

**Filter Tipped**  
**Andrew James Paterson 1998**

## **EIGHTH FLOOR**

Michael Standish was very annoyed by the sudden fire alarm. As he walked quickly down the fire escape he found himself exchanging obvious observations with his eighth floor neighbour Keith, to the effect that of course there wasn't any fire. Michael couldn't smell smoke- nobody could.

He had no idea how a false alarm was even possible in the high-rise in which he had lived quite comfortably for the previous two years. There were no children above the third floor; and even on the lower levels there were no inconveniently vulnerable alarm boxes.

He remembered the day when, as a ten year old at the Yonge and Eglinton YMCA, he had been the culprit. He had thrown a bad forward pass with his tote bag and hit the alarm.

As he reached the ground floor and opened the door leading to the outside walkway, Mike looked around for the building superintendent. There was obviously no fire because there was no goddamned smoke. So could the superintendent just say the magic word and authorize all of his tenants to return to their self-contained units?

He recognized the other eighth floor dwellers- Lewis the junkie painter, Jean-Marie the 'actress', Keith the antiques queen and even Terry, the hermit who was probably a writer Terry appeared even more slovenly than he usually did. Although he rarely changed his clothes or took showers, Terry at least made an effort to comb his hair. But today he hadn't. Perhaps he had either been sleeping or else having a moment of inspiration.

The tenants of the eighth floor blended in with those of the other nine floors. When the alarm finally subsided and the superintendent informed everybody that all was safe and clear; Michael quickly staked out a position in front of the elevators. He could see Keith casually flirting with a man from the seventh floor. He could observe Jean-Marie making arrangements with a client who lived somewhere in the apartment building. He could smell Terry, walking slowly and steadily behind.

Mike hoped that the elevator would arrive before Terry did.

He tried to resume the illustrative assignment he had been working on prior to the alarm, but his concentration was failing him. He was angry at whoever on presumably one of the other floors had overcooked their potatoes or committed whatever other minor negligence that would have activated their smoke-detectors.. The high-rise at 35 High Park Avenue, a two minute walk from the subway station, had been *intended* to be a building offering self-contained units for self-contained individuals. His neighbours were, most of the time, laudable examples. The antiques queen was certainly chatty, but he knew enough to maintain his distance after an initial tentative flirtation. The moonlighting actress was a model of constructive discretion. The junkie posed no problem as he didn't need to steal in order to subsidize his addiction and he wasn't exactly a noisily social type to begin with.

It was *Terry* who was impeding Mike's concentration. Terry was indulging in one of his truly annoying personal habits. Mike didn't usually notice music played by his neighbours unless they played the same fucking song over and over again the way Terry occasionally did and the way he was doing at this moment. He was playing something unrecognizably bombastic and significant over and over again in the manner of a child who needed to hear a story repeated *ad infinitum* even though he or she had already memorized every single nuance and detail.

Mike understood *background* music. He did not understand music that became foreground due to the listener's insistence on interrupting the preprogrammed sequence of his or her CD player and then fetishize one singularly stupid piece of music. He wanted to knock on Terry's door and tell him to please lower the fucking decibels because he, Mike Standish, had a very important assignment that he needed to complete as in the immediate near future. But Mike knew that doing such would only open up a can of worms that was definitely best left unopened.

He realized that the day of the week was Wednesday and that there was a sensible means of relieving the tension that involved getting out of his temporarily uncomfortable building for at least a few hours. He shut down his computer and departed in the direction of *The Cellar*, at which a middle-aged unfit gentleman such as

himself could enjoy a very playfully weird Wednesday as long as he didn't spend too much time outside of the dark areas.

By the time he anticipated returning to his apartment; surely to God Terry would have either solved his conundrum and moved on to something quieter or else bored himself into a deep sleep by means of mindbogglingly numbing repetition.

Two days later Mike had successfully completed his graphic assignment .which meant that he had managed to submit it to Demi Mondo magazine without having to personally deal with either the textual or visual art directors of that transparently insignificant rag. His design had been approved and then paid for without his having to leave his work station except for purposes of sleeping, reading, and masturbation. He had again become very comfortably entrenched within his apartment at 35 High Park Avenue.

And the neighbours had not intruded on his privacy. Certainly he heard Keith kissing his boyfriend Colin good night and good morning by the elevator. Certainly he heard Jean-Marie admitting least one male visitor with cash to spare and libidos to satisfy. He thought he heard Lewis' supplier making a clandestine delivery at three in the morning. But he was spared any distractingly irritating music. Terry had either taken a well-deserved vacation; or he had fallen into a pleasantly deep sleep after struggling with some terrible personal demon..

Suddenly there was a knock on Michael's door. A policeman identified himself and then insisted upon entering the apartment.

The Homicide Detective's business was urgent, to put it mildly. Terry, bless him, had entered into something far deeper than an extended beauty sleep..

The Homicide Detective, whose name was Ted Willis, inquired after Michael's alibi for late Wednesday afternoon and early Wednesday evening past. Mike matter-of-factly informed the detective that he had gone to *The Cellar* for sexual purposes and that the gatekeeper was familiar with him and would therefore be able to supply recognition Detective Ted Willis frowned upon hearing this alibi and then demanded information about

Mike's eighth floor neighbours. Unfortunately, there wasn't a lot that Mike could really tell him.

*Keith was an aspiring antiques dealer and Jean-Marie was an actress and Lewis was a painter and Terry had been whatever Terry had been - probably a writer although Mike really had not known the gentleman .*

Terry had called upon and spoken to he, Michael Standish, exactly once since he had moved in next door to him.

Terry had wanted to know if he had possessed a spare computer-disc and Mike had grudgingly obliged.

And, no, Mike had not been at home during the late afternoon and early evening of Wednesday September the ninth. Which meant how the fuck was he supposed to know what any of the other tenants of the eighth floor at 35 High Park Avenue were up to during those particular hours .Or, for that matter, if they were at home and functioning.

After the cop bade him a stern good-bye, Mike poured himself a shot of scotch and mulled events over .Terry had left a suicide note; but the handwriting had not been Terry's.. Now, *this* was definitely food for speculation. .

About one hour after Detective Willis' departure, there was another knock on Mike's apartment door. He scowled. E-Mail and faxes and the occasionally necessary telephone call were to be expected; but yet *another* person wishing to speak to his person was not a good sign.

'It's Jean-Marie. Do you have a minute, Mike?'

He opened the door to her. He realized that she expected to be invited in.

'Yes, I have a minute. Please sit down and make yourself at home.'

She tentatively walked through the main living room and sat down in his wicker chair. As she retrieved

her cigarettes from her handbag, Mike realized that he needed to get an ashtray for her. He had stopped smoking dope two months ago and consequently had relegated his ashtray to a spare cupboard.

‘Did the detective call upon *you*, Michael?’.

He nodded as he handed her the ashtray. Presumably the detective had covered the entire eighth floor as well as the building superintendent. He hoped Jean-Marie hadn’t been entertaining company at the time of the call.

She drew on her cigarette and exhaled away from his direction.

‘I told him that I was rehearsing a scene with a male actor at the time. It’s sort of the truth.’.

They shared a laugh, then her face became clouded.

‘The gentleman whom I was servicing knew Terry. He asked me questions about our now deceased neighbour. I’m very disturbed about this’.

Mike frowned.

‘Would you like a beer?’.

‘Sure’, Jean-Marie nodded nervously.

Mike stood and returned with two bottles of Red Baron from his refrigerator. He liked Jean-Marie. He thought she appeared remarkably composed for a woman pushing fifty who had recently left her husband in Don Mills and then begun a new life for herself- even if prostitution hadn’t *quite* been her first choice for a new career.

‘You’ve just passed on some information to me that I really don’t need to know about or hear. But you don’t need to worry, Jean-Marie. My lips are sealed.’.

She laughed as she exhaled, still nervously.

‘Like I said, Mike, I don’t *know* that Gerald visited Terry after finishing his session with me.’.

‘Exactly. What he does after rehearsal is his own business. Cheers.’.

Mike and Jean-Marie clicked their bottles and smiled at each other.

‘I have a joint in my purse. Would you like to share it with me?’.

Mike nodded assent. Somehow this seemed an appropriate gesture .

Things were pleasantly and not atypically quiet at 35 High Park for the next three days- .no loud music, no other people's guests coming and going, no anything distracting or suspicious.

*Discretion is the root of all that is good and comfortable*, Mike remarked to himself as he realized that he had to do a little shopping in the downstairs tuck shop.

In the fruit and vegetables section he almost collided with Keith.

'Hey, Mike. Careful. *Careful*'.

Mike laughed, even though Keith had managed to draw undue attention to the pair of them.

Then Keith lowered his voice.

'Gossip time. Lewis is in rehab and Jean-Marie is on vacation.'

"Oh?"

Mike's body stiffened. He hoped Jean-Marie wasn't still panicking about her client who had possibly acted out his grudge against Terry .He chose not to comment on any possibilities.

'Well, Keith, this could explain why things on the eighth floor have been even quieter than they usually are.'

He also decided against asking Keith about his interrogation session with the homicide detective.

'Got to get moving, Michael. I'm having some friends over for cocktails tonight. Are you free?'

Mike looked at his neighbour.

'I'm not sure. If I'm free I'll drop by. Okay?'

'Please do. It would be nice to see you before I move out.'.

'Oh?'

Keith abruptly paid for his groceries and walked toward the elevator before Mike had finished his shopping

Mike wasn't particularly inclined toward going to Keith's cocktail party. He's been to one before and that one had been quite enough.

But he was very curious as to why Keith was suddenly moving out of 35 High Park. He was also curious as to whether his other neighbours were really in rehabilitation or on vacation or whether they too had moved out- for whatever possible reason.

Upon returning his apartment Mike almost tripped over a notice from the superintendent. He now understood why all of his neighbours were moving out.

His rent was being raised because a new refrigerator was to be installed. Mike had not requested any new refrigerator. His own had never caused any problems in terms of available space and functionality. The superintendent of his parents' building had tried to pull the same stunt on them- forcing refrigerators owned by one of his friends onto the tenants and then gouging them for additional rent.

Mike agreed with Keith. He wasn't going to stand for this shit.

But where would Mike go? He couldn't just move in temporarily with his lover the way Keith would. Mike didn't have a lover and he didn't want one.

He knew one tenant on the seventh floor. He decided to call on Lois Bromley, who was also a graphic artist working out of a similar set-up one floor below him.

Lois Bromley had not been handed any notice of any rent increase. She wasn't in any hurry to move out of her apartment as she had no reason to. She was proficient and she had a girlfriend living on the fourth floor. Lois had the best of everything.

'Sorry to hear about your neighbour, Michael.'

Lois invited Mike to join her for a beer. They toasted each other.

'Well, Lois. The man wasn't exactly my best friend. I mean, he literally and figuratively smelled.'



“My friend Gerald used to know Terry quite well- years ago. They had quite the nasty falling out.’.

Lois’ girlfriend Barbra emerged from the shower and helped herself to a beer from the refrigerator.

*Gerald?*

‘Terry and my friend used to be partners in an architecture firm. Then Terry lost it.

Mike didn’t want to know any more. He tuned out as Lois and Barbra gossiped about Keith’s strange relationship with his lover Colin. He wondered how long their relationship would last, now that Keith was being forced to move in with his lover.

*And it was all Terry’s fault.* Damn Terry for not being as self-contained as he had fancied himself to be. Somebody, maybe the mysterious Gerald or maybe even the superintendent himself, had had some outstanding business with the hermit. Terry hadn’t spoken to other people unless absolutely necessary. Well,, just possibly somebody attempted to confront him and didn’t appreciate receiving the silent treatment..

Mike finished his beer quickly and bade Lois and Barbra cordial farewells. Then he E-mailed his notice to the superintendent and began packing. He would stay at a B&B until finding another apartment - one hopefully even more self-contained than the one that he was being forced to vacate..

He took a break from his packing and stood out in the hallway outside what had been Terry’s apartment. Nobody else had moved in and nobody else was going to be moving in .The apartment was now cursed- just like the entire damned eighth floor..

## **BROWNSTONE ANONYMOUS**

Tim Barnes finished his beer and then put his coat on. He felt secure that there was no ostensible reason for him to sleep in the apartment that had the superintendent sign on its front door. All of his tenants were quiet enough and reliable; and none of them were likely to have plumbing emergencies overnight.

He adjusted his cap as it was raining outside, and then locked the apartment door behind himself. He was expected at Mary's place within the next hour. He preferred Mary's place to his own - because it was where she lived and because it was a house.

Tim Barnes had once been a promising college quarterback but a serious football injury had nearly paralyzed him. It had only been recently that the owners of his apartment building- Bob and Sally- had awarded him the paying job of being a live-in superintendent. But Tim saw no harm in spending many of his nights elsewhere- just as long as he was home and functioning on the mornings when he had to be there.

He smiled at Afua Cooper, one of his tenants who paid her way through university by copy-editing. She was a nice, tall black girl who never made demands on either himself or his time. Most of his tenants were similar- self-contained and relatively quiet. He could never tell how many people were actually living in one of the units; but the rent was always on time and there were never any noise complaints.

Tim saw the street-car approaching and reached for his TTC token. Mary was expecting him for dinner and for company.

'You're *late*'

. Mary Savidge kissed Tim good-naturedly as he let himself into her house in Parkdale

Dinner was all ready for him. Dinner was fish and chips, which was always fine by him. Mary retrieved two beers from the kitchen and then they sat down to eat.

'How's that older man in your building? That Harry or whatever his name is?'

'Henry. Mr. Henry Chadburn. He's the same as usual- for better or worse.'

'I think he's just a bit, shall we say, *eccentric*. Well, you have to admit it, Tim. He just *is*.'

Tim squeezed more lemon juice onto his cod.

'I won't argue with you there, Mary. But I think he's quite harmless; and he's indispensable to Bob and Sally. They'd be up Shit Creek without him. And he does *not* drink, which is useful.'

Mary shook her head as she sipped her beer.

'He does have another source of income, doesn't he?'

'Oh, for sure', he sipped *his* beer.

'Well? What is it? How much do you really know about this Henry? Or about any of your other tenants?'

'As much as I need to.', Tim frowned. She never talked about *her* workplace but she always expected to hear anecdotes about his. Her salary was considerably higher than his; so presumably there must have been a few strings attached to her workplace.

They ate silently for a few minutes. He had often wondered about one unit in which the number of overnight guests had frequently been plentiful. And he had been cornered by Henry Chadburn on a few too many occasions when he had only been able to deal with the most basic of conversations. Henry would yap on and on about conspiracy theories - the CIA's experiments with LSD and Canadian guinea pigs and of course the Kennedy assassination.

Sometimes Tim suspected that Henry had taken a large amount of LSD in his younger years.

'Dessert, Tim?'

Mary carried in two slices of lemon meringue pie. Tim couldn't refuse such a dessert if he were paid to.

She switched on the CD player and pit on a blues CD by John Lee Hooker. Tim liked to listen to blues at the end of a long day as well. One of his tenants was a musician who mercifully used headphones in his little studio. Tim suspected that he would dislike young Pedro's music if he were actually to hear it.

But the young man's little business paid the rent. And the tenant with all the friends, room-mates and possible lovers of more than both official genders was also economically reliable. If George and his friends sold

drugs; they certainly didn't appear to be using them.

'We should watch the news after this CD, Tim. There's a good story breaking.'

Mary relaxed on the sofa with a cigarette, inviting Tim to join her. They sat together, listening to the music and smoking. When the CD concluded, she switched on the television with her remote control.

*'Good evening. This is Sandra Larson with tonight's report. The RCMP is looking for a man who they say is a Heritage Front member passing as an RCMP undercover agent. John Stansbury is wanted for questioning. We cannot show you a composite picture of this individual at this time ; but the suspect is known to be operating in downtown west Toronto.'*

Tim scowled. If the cops didn't have a picture of their suspect; then what could the good citizens of downtown west Toronto possibly do about this man?

'Well, so what? I don't know John Stansbury. Do you, Mary?.'

'No, Tim. I don't.'

She walked to the kitchen and returned with two more beers.

'Perhaps this John Stansbury character not only has other names- he has many different faces?' .she smiled at him mysteriously.

'Maybe.. I don't know.'

Tim took a long drink of the beer and took in the news silently .Mary's idea of a good story wasn't particularly his. At least, not for tonight.

He didn't arrive back at the west-downtown brownstone until ten o'clock the next morning, and the building's managers were there- waiting for him.

Bob and Sally Rendell. frowned as Tim unlocked the building's front door.

The apartment's business managers had always warned him at least a day before their building

inspections. Something was not right.

Bob and Sally had been his friends for longer than anybody else had ever been. They had helped him get back on his feet after the near-paralyzing accident and they had given him a job.

*Why* were they acting so strange this morning?

‘We’re going on vacation, Tim. So we need you to be *here*.’

Tim was the superintendent of this particular building of theirs. This meant that he was on the premises pretty well all of the time and overnight. He had his holiday break in January; and they could take holidays whenever they damn well felt like taking one

He knew that Bob and Sally were aware of his relationship with Mary. They’d even met Mary on a few occasions and they’d been able to put two and two together.

Bob and Sally hadn’t particularly made any effort to get to know his girlfriend. They were downtown property-owners and she was a secretary who rented a the ground floor of a house out in Parkdale.

Well, his car was a Volvo and they had a BMW and a Camry between them. Mary’s car was a used Volkswagen. Maybe her fur coat was the first one off the rack and not all that great a fur. And Tim had overheard his tenant George and some of his vegetarian-punk friends making derogatory remarks about the superintendent’s wife and her cheesy fur coat. They should all mind their own damn business..

‘Your girlfriend can stay with you *here*’, Sally spoke in an irritatingly bright voice as she often did..

‘Two heads are frequently better than one’, Bob smirked.

Tim did not want to be confined to the downtown brownstone. Mary spent as little time in it as possible. Tim wondered whether Bob and Sally had a mole among the tenants- somebody who would keep an eye on his whereabouts and inform them in case he decided to spend time with Mary at her house..

‘How long are you going away for?’, Tim looked at Bob and Sally pleadingly.

Bob and Sally looked at each other.

‘We really don’t know’, Sally appeared genuinely confused by Tim’s question.

*Henry!* Tim more than suspected that Henry Chadburn would be clandestinely keeping an eye on his

comings and his goings. *Damn!*

Tim relaxed with a cigar, quite intensely watching a baseball game between the hometown Blue Jays and the New York Yankees. Tonight's game was a close one- it kept his attention as he played armchair manager.

He still couldn't watch contact sports. He could barely stand being in a room where somebody else was even talking about football let alone watching it. But baseball was harmless entertainment. It was slow- it was all about put that left-handed slugger in against that right-handed pitched.

This was a close game; and he resented the phone call. But he knew that he had to answer it.

'Hi, Tim. What are you up to?.'

'Smoking a cigar and watching the ball game. It's a close one.'

"Oh'., Mary's response was unenthusiastic. She herself enjoyed both the occasional ball game and the occasional cigar

.But she wanted him to get on the street car and get his ass out to her house; and this was not tangible for him tonight.

'Fuck Henry .Whether or not he's a mole for Bob and Sally, to hell with him. How long are they going away for again?'

Tim didn't know. Bob and Sally had provided neither the time or the place.

'Well, does this mean that I can't see you until your employers return from their mysterious vacation?'

Tim drew on his cigar thoughtfully. He wished that he could come up with an answer to her question, aside from inviting her to spend the night at his apartment.

She had not stayed with him for some time now. She had not appreciated the nasty looks from his militant animal-rights tenants. Even though it was now spring and there was no need for Mary to wear her fur coat; she would always find some other excuse for avoiding his building and its tenants.

'I have to go now, dear. You're welcome to come over, you know that.'

'I'll call you tomorrow, Tim. Enjoy the rest of your baseball game.'

Them Mary hung up. During her call the Yankees had homered and gone ahead by three runs.

And now he could hear his tenants George and Henry engaging in a conversation about animal-rights -whether or not the animal-rights movement was hopelessly middle-class and white. Henry was insisting that it was definitely and hopelessly so and George was angrily refuting him.

Tim steps out into the hallway and told the pair of them to just shut up and to stop distracting him. George walked away from Henry and out of the building temporarily ending the argument.

Tim hated arguments. He tried his damndest to avoid them in his relationship with Mary and in his personal life. They never sorted themselves out- they just went on and on. But sometimes he wished that he were better at resolving them- by making it clear to the other person that certain subjects were closed simply because they *were*.

The ball game finished its course with the Yankees holding on to their lead. Tim scowled as he decided to avoid the post-game analysis and switch the station to the one with the nightly report.

The municipal, provincial, and national police forces were all looking for the man calling himself John Stansbury .There was still no composite picture of this man. How could anybody inform on him if nobody knew what the man even looked like.

Then Tim realized something. The law-enforcement agencies themselves did not have a composite picture of the man. They only knew about him- from somebody who had been either unable or unwilling to supply a picture.

As he butted out his cigar he heard a knocking at his door. He could guess who the caller was; but he couldn't pretend not to be at home with the newscast being so audible.

Henry Chadburn invited himself in. Tim offered Henry neither beer nor coffee; but Henry made himself at home regardless.

'Timothy, we need to discuss those punk morons in our building.'

Tim opened a beer for himself.

‘Why, Henry?’.

‘They are beyond stupid. They can’t even out one and one together let alone two and two. They claim to be anti-racist yet they’re for animal rights.’.

Tim scowled at Henry.

‘I don’t understand. Why does that *have* to be a contradiction?’.

‘It just is’, Henry lit a cigarette. ‘Banning hunting and trapping is unfair to native North Americans who literally have to hunt in order to eat.’.

Tim sipped his beer.

‘That’s too pat, Henry. That’s too convenient.’.

‘Come on, Tim.’, Henry drew on his smoke. ‘The anti-racist groups with their anti-hunting and animal rights rhetoric are unwitting fronts for anti-native settler-population agendas; and they’re too caught up in their own self-righteous bullshit to know it.’.

‘You’re wrong, Henry. George and his revolving room-mates are too naive for their own good; but they’re not unaware of these contradictions. They don’t feel that they have to give up just because of some obvious contradiction.’.

‘You don’t get it, Tim.’.

‘No. Maybe I don’t.’, Tim glared at Henry. ‘Maybe I’m a naive idealist too. I’m really too tired to continue this conversation. Okay, Henry?’.

Henry appeared ready to challenge Tim, to accuse him of cowardice or something similar. But he scowled something inaudible and then walked out of Tim’s apartment- back to the apartment’s office and the books that he slaved over.

Tim could visualize Henry working all night in front of the computer screen- working all night for Bob and Sally who were God knows where for God knows how long.

He wished that Mary didn’t have such a bee in her bonnet about the building that he worked and lived in.



He wished that she would get over whatever was holding her back and make a commitment.

But he resisted the temptation to call her. The ball was now in her court.

The next day Tim noticed that Henry had gone out somewhere for the day- looking far more official than he usually did. Henry more often than not worked at home- either sending faxes via the machine in his own apartment or working on the computer in the building's office. Henry didn't seem to have his own personal computer, which seemed odd..

Tim remembered something. He remembered that he had found a key for which he had not been able to identify an owner. Possibly the key had belonged to a former tenant- one who had either moved elsewhere voluntarily or else been evicted for whatever reason.

The key was a duplicate for the key for the office door. Tim looked around, and then entered the office.

There were hardly any old-fashioned files or filing cabinets. Everything was stored in the Macintosh computer .

Tim wanted to see what comprised 'everything'.

He sat down behind the computer and switched it on. He had never become much of a computer person; and the last thing he wanted to do was wind up erasing things.

Tim entered into Microsoft Word programme 5.1 and moved the mouse up to 'File'. Then he highlighted 'Open'.

A vertical list of files stared at him. He moved the list further down , staring at the titles and not seeing any that he wanted to open up.

Then he came to one labeled ' John A'. File ' John A.' was dated last December eleventh. There were many ' John' files- running up to T.-which meant that there were twenty.

Tim opened up ' John A'.. He could not believe what he was reading. It was a report written to the RCMP about local anarchist kids in Toronto. His tenant George figured prominently in this report. 'John' was describing George as being a ringleader of sorts- a kid who pretended to be a pacifist but who was really armed

and dangerous. The report went on to identify George as the mastermind behind a series of posters designed to provoke local neo-fascist organizations by implying that their ranks consisted mostly of self-loathing and closeted homosexuals.

Tim heard the sound of footsteps walking up the stairs. He quickly closed file John a and then pressed the 'Escape' key in the upper left corner of the keyboard. Then he killed the lights in the office and returned to the hallway.

*He was on the premises. He was available for his tenants.*

'Good morning, Pedro.'

The young musician smiled at him.

'Are you doing book work while Bob and Sally are out of town? You know, I saw Bob and Sally at the airport.'

'Really?'. Tim stood for a moment. Then he remembered to ask Pedro whether he knew what flight his employers were standing in line for.

'Yes. They were flying to the Bahamas. I didn't talk to them for very long because I was meeting a friend arriving from London. But they were definitely headed for the Bahamas. That was the lineup they were standing in. I didn't get the chance to ask how long they were going for.'

Tim nodded. He wished that Pedro had been able to find that out for him.

'See you later, Pedro. Have a good day.'

The musician nodded and returned to his home studio.

Tim returned to his apartment and phoned Mary at home. He knew she was at her workplace but he never called her there

Mary was far more computer-literate than he was; and he needed her to not only open up the John files on the office computer but to duplicate them. He needed to get this done as soon as possible.

Henry didn't arrive back home until rather late in the afternoon. He appeared both somber and agitated as

Tim nearly collided with him on the first staircase.

‘Grueling day, Timothy. And I have to return tomorrow.’.

‘Return to what, Henry?’., Tim was now all ears.

‘My nephew’s drug trial. It seems that dear old Uncle Henry was Jason’s alibi. I had seen my nephew very early that evening- not after midnight when he got himself arrested. The defence lawyer of course considers me to be a liar; so I will have to undergo further cross-examination tomorrow. This is very annoying, to put it bluntly.’.

Henry scowled. Obviously he expected no responses- affirmative or negative- from the superintendent.

But Tim had a question for Henry Chadburn..

‘By the way, Henry, where *did* Bob and Sally go for their vacation ? And did they tell you when they’d be returning?’.

Henry shook his head.

‘Arizona, I believe. I think Sally needs a rest for some or other convoluted medical reasons...Today is the twenty-ninth; so of course you’ll make sure we have all the rents by the top of the month. No exceptions this month- not George, not Pedro, not *anybody*. Do you understand, Timothy?’.

Yes, he understood. But he chose not to respond. He returned to his own apartment and resumed reading a murder mystery that he had begun a few days previously. He would call Mary again after he she had had ample time to go home from work and then relax for a while.

She arrived downtown in time for a simple meat and potatoes dinner. Her work day had been long but not stressful and she seemed much more perky than she been usually during the last few weeks.

‘Things are slow, Tim. So I killed time on the Internet.’.

‘Really?’. Tim opened another two bottles of beer.

‘There are some serious lunatics out there, I tell you. There is a ‘John Stansbury’ referred to on some of the really racist local sites.’.

‘Yes, John Stansbury. Who I strongly suspect lives very close to home.’.

Mary helped Tim clean and rinse the dishes.

‘Let’s not watch baseball, Tim. Let’s listen to music.’.

‘Sure’. Tim had checked in on the ball game earlier and it was clearly going to be a rout for the Yankees.

‘Elvis Costello perhaps. Or Tom Waits, or Bob Dylan. Somebody in that vein.’.

‘Bob Dylan I have.’.

Tim found his CD for Bob Dylan’s Highway 61 Revisited and inserted it into the player.

Mary sat on the sofa, unwrapping two cigars she had brought with her.

‘Why don’t we smoke these cigars and then have sex? How does that sound to you?’.

It sounded perfect to Tim.

Mary toasted her cigar, then lit it and exhaled.

‘It’s not *only* the reward I want. I really want to help put your Nazi neighbour out of circulation.’.

‘Reward?’, Tim lit his.

‘Well yes, Tim. Who knows. It might be enough for you to get out of this cursed building. I mean, you were the only tenant who could deal with the garbage problem, so Bob and Sally made you the superintendent. There’s nothing wrong with having a just a *little* bit of ambition.’.

‘Hmmm. I suppose not- if you put it the way you did.’.

Bob Dylan whined on about ‘How does it feel to be like a rolling stone’, as they sucked back on their cigars. After Dylan finished they would have sex, get a good sleep, and then wake up and do the necessary dirty deeds after they were sure Henry had left for his nephew’s drug trial.

Mary planned to phone in sick the next day. Her company allowed her twelve sick days a year, in addition to a two-week vacation.

Tim had begun to suspect that Bob and Sally had gone to the Barbados or wherever they had then gone to from there for more than two weeks. He suspected that Bob and Sally were gone. Things were collapsing and things were beginning to fall into place, he smiled to himself as he fell into a pleasant sleep.

Sex before bedtime had been such fun that Tim and Mary indulged themselves again as soon as the alarm clock went off. Then a quick breakfast and strong coffee; and, just as Mary was nonchalantly getting dressed, there was a knock on the door.

‘Phone company’s coming this morning to re-install Afua’s phone. You’ll be here to let them in?’.

Perhaps Henry thought that Tim would be eloping with Mary or indulging in some other romantic foolishness?

‘Of course I’ll be here to let them in. Afua will be at school so I’ll be here.’.

‘Excellent’, Henry nodded. ‘Well, I certainly hope this is my final day on the stand. Just put the damn kid in jail, that’s what I say.’.

Tim refused to comment .As Henry caught sight of Mary who was still casually nude; he parted with one final shot of wisdom.

‘You realize that marijuana is actually legal and marketed by the potato-chip companies, don’t you?’.

‘Whatever you say, Henry’, Mary smiled at him as he close the door.

‘What the fuck?’ , Tim shook his head.

‘Our poor Mr. Henry Chadburn is so fried about something that he can’t distinguish pot odor from cigar stench Although a little toke might be a nice way to put ourselves in a relaxing mood before we get down to work.’.

Tim scratched his head, then assented. He had never been keen on recreational drugs of any sort but Mary liked to smoke grass. Henry was at least partly right- he found that the stuff only made him hungry.

‘Mary passed him the joint as she threw on her jeans.

‘I suspect our poor Henry is also somewhat frustrated in the sexual department.’.

‘I suspect you’re right, honey. Let’s get working- now that he’s gone.’.

Soon Henry could be heard slamming the front door behind him and with no further ado Tim let himself and Mary into the office.

‘It’s al yours, Mare.’.

Mary sat down and quickly opened up the special 'John' files, She scanned through them, sight-reading some more quickly than others.

'Which one are you reading now, dear?'

Mary pored her head for a few seconds more and then informed him that she was particularly revolted by 'John5'..

'This is a dispatch to the RCMP informing them that Youth Against Neo-Nazis are a sinister RCMP plot to undermine other anti-racist groups.'

Tim reddened

'George is a member of Youth Against Neo-Nazis.'

'Yes, George figures prominently in this particular dispatch. Well, Tim, our 'John Stansbury' is being paid to pull the wool over the RCMP's eyes. He claims irrefutable proof that Youth Against Neo-Nazis are all cops.'

'Or worse, that some of them are neo-Nazis who have hoodwinked the cops?'

She scowled.

'Yes, damn it. Well this one alone is worth downloading; so let me get on with it.'

Tim watched as Mary systematically transferred the file 'John5' to a blank disc that she had inserted into the computer's hard drive and watched the disc transfer by percentage.

'Let's grab a few more just to rub it in. Fuck, Tim, I'd better get something under the name Henry Chadburn while we're at it.-unless that name simply doesn't exist on either paper or computer.'

Tim nodded. He didn't want the situation to be simply their word against Henry's against the cops'

'But there's loads here. This would mean accessing this computer to the cops; so we'd have to figure out how to get them here when Henry's not here.'

Tim looked at the computer screen. John6 also ranted on about the 'benign supposedly pacifist and vegetarian punks who were actually experts at crowd provocation and who were the ringleaders of an attack on a local neo-Nazi house.'

Tim had a sudden urge to stake out the asshole's house and then throw a few rocks himself. And now it was clear to him that Henry was one of them

'How are you doing, Mare?'

'We're bopping along, honey. Just let me transfer two more and then you can make the call. And then we

can celebrate.’.

Right. Mary had after all phoned in sick. And Tim knew that he had to be the one phoning the local police since he had been the one who had stumbled upon the ‘John’ files on the office computer.

He more than suspected that Henry might be using this trail he was testifying at- if it even existed- as a ruse to get out of Toronto and perhaps even Canada. Perhaps he was rendezvousing with Bob and Sally in some safety zone who really knows where.

Shit, Bob and Sally had been his friends- they had supported him. And they were obviously guilty of something in relation to Henry and his horrible mission.

‘I like your tenant George, even if he is a vegetarian.’.

Tim laughed.

‘So I guess that means we’re going out for steak?’.

‘You bet your ass it does’, Mary smiled as she closed down the office computer. “Now, make that call!”.

Tim dialed Metro Police and was whisked through the system. The investigative officer was all ears the minute his caller began talking.

**THE CAT AND THE CAR** copyright Andrew James Paterson ,1998

Nicholas Turnbull let himself in by the unlocked front door of his family's house in Don Mills at a few minutes before six o'clock.

"You're late, Nick. Dinner's almost ready."

His Dad scowled at him while his Mom looked after her final dinner arrangements.

Then Dad noticed the scrawny little cat that Nick was holding in his arms.

"Why have you brought this animal home with you?"

"Paul and I found it. He's starving. Can we keep him here?"

James Turnbull paced the floor angrily as Jean Turnbull carried the dinner contents into the dining room.

"And why can't your friend Paul look after this animal?"

"Paul already has cats. Doesn't he?"

Nick nodded enthusiastically.

"Paul's cats can barely tolerate each other - let alone a newcomer, Can I keep him, Mom?"

"And who's going to look after him - like pay for his food and his veterinary bills?"

Jean Turnbull finished carrying in the perfunctory dinner components and sat down at the head of the table.

"I don't see any problem with having a cat, Jim. I can feed him and play with him - or her - during the days."

Something about her tone effectively forced her husband to back down.

"Is he fixed, son?"

Nick stared at his Dad briefly, then address his Mom.

"Of course he's fixed. His name is Plato."

Jean laughed at the name.

"There's tuna fish in the bottom of the refrigerator, Nick. Put a big full bowl of tuna out for our new



family member. And pour him a clean bowl of water.’..

‘It’s quarter to six, Paul. I have to go home now.’.

‘Says who, Nick?’.

Paul held onto Nick’s nipples in a manner suggesting that he was in no hurry to let his friend make it home in time for dinner

‘Cut it out, Paul. My parents will give me shit.’.

‘No they won’t, silly. Your Mom probably knows everything there is to know about our relationship.’.

Nick pulled away from Paul and quickly threw his shirt on over his jeans.

‘She does not, Paul. She’s always asking me if I know any girls.’.

Paul Stanley snorted contemptuously.

‘Oh, she wants you to go to the school dance. Well, why don’t you ask Linda?’.

Yeah, right.’. Paul’s sister Linda was a working girl .

‘I’ll let you run home to Mom and Dad, Nicholas. On condition that I can see you tomorrow.’.

‘It’s a deal, Paul. If the weather’s nice, maybe we can do something outdoors.’.

‘Sure. I know a very sexy tunnel underneath the bridge over the parkway.’.

Nick tried to scold his friend that such activities were unlikely. But he was hardly very convincing.

After Jean had finished reading the morning newspaper, she stood and then walked in the direction of the freezer where she kept her cigarettes. She didn’t usually smoke by herself - she only smoked socially after a few drinks and on rare occasions. But now she wanted a cigarette.

Jean returned to her armchair, lit the cigarette, and then exhaled toward the west wall of the TV room. If either Jim or Nick made any comment about her smoking; she would tell them that she wished to avoid afternoon snacks that were causing her to gain weight. She knew that Nick knew where she kept her smokes and that he helped himself more than occasionally; but she pretended not to notice. In the next year Nick would be old enough to legally smoke anyway. Jean also knew damn well that her son smoked marijuana and she was not particularly concerned as long as he stuck to pot and kept his grades up.

She took another puff and exhaled toward the wall, appreciating the smoke pattern that was beginning to develop. In a few years Nick would be moving out - hopefully enrolled in a quality university and quite likely living in residence. Then she might seriously try to find some form of employment. Jean enjoyed the amount of leisure time that allowed her to read voraciously; but she felt that she needed to rejoin the work force or else risk stagnation. She had once been an aspiring actress, but that now seemed like more than a lifetime ago.

She heard a knocking at the front door. Surely Jim hadn't forgotten his keys? She looked at her watch and decided that it was still far too early for Jim to be coming home

And it was absurdly early for the caller to be Nick. Nick never came straight home after school. He always went over to Paul's house and then they did whatever they did together. She felt certain that her son and his friend Paul had girlfriends.

But who could her caller be? She couldn't think of any outstanding bills that needed to be dealt with in person. Jean butted out her cigarette and then walked toward the front door. Probably somebody had the wrong address; or looking for directions to who knows and who cares where.

She greeted her next-door neighbour, who needed to borrow measuring tape. Jean disliked Steve Furlong. Why couldn't the man go buy his own measuring tape down at the hardware store at the mall? But she realized that lending Mr. Furlong the tape would be the easiest course of action. Just as long as he returned it quickly and preferably to her husband rather than to her.

It was now almost October and therefore time to do some necessary end-of-season gardening maintenance. Jean slipped into her wind-breaker and retrieved the appropriate tools from the garage.

As she tidied up the beds and cursed the spots that Plato had marked for himself; she became aware that Lynne Furlong was also attending to her late September gardening duties. She decided to say hello to her neighbour. The pair of them had barely spoken since that initial dinner party where both Lynne and her husband Steve had imbibed far too much alcohol.

‘How are you, Joan?’.

‘It’s Jean. I could be doing a lot worse, I suppose.’.

‘I’m pretty well finished with the garden. Would you like to come over for tea?’.

Lynne Furlong took a puff of her cigarette and then stepped on it very thoroughly

.Jean considered this invitation. She felt more than certain that tea referred to blueberry tea and it was only two o’clock in the afternoon. But her neighbour wished to say something to her and therefore feigning another duty would not be the best of tactics.

‘Thanks, Lynne. I’ll finish up with our garden and then I’ll come right over’.

Linda Stanley sat at the Stanleys’ kitchen table, drinking a beer and smoking a cigarette.

‘Can I have one, sis?’.

Paul stood beside his sister as Nick’s eyes also begged.

‘No. Buy your own.’.

‘That’s easier said than done’, Paul retorted to his sister who ignored him. Her eyes appeared glassy, Nick remarked to himself Paul had informed him that his sister was a junkie.

‘ You guys are almost sixteen, for fuck sakes. You’re almost sixteen, right Nick?’.

Nick nodded. At dinner he was planning to broach the subject of driving lessons with his father.

'Here. Help yourselves to a smoke each. But I don't have any more beer.'

Linda stood and left the two boys alone. Her sneer made it obvious to Nick that Paul's sister considered the pair of them to be sissy boy cocksuckers..

Paul lit two cigarettes and passed one to Nick.

'Your Mom doesn't drive?'

'She drives, but she doesn't have her own car.'

'Oh.'. Paul drew on his smoke and exhaled. 'Well,, good luck trying to get driving lessons from your Dad.'

Jean sat patiently with Plato, simultaneously making the cat comfortable and ignoring its requests for its dinner. Plato was a well - broken housecat who spent most of the days and nights outdoors, hunting. Jean was relieved that Nick had brought home a male cat which was not inclined towards bringing back any foul presents for its humans to admire and then devour.

She recognized her husband's keys opening the front door.

'Jean? Are you home?'

She allowed him to enter the living room where she held the cat in her arms before releasing him.

'How was your day. Jim?'

'Good. How about yours?'

Jean shrugged.

'Who was your visitor, dear?'

Jean was unprepared for her husband's question but she regained her bearing.

'I've been by myself all day. I smoked a cigarette.'

'Oh?'

'I smoke occasionally when I'm prematurely hungry. This isn't a shocking new development, Jim. Two or three a week won't give me cancer.'

She sat down again in her armchair.

“Nick will be almost late, as usual.’.

‘I wish things would change with Nick. I don’t like that friend of his. I don’t like him at all.’.

“He’s not evil, Jim. I agree he has a bad attitude to school; but *Nick’s* marks are consistent.’.

Jim nodded. Nick’s grades were consistently average. Surely his wife had higher standards?

‘I like not having Nick home until dinner sometimes, Jim.’

‘What do you mean?’.

Jean walked over to her husband, kissed him, and rubbed her legs against his.

‘I think you know what I mean, Jim.’.

Jim backed away from Jean. He sat down in the armchair adjacent to the one she had been sitting in.

‘I don’t think this is a good time, Jean.’.

She stood and walked to the kitchen. She opened the liquor cabinet.

‘Then let’s at least have a drink together before dinner. Is *that* okay?’.

‘Yes! Yes! *Harder!*’.

Paul exhorted Nick as Nick aggressively sucked on the shaft of his hardened red cock. He wasn’t going to cum just yet; but he didn’t want to lose any momentum.

He wasn’t prepared for Nick’s sudden request.

‘I want you to fuck me, Paul. I’m ready for you.’.

Nick threw off his jeans and turned around so his ass was sticking out in front of Paul’s cock. Nick spread his hands out against the corner wall and held position.

‘Let me get the lube, Nick. You have to be loose.’.

“Get it, Paul. *Now*. I want you in me.’.

Paul retrieved the lubricant and began playing with Nick’s ass. He really wanted to stay hard for as long

as possible. He could wait to cum indefinitely; although Nick would eventually have to go home to the family dinner.

The roast beef was just perfect, Paul informed his mother who was grateful for the compliment. Nick noticed that his parents were drinking red wine at dinner, which was unusual. Milk or ginger-ale or the occasional beer was more typical.

‘Your father has some wonderful news, Nicholas.’

‘I’m being promoted. I’ll be traveling more .I’ll be getting a significant raise.’

‘Congratulations, Dad.’

Nick smiled. He knew his mother would be pleased because she would now have access to the car whenever Dad was on the road.

‘We’re going to have a party, Nick.’, Jean sipped from her glass of wine.

‘And we want you to be there. Next Saturday night, so please don’t make any plans.’

Nick frowned. He really didn’t feel any great need to socialize with his parents’ friends. He didn’t have a lot to say to any of them.

‘You can be bartender, Nicholas.’

Nick smiled in relief. Bartending would spare him from having to say anything to any of the guests besides ‘a refill, sir or madam?’.

‘I’ll keep the night open’, Nick promised

‘Don’t invite the Furlongs. Please, Jim.’

‘Don’t worry, Jean. The Furlongs never even crossed my mind.’

‘Mr---wow-ow’.

Plato walked into the dining room and angrily addressed Jean.

Jean flushed for a second, then remembered that she hadn’t put out the cat’s dinner.

‘There’s a tin of Whiskas in the fridge, Nick. Can you please look after Plato’s dinner?’.

Nick kept himself occupied as a bartender, realizing that later on in the evening he would be able to sneak some wine for himself. He appreciated not having to really speak to any of his parents’ guests; and he imagined himself enjoying this role when he was living by himself in his own house or apartment.

*This* was how to be simultaneously social and anti-social, he noted to himself. He observed that all of the men, with the exception of the one talking to his mother, were unattractive and indifferently dressed. The women, in contrast, all looked like they were decked out for the opera rather than some professional associate’s house party.

The expensively-dressed gentleman had been talking to his mother for quite some time, he realized. The man, whose name was Roger, offered his mother a cigarette from a very impressive gold case. She gratefully accepted his offer and continued to chat away with Roger, ignoring her guests. His Dad was too preoccupied with being congratulated to register anything off-balance or unusual.

‘Cheers’.

Nick toasted his father and his mother and the well-dressed man with the case and then himself. He poured himself a sparkling glass of wine and smiled at all those who paid not the slightest attention to him.

On Saturday morning Nick fixed himself an early breakfast so that he and Paul could get off to an early start. They had planned to go hiking in a ravine in which Paul’s sister Linda would be driving them to. Linda

would be dropping the two boys off at eleven-thirty and then picking them up again at five-thirty.

As he finished cleaning his teeth he overheard his parents talking in the hallway.

‘I want to go shopping with Wendy so yes, Jim, I would like to use the car unless you *absolutely* need it yourself.’

Dad mulled this request over.

‘I’m not sure, Jean. I do plan to play a round of golf with Al today.’

‘Well. Then surely you can carry your clubs in the trunk of Al’s fucking car !’

Then his mother angrily stomped down the staircase before her husband could respond to her face.

‘I’ll call Al and ask him if he can pick me up, okay?. Please ,Jean. Watch your language.’

Nick heard his mother snort audibly as he decided that *now* was the right time for him to leave.

He walked stealthily down the staircase, hoping not to draw attention to himself. However, in the process he narrowly avoided tripping over Plato who was walking up the opposite side of the staircase.

‘What the.....Oh. Where are you going, Nicholas?’

‘Hiking with Paul.’, he answered her as nonchalantly as possible.

‘Every day. Every day you’re doing something with Paul. You’re almost sixteen, Nick. Don’t you know any *girls*?’

‘Of course I do, Mom. I’ll be home for dinner. Have a good day.’

Nick left the house without any further ado. After he closed the door firmly behind him, he could hear his mother again demanding to use the car for the day .He felt glad that he was not in her shoes at this particular moment in time.

As late September gave way to early and then mid-October; Paul began to seem more and more distant



from everybody whom he was interacting. Often he was absent from school; and, when Nick called on him to see how he was doing, he would come to the door in a daze. His eyes were glassy and his movements lethargic and finally Nick decided to confront his friend.

‘Are you using heroin. Please don’t bullshit me.’.

Paul nodded,

‘I take it occasionally. My sister’s in rehab. She got really pissed off at me for using.’.

‘She’s not the only person annoyed at you, Paul. You’ve got to smarten up before you get in over your head.’.

‘Fuck off, Nick. You have no idea what you’re talking about. You’ve never been there, so you can’t talk.’.

Nick flushed. He could so talk. He told his best friend unequivocally that he would have to stop using heroin or else he could no longer be his friend.

‘No, Paul. I’ve never been there and I won’t go there. Get it?’.

Nick then turned abruptly and walked away from Paul Stanley’s house. When he reached the first block at which he normally turned right in order to continue walking home; he almost turned back.

He hadn’t been supportive. He’d been judgmental, just as Paul had accused him of having been.

But it was now too late for him to go back there. Paul no longer wished to see him.

Jean drove slowly along the side streets of Moore Park, avoiding the Don Valley Parkway. She had been drinking and she needed to think as she drove. She was strongly leaning toward ending her affair with Roger as he was insisting on a greater commitment from her and she did not feel that she could offer him anything that she wasn’t already offering him. He was more emotionally involved with her than she was with him She realized all too clearly that this same dynamic had also set dampened the two other affairs she had engaged in during her marriage to Jim. She did not feel at all guilty about this liaison - she wouldn’t have even if she hadn’t been convinced that Jim was enjoying the company of call girls on his many cross-country working vacations.

No, she had to tell Roger that their affair had run its course. She did not wish at all to hurt his feelings but she now knew that seeing him again would be only continuing something that had to stop

*Shit*, Jean cursed out loud as she hit a prematurely red light at a meaningless intersection.. *Something* had to change between herself and Jim. Their sex life had become almost non-existent and they no longer had any mutually enjoyable recreational activities that they could enjoy together.

Jean turned onto Lawrence and then drove straight up until Underhill Drive where she then turned left to officially enter the subdivision in which the Turnbulls lived. As she approached the driveway; she registered a small animal lying on the middle of the road in front of the house.

She slammed on the brakes and scrambled out of the car

.Her worst fears were confirmed. Plato lay motionless on his right side, far beyond the hope of any possible resuscitation or revival.

As Jean bent over to retrieve the dead cat's body and take it into the house she became aware of Steve Furlong rushing out to intercept her.

She glared at her frantic neighbour.

'It was my fault. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I couldn't hit the brakes in time. Do you understand ? I couldn't see him on the road.'

'Because you weren't looking where you were driving , you asshole!', Jean screamed at Steve Furlong. 'Just get out of my sight! Okay!'

The intoxicated man took the hint and the opportunity to run back into his house where Jean would not follow him. She had been a guest on one occasion at the Furling house and she already knew too many details about their marriage.

She poured herself a shot of Scotch, lit a cigarette, and then dialed the veterinarian. She wanted Plato's dead body to be far away from the house by the time Nick returned from wherever he had gone *without* his friend Paul.

The school year passed on uneventfully and Nick's grades improved. He was actually a strong candidate for an end-of-the-year Proficiency Reward as long as he didn't become either sick or distracted.

Jean had gone on a tropical holiday with Jim during December and they had talked at length about their marriage and how they might attempt to revitalize it. They vowed to go to plays together, as theatre was a mutual interest that had been practically abandoned for various reasons.

Once a week Jean took the car and enjoyed more experimental plays and, in the process, became social friends with a gay director named Brent. She began to realize that her son Nick simply wasn't sexually interested in girls and she no longer badgered him about this. She was relieved that Nick had broken off with Paul for whatever unspoken reason.

Nick rarely went out any more, except to movies. Jim and Jean invited him to plays but he wasn't interested. Nick had strongly developed a film buff's disdain for the theatre.

On the Saturday evening of Nick's sixteenth birthday, his parents intended to surprise him and treat him to a movie of his choice. They sat on the sofa together, holding hands as Nick set about his evening chores. Jean drank wine while Jim restricted himself to coffee as he planned to be the driver.

'You have the keys in your purse don't you, Jean?' ..She had used the car earlier in the afternoon.

'I think they're still there, Jim.'

'Well, we'll deal with this when it's time to leave.'

They sat and watched the evening news. Suddenly, their attention was diverted by the sound of a car starting up and then pulling out of a driveway at a highly advanced speed limit.

Jim and Jean stared at one another .The Furlongs had mercifully moved out and the new neighbours were a quietly pleasant couple of avid gardeners.

'Nick?'

There was no answer Jim and Jean rushed to the driveway where their car was parked no longer. The car was no longer in either the garage or the driveway; and their son was no longer home.

'Damn it to hell !'. Jim rushed toward the kitchen phone, panting furiously.

Jean sat down in her favourite armchair and thoughtfully sipped her wine. This had been her son's birthday. And her son was now legally old enough to drive a car.

The Cottages                      copyright Andrew James Paterson, 1998

Jack Green sighed as he reached another impasse. He was at a stage where he had written several scenes and , as far as he was concerned, they were still all unconnected to one another. He didn't have not so much a story-line as a *through-line*- a reason for writing his script beside the fact that he was supposed to be writing it.

He didn't particularly wish to be dealing with narrative. He wanted narrative to emerge from the images he wished to associate. But he had enjoyed an unexpected success with his first feature; and now there was pressure on him to either duplicate or exceed that initial success.

He shut down his computer after making certain that everything had been saved. He still had time before he had to show anything to his producer, who only wanted to see something that was ready to pitch. Rosie never had time to read it herself, she only had time to look for things that didn't jell.

Well, what Jack had stored up until now didn't even mesh, let alone jell.

The telephone rang. Jack didn't have to look at his call-identification to know that the caller was Philip.

'Do you want me to drive up , Jack?'

Jack muttered assent. He hoped Philip might occasionally read between the lines but he didn't want to open any cans of worms. It wasn't so much Philip that he didn't wish to talk with tonight, it was *people*.

Maybe when he had passed a turning point with this script assignment then he might be prepared for some

sort of relationship. Possibly with Philip, possibly with somebody else. Not that there was anybody else in his life. Having a workaholic reputation can do that to you, he scowled as he poured himself a shot of scotch.

He heard a nearby gunshot. He knew it was only Thomas - out hunting for supper again.

Thomas was his neighbour who hunted for food. He was significantly older and none too communicative. There was a story to Thomas but Jack was pretty sure he didn't want to know it. This knowledge might spoil everything that interested Jack about his neighbour. Self-contained people interested Jack, because he himself was not quite self-contained. He needed agents and producers. He needed sex. He knew that was why Philip was driving up to the cottage to see him. He and Philip had a *sexual* relationship, at least.

He switched on the television. There was a movie he recognized, with Farley Granger and a young actress whom he couldn't name. It was another variant of the Bonnie and Clyde story. If push came to shove, Jack could always write and then direct his version of that stock but trustworthy narrative. Except, Rosie would recognize the plagiarism. That was one of the few big words Rosie understood, or *thought* that she did.

Shit, he cursed to his empty cottage as he heard Thomas's rifle aiming for prey further away in the nearby wooded area. Jack wondered not only about the wildlife in that area, but the human life. He knew that it had again become a cruising area after local police crackdowns.

He wished he had pleaded too tired when Philip had called. Now he had to kill time with the Farley Granger movie. Well, at least Farley Granger was handsome. In fact, he looked rather like Philip.

Thomas Lawson sat by himself in the living room of the older cottage next to Jack Green's.. He sighed and then activated his module so that he could compose and then transmit a message.

*H.....ASAP.....THANKS.....T.*

Mark would get the message and then deliver the goods. This arrangement had been working for a couple

of years now so why fix what isn't broken. It wasn't as if there was a crooked local pharmacist who could clandestinely prescribe morphine for him.

The relative privacy of the cottage was worth the occasional irritation of having to talk to his supplier. He had inherited the cottage at exactly the right moment in his life- when shelter and privacy had become imperative. He barely spoke to his neighbours and he didn't feel that he was expected to do so. He could tell that the young man in the adjacent cottage- Jack Green- was also some sort of writer. Jack had a boyfriend who came up to the cottage occasionally. He had the sense that Jack cruised the bushes for sex while he hunted for food. There were parallels in their lives that didn't need to be socially acknowledged..

Yes, *food*. Thomas had finally been successful. He had become a better marksman, snagging a full-grown deer for himself. Ordering food on his modem had become far too cumbersome, so why not eliminate the middleman? Nothing against Mark, but Thomas wished he could supply his own drugs.

He hoped Mark would be making his delivery that night. His supply was dwindling. He knew that Mark had another customer in the cottages; so an excursion on his part would be rewarding.

It was time to prepare another injection. Yes, he did wish for Mark to drop by later in the evening.

Jack needed a break, he needed fresh air. He knew that Philip wouldn't be arriving for another hour and that he had time for a walk.

He could detect definite action in the bush areas but he wasn't interested tonight. He needed the exercise and the air and some distance from his computer and his cottage.

He recognized a young man walking on the other side of the pathway. He'd seen this man before- knocking on his neighbour's cottage door. Jack suspected the young man to be a prostitute who made highly specialized house calls.

The man passed Jack while definitely looking him over. While Jack had an academic interest in commodity exchange politics; he had always managed to avoid paying for sex. *That* was for either closet cases or somewhat unattractive men or elderly hermits like his neighbour Thomas.

Jack laughed to himself. Maybe the young man wasn't a hustler after all. Why would Thomas pay for sex if he didn't even pay for *food*?

He turned around and walked back toward his own cottage. He was expecting Philip's company later in the evening and overnight.

Thomas sat at his computer and module table without acknowledging the relatively-empty screen. He was reading through a book on serial killers by a writer named Elliott Leyton when there was a knock on his door.

'Good', he muttered to himself.

'Is that you, Mark?', he called out.

'Uh-huh', muttered the voice on the other side of the door. Like, who else could it be ?

As Thomas guardedly opened the door Mark immediately walked over to the computer-table that he expected Thomas to be returning to.

'Here we are, Thomas. The exact amount as requested.'

Thomas looked over the package while sniffing a spot of the white powder inside. This was more of the high-grade heroin that he had been buying from Mark for almost two years now.

He sensed that Mark wanted a drink, so he walked over to a kitchen cabinet and poured two shots of single-malt scotch. He handed one to Mark and then returned to his work table.

'What about money, Thomas?'

Thomas shrugged.

'What about it? I'm okay. I can always get an advance on my manuscript, if things got tight.'

'No, Thomas', Mark paced the floor. 'I mean the *money* for what you just bought from me.'

'Oh', he grinned sheepishly. 'The cash economy. I'm sorry, Mark.'

'It hasn't disappeared completely'.

Mark helped himself to a chair near the bookcase.

‘There are two underground economies. Mark. The cash one and then the digital one. My addiction serves a purpose....it provides *routine* for my life. But spending money on drugs is annoying. Nothing personal; but I’d love to be able to order and then score electronically.’.

Mark was familiar with this line of wishful thinking. As long as drugs were illegal there would always be a need for suppliers of both major and minor varieties.

‘Just like groceries’, Mark nodded vacantly. It occurred to him that Thomas had been honing his hunting skills as he noted the rifle on the west wall. Thomas had become quite obsessed with eliminating middle persons.

‘Are you completely carnivorous, Thomas?’.

‘Not yet’, Thomas finished his scotch .He wanted Mark to take the hint and finish his. ‘I haven’t got much of an appetite any more. Or sex drive. Sex is overrated, anyway.’.

‘Speak for yourself’, Mark finished his drink and faced the door. He had another delivery to make in the vicinity. Then he thought he might check out the local bush action. Sex was *not* overrated, as far as he was concerned.

‘My neighbour to the east....the writer or film person or whatever.....he might be out and about tonight.’.

Mark shook his head.

‘He walked right by me. He wasn’t interested.’.

Mark looked out the window..

‘He has a visitor tonight. Well, Thomas, drop me a line when you need to see me again.’.

Mark closed the door gently enough as he left. After the door was firmly shut, Thomas began to make his preparations. It would be a few days until he needed any reinforcements.

Jack had resumed work on his script when he heard the sound of Philip’s car pulling up. He resented the



fact that he had to interrupt his work in order to let his guest in.

Philip hugged him when Jack opened the door.

‘I’m returning your book, honey.’.

‘Thanks, Philip’.

Jack returned to his computer, leaving Philip holding the copy of *Homosexual Desire* by the deceased French theorist Guy de Hocquenhem.

‘It’s a bit dated now, but it’s still a good read.’.

Jack concentrated on his script.

‘Can you fix a scotch and soda for me? And, also one for yourself?’.

Philip glared in Jack’s direction for a moment. Then he placed the book down on the coffee table and walked into the kitchen area. He decided to make a gin and tonic for himself. Gin and tonic was more of a summer drink.

He brought the scotch and soda over to Jack who nodded thanks. He knew Philip wanted him to shut the computer down for the evening but what did Philip expect him to do.? Philip also inhabited the art world, although he spend more time with and made more money from his landscaping business.

Philip walked over to the bookcase and browsed through it, looking for something to occupy himself until Jack shut down. He wasted something trashy, not something dense and academic.

His eyes registered a paperback mystery by an American writer named Joseph Hansen. Philip was about to pull this book down from the shelf when he heard a rifle shot..

Philip almost ran to the front door and started to open it.

‘No need to panic, Philip. It’s only my neighbour. You know, the hunting hermit?’.

Right. Jack had talked about his neighbour.....Thomas Lawson.....before. Philip didn’t particularly want to talk about the man again tonight. But he resented the gunshot. He resented everything he felt that he knew about the man.

Jack stared at the screen and then decided to shut down for the night.

'How's it going, Jack?'

Jack shook his head slowly.

'Is it too early for a synopsis?'

'I don't really have one yet, Philip. That's the problem.'

He wondered if Philip understood. His previous partner had been an experimental filmmaker who had accused Jack of selling out to the industry. Jack had vowed to never again date anybody who felt threatened by his work.

He rose from his work station and walked toward the bedroom.

Philip blocked his path.

'Do you want me to stay over tonight?'

'Of course I would, Philip. I would have told you not to come up if I didn't want to see you tonight.'

Philip began to say something, then he changed his mind. He kissed Jack, who returned the affection.

Then the two men almost ran into the bedroom area and then threw their clothing off onto the floor.

Jack was now glad that Philip had wanted to come up to the cottage tonight.

Philip and Jack slept in and allowed some time for morning play. Then Philip declined Jack's invitation to stay for coffee. He had business to get done in Toronto- a meeting with a potential landscaping client.

After Philip drove away, Jack seriously attempted to break his writing block. His agent Rosie actually called to see how he was doing. Although her tone remained even and pleasant, Jack could tell that she was concerned about his lack of product.

Why else would she be calling him up at his cottage? They had an unspoken agreement that he was not to be disturbed here.

He decided that one of his principal characters was the problem. If he were to eliminate 'Nicholas' then what would remain that could now be built upon ?

No, 'Nicholas' or at least some variation of the character was structurally necessary, for both plot and

psychological reasons. Unfortunately, 'Nicholas' was one-dimensional. 'Nicholas' not only needed work- he needed to become a piece of work.

Jack took a break at about six o'clock and fixed himself something to eat. His refrigerator was still well stocked for the next few days. Then Jack would have to take the car into the nearby village. He tried to do this as infrequently as possible.

After eating and washing the dishes, he switched on the television. He was looking not so much for news as for something just after the news. He found what sounded to him like a Wanted or Missing Criminals programme.

A female announcer dutifully read from an obviously prepared script. Jack found himself looking at a sequence of bush areas looking very similar to those a stone's throw from his own cottage.

*This string of murders took place almost ten years ago in the Barrie- Huronia- Collingwood cottage country area .What has long baffled law-enforcement agencies is the relative lack of identifiable or recognizable patterns with regards to these killings. The victims were not all of a recognizable demographic. Some were male teenagers but some were adult heterosexual couples, whose bodies were not always found together. Investigators have concluded that these murders were all committed by the same man because of the consistency of the weapon, which was in every murder thirty-eight calibre revolver. And the bullets were always fired from a consistently high angle.*

*Sam Shelby has not been seen since his sudden disappearance from the legal firm of Shelby, Townshend, and Carpenter almost ten years ago. Two of the teenage victims- Ryan Kingsley and Kevin Slater- were known to be friends of Shelby's son Matthew who now lives with Shelby's wife- Kate. Kate Shelby ,who has since remarried, would not talk to this programme except to inform us that she has not heard one single word from Sam Shelby since his abrupt disappearance.*

When the programme switched the focus of his report onto the missing Sam Shelby, an image of the missing man was inserted into the upper-right hand corner of the television's frame and then allowed to dominate the frame for a few seconds before being edited away.

Jack stared hard at the man's face. It was rather young - fortyish - but already grizzled. It had three particular wrinkles and pronounced cheeks that did not blend in with the man's aura of severity.

The face bore more than a slight resemblance to his neighbour Thomas.

'It *is* Thomas.', Jack swore to himself. 'It *has* to be.'

Thomas sat on the sofa, pleasantly stoned. Mark seemed to have found a better connection or a better employer or supplier or whatever the jargon. He had earlier in the day snagged additional venison for himself and thus he didn't have to concern himself with hunting or procuring for some time ahead.

Thomas Lawson was at peace with himself.

A beeping signal alerted him to an incoming dispatch. Thomas walked quickly over to this module. He was not expecting any messages.

The incoming dispatch was addressed to 'Nicholas Turnbull'. All of his incoming messages were addressed to this person. His publisher went along with the current pseudonym - the deployment of one-time only pseudonyms was hardly an unusual practice in the publishing world.

The incoming message was not from his publisher. It was from Revenue Canada.

*Mr. Nicholas Turnbull. This notice is to inform you that your savings, chequing, and RRSP accounts have been frozen, in response to assorted creditors and to the Bank of Canada itself. Please contact Revenue Canada at.....*

Thomas stopped reading the message even though the final details were still being transmitted. He angrily shut off the monitor and the module and closed down his entire working system.

He lit a cigarette and then walked outside, slamming the door as he left the cottage. Drastic measures could only be countered by drastic measures.

At almost eight o'clock, Philip was surprised to recognize Jack's cottage number flashing on his incoming call - indicator.

Usually *I'm* calling *him* to see whether or not he wants my company, Philip thought to himself. Something must be different tonight.

'Did you by chance watch Canada's Most Wanted Criminals tonight, Philip?'

Philip took a beat, then responded..

'No, I didn't. I went to the baths.'

Philip was hoping that this small confession might provoke Jack - shake him up and perpetuate a little guilt that might provoke an overture. But Philip's occasional preference for dinner hour bathhouse escapades was not an issue in their relationship, so Jack simply continued his report on the programme which Philip had never watched in his entire life.

'I wish you had watched this programme. There's one suspect-at-large who's a dead ringer for my cottage neighbour.'

'Really?'. Philip was skeptical. Thomas was at least an original if nothing else, he had decided.

'I'm not making this up, Philip. Sam Shelby and Thomas Lawson are dead ringers.'

'Are you sure about this, Jack? I know a guy who sells drugs to Thomas. You know the guy I mean. And it doesn't sound to me like Thomas is up to anything unusual at all. Or that he's very active - aside from his drug habit, his fondness for hunting, and his mysterious writing.'

'These murders took place ten years ago', Jack's tone was an exasperated one.

'Oh.'

Philip wanted a drink but there was nothing in his kitchen.

'Hey, Philip. Your friend who sells drugs to Thomas- do you think you could maybe pick his brain?'

'That's easier said than done, Jack.', Philip snorted. 'Mark's a loner. Most of what I know about *him* I've learnt second-hand. Do you want me to drive up tonight?'

There was dead air on the line.

‘No. Sorry, Philip, I have to get back to my script. Hopefully tomorrow.’.

Philip had heard this line before.

‘Goodnight, darling.’.

Jack was now annoyed by Philip’s abruptness. For a second he wished that Philip would meet somebody else and fall in love with him, instead of going to St. Marc’s or whatever bath he frequented. Not that he never indulged in anonymous sex

He shook his head as he switched his computer back on. He wished that he could get this damn script out of the way and move onto something else. But no breakthrough was going to be talking place tonight, he realized as he sat staring at the monitor.

The weather forecast had predicted rain and Jack realized that the forecast was for once about to become an accurate one. He decided that, if he were going to take a fresh air break, he had better do it before any precipitation set in.

The wind was also picking up, he noticed quickly. The bush area was more active than usual for the early evening, now that rain appeared to be an inevitability . Jack was tempted to try his luck for a moment, but only a very short moment.

As he walked further down the pathway he saw Thomas passing on the other side of the walk. Tonight Thomas looked much angrier and anti-social than he usually did. Most of the time Thomas would at least acknowledge him with some sort of gesture, if not verbally. But tonight his neighbour was stomping around in his own private Idaho

. Jack did not want to be in the man’s way. others had made that mistake before and suffered for it, Jack was convinced of this. Thomas wasn’t carrying his hunting rifle - he wasn’t hunting or searching for anything. He was blowing off steam.

Had Thomas been watching Canada's Most Wanted Criminals?

Jack had never been inside his neighbour's cottage so he didn't know whether or not Thomas even owned a television, let alone watched it.

But something had gotten to the man. *Something* was grinding him down.

Jack stared after him as he walked on in his blinding rage. Thomas did not turn around. He was focused straight ahead of him - but on what?

When he arrived back at his cottage he recognized Philip's car, waiting for him

'What are you doing here?'

Philip looked at him patiently. He had either myopically or intentionally chosen to ignore Jack's anger.

'I came up to see *you*.'

'I thought I made it clear that I didn't want company tonight.'

Jack fumbled for his keys.

Philip was gently persistent.

'I'm worried about you, Jack. It's about to start raining, so can we please go in?'

Jack deliberated for a second and then opened the front door. Philip walked over to the sofa and sat down.

'I'm way behind where I should be on this script. I'm not sure what I'm doing with one major character.

Does *Nicholas* get cut or does he get a serious makeover and then what does that do to *Chris*. Or to *Joanna*, for that matter. I have to make these decisions soon, Philip. And I can't do it when I'm under pressure to be social and...'

'I need to know exactly where I stand with you, Jack.' Philip's tone was low-key yet very hard. 'I need to know whether we're lovers or fuck-buddies or friends who don't share each others lives but who do *this* and who. don't do *that* and who .....'

A gunshot interrupted Philip's questions. The sound had come from the direction of Thomas' cottage.

Jack and Philip stared at each other, wide-eyed and frightened. Then they bolted out the front door and ran

in the direction of Thomas' cottage.

The door to Thomas' cottage was ajar and they walked in.

Thomas' body had fallen onto the floor by the chair on which he had been sitting when he pressed the trigger. A thirty-eight calibre revolver lay beside him. This revolver was clearly his weapon, as his hunting rifle was hung in its designated spot on the wall by the kitchen.

Jack and Philip looked for a phone, then they realized that Thomas didn't have one. He only had his modem.

'I'd better make the call from my phone, Philip.'

Philip shook his head.

'You're calling the *police*'?

'God, yes. Let's get the fuck out of here, and don't touch anything!'

Jack and Philip bolted back to Jack's cottage, as the heavy rain began falling. No other neighbours were mobilizing around the cottage. Either they had not heard the gunshot, or else they didn't care. Philip wondered if any of Jack's other neighbours paid any attention to Thomas' comings and goings. Or to Jack's, for that matter.

As they barged into Jack's cottage Jack almost lunged for the telephone.

'Get me the police. It's an emergency!'

Philip could overhear a woman's voice, a rather laconic one.

'Can I help you, sir?'

'There's been a suicide at..'

'Are you sure this is a suicide?'

'Yes, damn it!', Jack almost screamed at her. He didn't need to be transferred to another fucking department.' My partner and I heard a shot coming from the cottage next door, so we ran right over. We saw the dead man on the floor by the chair he'd been sitting on, with the gun at his...'

'His door was open?'

The officer's voice was laid-back, yet incredulous.



‘Yes, officer. Don’t ask *me* why he left his door open. I barely knew the man.’.

‘Just calm down, sir’, the officer snapped. ‘Now, what’s *your* address?’.

‘22 Sycamore.’.

‘Okay. I’ll be right over. Stay there and don’t go anywhere.’.

As Jack hung up the phone he cringed. Where the hell did this police officer think he and his partner were likely to be skipping out to, for God’s sake?

Philip motioned for Jack to join him on the sofa.

‘I’ll get you a drink, dear. I’m sure *that* isn’t illegal at a time like this.’.

Jack nodded as Philip walked toward the kitchen. A drink would help kill time. It wouldn’t do much else, but it would kill time

.Music would help kill time, they mutually decided without having to articulate why. Pleasant, instrumental music that could express emotions that would be trivialized by verbal language. Jack and Philip could listen to music and not have to talk to each other.

As Jack’s Brian Eno CD repeated itself, the sound of a car pulling up to Thomas’s cottage was a distraction.

‘ It’s a woman cop.’.

Jack looked at Philip. It was probably the cop who had answered the phone.

They observed the lieutenant, marking the details of Thomas’ cottage. The body, the weapon, the furniture, the module, probably the drugs - not only was the officer writing it all down but she was also taking Polaroids.

Then they saw her marching over to Jack’s cottage. They decided to let her in - before she demanded that they do so.

The officer stood as Jack and Philip seated themselves on the sofa. She was a big woman. She reminded Philip of an American customs agent who had once made life difficult for him at the Peace Bridge border crossing.

‘Lieutenant Deb Robinson, Is this your cottage?’.

She wasn’t sure which man had made the call.

‘It’s mine’, Jack asserted. ‘I called you. My name is Jack Green.’.

Deb Robinson brusquely shook hands with Jack and indicated Philip.

‘Is this gentleman your partner?’.

‘Yes.’, Philip broke in before Jack could reply. ‘I’m Philip Evans.’.

‘Were either....or both.....of you gentlemen acquainted with the deceased, Thomas Lawson.’.

Philip shook his head as Jack nodded yes.

‘On a first name basis, Mr. Green?’.

‘Yes, but not really socially. We occasionally exchanged brief but polite conversation.’.

Deb Robinson frowned.

‘You never exchanged notes? About your writing, for instance?’.

Jack shook his head.

‘Not really. I come here for privacy and so he did, obviously.’.

‘But you are a writer .Right, Mr. Green. And also a film director?’

Jack nodded that he was both a writer and a film director.

‘So, having a neighbour like Thomas Lawson must have given you a lot to think about. A lot to play with.’.

Of course it did. But what the hell was this police officer driving at? He wanted to offer her a drink but he knew that she would refuse. She was on duty.

‘I was watching Canada’s Most Wanted Criminals last night and there was a spot about a serial killer named Sam Shelby. This man who is wanted for a string of murders in this general vicinity ten years ago?’.

‘Yes, Mr. Green?’, Deb. Robinson was becoming impatient.

‘Well, the mug shot looked a lot like Thomas probably did ten years ago.’.

Deb Robinson glared at him.

‘And you actually think that Sam Shelby and Thomas Lawson are one and the same person?’.

‘It *did* cross my mind.’, Jack tried not to be sarcastic.

‘It crossed ours years ago, Mr. Green. But only briefly. Mr. Lawson had been here well before you bought this cottage. Am I right, Mr. Green?’.

Jack looked at Philip.

‘Yes, Lieutenant Robins.....’

‘Thomas Lawson was well-known to the police. We knew him by his own name as well as by another name. He may or may have not been aware of this, but he was very useful to us. His suicide is unfortunate.’.

‘Oh.’, Philip blurted.

Deb Robinson stared at Philip. He had not indicated to her that he was likely to contradict his boyfriend about any important details. And she had no further business with either of these two men at this point.

‘Well, Mr. Green. What I saw at Mr. Lawson’s cottage matches your description. But both of you will be needed for the inquest, so don’t take any vacations. Both of you live in Toronto, I presume.’.

‘Yes, but not together.’.

Deb Robinson again glared at Philip. She remembered that she had to obtain both Jack and Philip’s addresses in Toronto. Then she left without any further ado.

After the lieutenant was safely out of earshot, Jack held onto Philip’s hand and grimaced.

‘I’m not in any hurry to talk to *her* again. Let’s have another drink.’.

‘Yes, Jack. Let’s have at least another drink.’.

Several scotches later, Jack and Philip decided to call it a night. They had managed to be together while talking as little as possible, absently listening to music and then watching the television with an eye to any possible news reports of Thomas’ suicide

Not that there had been any visitors to Thomas’ cottage after Lieutenant Deb Robinson finished her investigation. She had left the generic yellow bindings around the cottage - indicating that the cottage was out of

bounds and that entering the premises was inadvisable.

Jack wondered whether or not she had installed some sort of surveillance mechanism, or perhaps tampered with Thomas' computer system. He was actually quite curious to take a look but he knew this would not be a wise course of action.

At about midnight Jack and Philip fell asleep and slept like logs. In the morning Jack made it clear that he wanted to have sex. At first Philip was reluctant but then he came around. They had good physically and emotionally-rewarding sex for at least an hour.

Jack was glad Philip had acquiesced without needing any great amount of persuasion. He had decided that he would be breaking off with Philip. Philip had asked him for clarification of his status- of their relationship- and now Jack had come to a decision. But he didn't want to break the news to him this particular morning. He wanted Philip to understand without having to be told.

In the early afternoon Philip announced that he did have a meeting back in Toronto. Jack kissed him at length and then told him to drive safely. He observed Philip sneaking a long look over his right shoulder as he drove off.

Jack smiled. He felt certain that Philip had been taking a final look at the cottage.

Donald Sutton read the Halifax Chronicle Herald with an obviously-apparent exasperation.

‘What *drugs* does Prime Minister Chretien ingest, anyway?’. he demanded of his house mate Sandra MacDonald who simply rolled her eyes.

‘First he installs Jean Charest as liberal Leader in Quebec, for the purpose of defeating Bouchard and wiping out the separatist menace. And now he is undermining Charest, who is ostensibly his puppet.’.

Sandra MacDonald sipped her tea.

‘I don’t know what’s happening, Don. Maybe it’s all just hot air to make it seem as if Charest isn’t Chretien’s puppet’.

Don scowled.

‘That’s too obvious, Sandra. But *something* is off here. This doesn’t make sense.’.

Sandra lit a cigarette and exhaled.

‘Well, whoever is the Canadian Oliver Stone should get his camera on the case.’.

‘Wayne says Jeremy is a homosexual Olive Stone. Is that an oxymoron?’.

She laughed as she finished her tea.

‘With regards to Jeremy, it’s not an oxymoron.’.

Sandra stood and then walked toward the front door and her car. Don resumed reading the paper and found nothing to reassure him. Jeremy Rowntree might, for better or worse, have a valid point to make about the Quebec election - Jeremy Rowntree, his long-distance lover and WASP dilettante supporter of Quebec’s right to sovereignty.

Damn it, Don threw the newspaper in the recycling bin and then walked upstairs to his bedroom.

Jeremy Rowmtree decided that he needed to pee again before going out to the party he had reluctantly agreed to go to. When he returned from the john, the phone was ringing.

He recognized Don Sutton's number and picked up the phone.

'How are you, darling?'

Jeremy blushed.

'Fine, I guess. I was just leaving for a party; but I don't have to go to it.'

'No?'

Don had long stopped going out for the sake of going out. Jeremy could not pay himself the same compliment

'Some film people, a few academics. I mean, professional film people are really not my cup of tea.'

'Yes, Jeremy. You do go on about this. So, when can you come and visit me? It's your turn..

Jeremy tersely nodded.

'The upcoming holiday doesn't look promising. I'm barely squeaking by with the two nights a week job.'

'Is there any other job you can hook into?'

'That's easier said than done', Jeremy's tone became angry.

'Well, I have to do the three nights a week for at least another semester. Too bad your apartment is so tiny.'

Don was fortunate to have a room mate for economic reasons. Don and Sandra had become good friends . Jeremy could not imagine sharing even a larger apartment with another person and remaining friendly with that person

'Anyway, Jeremy, I'm on my way out. Sandra and I are going to a play.'

'Right. I'll call you later next week, Don.'

Don and Sandra were both theatre aficionados. Jeremy liked theatre that involves bodies in a space, not just a group of people sitting around like unattractive furniture and endlessly talking. He was keen on Beckett and Pinter and the German writer Handke. He did not like sentimentality or chattiness. Don, for his part, was not

terribly fussy or critical about either the performing or the visual arts.

‘I love you, Jeremy.’.

‘I love you too, Don.’.

Jeremy hung up and scowled at his tiny apartment. He decided that now he had to go to this probably boring party, just to get away from the apartment for a few hours. Maybe he could suck up to one of the academics and land some guest lecturer engagement for himself.

He vowed that, if anybody began pontificating about the Quebec election, he would not swallow the bait and participate in a pointless debate or conversation. He would take the opportunity to leave the party..

It wasn't so much a case of Don wishing that Jeremy would pack all of his bags and move to the east coast. Don just wanted his nominal partner to make up his mind - not only about the relationship but about other things as well. When he had visited Jeremy in Toronto the previous month, Jeremy had been cordial but distant. He had played the host while making it clear that he preferred privacy. He encouraged Don to go off on his own for a good portion of his visit..

‘You should go and visit *Mark*. I need time by myself and I have nothing to say to Mark.’.

This statement had surprised Don. Mark Rodgers and Jeremy had been close friends for years. *Something* had happened. Perhaps Mark had broken with Jeremy, rather than the other way around.

Jeremy had definitely been somewhere else sexually. Don felt that Jeremy was uncomfortable having sex with the lights on and with a man that he knew. Jeremy had settled into a dark corner of the local bathhouses lifestyle, where the last thing a man wanted to know was anything about other men except for their availability and the willingness. Halifax had a sauna that wasn't a blatantly gay male establishment; and Don never cruised the park at night. Wayne did, and was sometimes obsessive about it.

Don didn't mind Jeremy's occasional sex binges when he wasn't around. If he had been pretending to stay home and work while Don visited his Toronto friends, that would have been crossing a line on Jeremy's part.

Jeremy realized that Atlantic Canada had a sense of place lacking in Toronto. Jeremy used this to avoid making a commitment. A sense of place does not necessarily exclude newcomers, no matter what Jeremy might believe. People who can't make decisions for themselves love to believe that other people are making those decisions on their behalves.

Don looked at his watch. It was almost time for him to meet Sandra at the movies. They were going to see *Carrington*, a movie that Jeremy looked down his nose at because it was too theatrical or not experimental enough or whatever. If he were visiting Don at this time, that was probably exactly how he would express his predictable disdain. Don and Sandra-- that pair of drama queens. Well, why the hell not.?

He threw on his windbreaker and marched toward the door. A twenty minute walk was good for his system, and he was expecting to love the movie..

When Don and Sandra returned from the historical drama they switched on the television and watched the news. Jean Charest was still attempting to undo the damage inflicted on him by the Prime Minister of Canada. And the polls were showing the separatist PQ regaining the ground they had lose the previous summer due to Charest's installation as provincial Liberal Party leader.

'It's as if Chretien needs to have Bouchard as his adversary, Don. It's some bizarre symbiotic relationship or something '.

Sandra lit a cigarette as she opened a beer for herself. Don fixed a gin and tonic, as he did not drink beer.

'But why? Last summer, we didn't need Oliver Stone or any stupid conspiracy theorist to inform us that the federal Liberals were controlling the shots with their provincial counterparts. Now Chretien is undermining Charest, and why?'

'Do you want to smoke a joint?'

"Of course I would!'

Wayne Bennett's voice boomed from the other side of the locked door. Don and Sandra looked at each other and then cracked up.



'Good evening to you, Wayne.'

Don let his friend in as Sandra busied herself rolling the joint.

'You could have been a cop out there, staking out our house.'

'Oh, right, I forgot that marijuana's technically illegal.'

Wayne sat down and accepted a hit from Sandra.

'I was just walking by and thought I'd drop in.'

Sandra drew on her cigarette and exhaled away from Wayne's face.

'Which way were you going, Wayne?'

'The hill. You know me. I see you're watching the same old news.'

'Yes', Don sighed. 'It doesn't seem to ever resolve anything. Does it?'

Wayne scowled. 'Because there are so many anti-French bigots and not only in Western Canada, I could almost become sympathetic to Quebec separatism. Except, I know damn well what Bouchard and his cronies really think of Haitians and anybody else who isn't a white Francophone.'

'They don't have any time for aboriginals either', Sandra passed the joint to Don..

Don nodded.

'Care to join me, Don?' Wayne smiled at him..

Don shook his head. He did not cruise the hill at night.

'You should have fun occasionally, Donald.'

'I'm tempted, guys.'

Sandra took another hit on the joint and passed it to Don, who looked at her quizzically.

'Where's Larry been lately?'

Sandra drew on her cigarette and sipped her beer.

'Help yourself to a beer, Wayne. I've stopped seeing Larry. It wasn't any big deal - I could tell that our relationship wasn't going to be entering any radical new dimension.'

Wayne opened the beer.

‘Smart decision, Sandy. What you saw was what you got.

‘Yes, Wayne. Larry was a good fuck and we had fun. Okay?’

Wayne chuckled to Don, who leaned forward.

‘Have you see Kim lately?’.

Kim was Sandra’s one and only lesbian affair. Don had wanted this affair to last for a long time if not forever. He thought his house-mate was locked into a bad pattern with attractive but stupid men.

‘She moved to Toronto She’s already getting into a lot of Asian-themed art shows there. And.. I could get into dating another woman, but you guys know me, I have to feel pursued first.’.

Don groaned. He’d heard this rationalization before.

Wayne shifted toward Don as Sandra blew smoke in his direction.

How’s Jeremy?’.

Don scowled as he passed the joint to Wayne.

‘Same as usual. Broke. Stuck in Toronto.’.

Wayne nodded. The time was not appropriate to comment on this situation Whenever he scolded Don about unsatisfactory relationships, Don accused him of being the pot calling the kettle black. Don wasn’t at all off base when he did this.

‘Another joint, Wayne?’.

Sandra had already begun to roll a second.

‘Sure, why not’.

Why not indeed, thought Don to himself. If he were going to cruise the hill then he would want to be very stoned before doing so. But he didn’t want to have sex with any *strangers*. He wasted Jeremy to miraculously appear at the front door as suddenly as Wayne had.

‘Cheers, Wayne. Have a good night and don’t tell me about it the next time we have coffee.’.

‘Cheers’.

Wayne savored the joint as Don and Sandra looked at each other with a benign resignation.

Don had the house to himself a few nights later. Sandra had gone out to some film wrap party with a group of people whom he personally found uninteresting. He knew that Sandra would be drinking more than he would be and probably flirting with some macho gaffer or electrician. He did not enjoy watching this process..

As he read a novel by an English writer named Neil Bartlett, the telephone rang. He recognized Jeremy's number.

'I didn't expect to hear from you tonight, darling. What's up?'

Jeremy sounded a tad inebriated.

'I just went to a performance- cabaret event that upset me''.

Don wished that he had a joint for himself.

'Why/ I mean, who's performance?'

'Frances Lightfoot. You know, she lives in my building?'

'Oh. *Her*'. Don had met Frances Lightfoot previously and had been unimpressed. He had found the woman to be a peculiar cross between a new-age entrepreneur and a puritanical seventies feminist.

She gave me a free ticket, and I was curious. *Sometimes* she makes sense to me.'.

'But not *tonight*, evidently.'

Jeremy composed himself.

Why, Donald, do Canadian nationalists have this problem with British Columbia?'

Don braced himself.

'What are you on about, dear?'

'These CBC federalists, like Frances Lightfoot herself, all want Quebec to be part of the family and they think British Columbia can be the sacrificial lamb.'

'You mean *goat*, Jeremy.'.

'Whatever, honey. It's racist.'

‘How? *What* are you trying to tell me?’.

Jeremy paused, then continued.

‘ CBC federalists like to draw clear-cut divisions between who’s indigenous to Canada and who’s an immigrant. That Trudeau-era coast-to-coast bilingualism doesn’t make sense in a province where the second language is either Mandarin or Cantonese Chinese.’.

‘No’, Don shook his head. ‘That does seem simplistic. But don’t you think there are Reform Party types and anti-French western separatists who are using this fact. The Reform party, if you’ve been paying as much attention to national politics as you like to think you do, has been recruiting assimilated immigrants who have one thing in common. They don’t like Quebec or the French.’.

‘Yes, the Reform Party has been cynically clever here. But I’m hearing too many CBC federalists labeling all Westerners who are just a bit tired of the constitutional impasse as being Reform surrogates. I don’t think that’s accurate. And, Jean Charest, the great federalist hope - is a right-wing creep when it comes down to *economic* issues. A lot of Quebec voters take the constitutional impasse for granted and vote along economic lines; which just might be the prime reason why the PQ is surging and Charest is biting the bullet.’..

Don wished to move the conversation on to another subject or else wrap it up for the night.

‘You’re probably right, Jeremy. But I don’t know what can be done about this conundrum. How are your finances?’.

Jeremy paused.

‘Not that great. I’m going to try to save money so that I can visit you over the Christmas holiday. Is that all right with you?’.

‘That would be wonderful. Jeremy. You know that. Please try to make your arrangements soon and get a bargain with your airfare.’.

‘I love you, Don.’.

‘Even though I’m a federalist?’.

‘Yes. How’s Sandra?’.

‘Comme-ci. Comme-ca. She’s out at some film party, the kind of party I always try to avoid.’.

‘Me too. I’ve seen her ex-girlfriend around Toronto. Kim’s doing quite well for herself.’.

Don nodded.

‘So I’ve heard. Sandra’s *definitely* bisexual, which is why she has no time for any variety of separatist thinking. I’d better sign off, Jeremy. Can’t be ringing up too many large phone bills if you want to see me over the holidays.’.

Jeremy agreed. He didn’t want to argue this point.

‘Call me soon, honey. I love you.’.

Don hung up. He didn’t know whether or not he loved Jeremy any more. That was why he wanted Jeremy to visit him - in *his* own neck of the woods..

He was awakened an hour later by the sound of Sandra arriving home with a group of friends. They had come back to her place to drink more and to consume drugs. Probably some of those well-paid film types had some cocaine to pass around.

Don threw on his dressing gown. He walked into the living room where Sandra was opening beers for two young men and a young lady.

‘Hi, Don. This is Scott and Martin and Liz.’.

Don smiled at the three film people.

‘Please keep it down to a dull roar, dear. The old man is attempting to *sleep*.’.

Sandra winked at him as he returned to his bedroom Oh to be young again. ,he thought without any bitterness. He was forty-two and Sandra was twenty-seven and still he could not imagine living with any other house mate.

‘Goodnight, Don’, his house mate called out to him.

Don slept like a log, and when he finally did get out of bed Sandra had not only gone out somewhere but cleaned the living room spotless. There was no evidence of any rowdiness that may or may not have taken place

the previous night.

Still, he couldn't quite stop entertaining the possibility that one of the revelers had also been an overnight guest. Which of the three, he mused. One of the boys, or the girl?

As he fixed tea for himself the telephone rang. He did not recognize the number coming in - it was a hotel phone from one of the Halifax hotels.

'Hi, Donald. It's Mark Rodgers from Toronto.'

He did not know that Mark was in town

'What brings you down east?'

'A job interview at NSCAD. What else?'

Don poured a cup of tea.

'Would you like to meet for tea? Or a drink?'

'How about at the Trident in an hour?'

Don considered this option.

'Sure. I can shower later.'

He sipped his tea and scanned the paper. The dynamics of the Quebec election had not changed.

'*Shit!*', he cursed to the empty room. He wished that the stalemate in Quebec - not only the one connected to the current election - would change. Drastically.

Mark arrived at the Trident cafe before Don. Don could not help thinking that Mark had lost considerable weight, and he tried his damndest not to appear alarmed.

'My interview's tomorrow, and I feel I have a strong chance', Mark greeted Don. Mark hoped to land a teaching job in the New Media arts department at NSCAD.

'How's Toronto, Mark?'

'Same old same old.', Mark shook his head sadly. 'The provincial government is probably the worst in Canada, and Harris has successfully polarized *everybody* against downtown Toronto.'

Don frowned. Surely there can't be that distinct a partition?

Well, Don. Look at the Quebec election. Bouchard compares Charest's proposals to Harris' and alarms go off. Unfortunately, Jean Charest *is* economically very conservative.'

'As if Bouchard isn't himself?'. Don signaled the waiter to deliver two teas.

'True. But his party is all over the map on economic issues. The Liberals, on the other hand, go wherever Charest takes them because he is the federally-appointed saviour.'

'Yes', Don shook his head. 'Well, Mark. I wish you luck tomorrow.'

Mark indicated his appreciation and cleared his throat.

'I haven't been in touch with Jeremy.'

Don nodded. He knew that something had snapped between Mark and Jeremy during his previous visit to Toronto.

'Jeremy is just contrary for the sake of being contrary. And I'm tired of it.'

The waiter delivered two cups of strong herbal teas.

'Last September, Don, we were both at a party. It was at the apartment of a friend of mine who is involved in anti-racist work. Sandra's friend Kim was there, among other people.'

'Yes, Mark?'

'Well, Jeremy completely put his foot in his mouth all night. There was this older straight couple there - Tim and Mary Barnes, who have become very active against neo-Nazis and their cohorts.. Tim Barnes is the superintendent of a downtown building where this neo-Nazi masquerading as RCMP had his cover blown. And Jeremy talked to Tim and Mary as if they were just homophobic white trash.'

'Oh, shit.', Don had been around Jeremy on other occasions when he had made such stock assumptions.

'Jeremy himself goes on and on about class as the issue that everybody had forgotten, and then acts like a typical Noel Coward snob.'

'This couple, who are very straight and whose tastes are very different from the younger activist crowd's, were the ones who broke into Henry Chadburn or John Stansbury or whatever the mole's name' computer files and then blew the whistle on him. So these are people you have to respect, even if they do eat meat and listen to

older music and wear generic fur and whatever other bad habits they might have. Tim Barnes was a football star who was injured and who had to cut his career short .’.

Don was glad he had not been at this party.

‘So Jeremy was cornered?’.

Mark nodded

‘Not only by the Barneses , but also by the host- this musician friend named Pedro who knows a lot about sample culture as well as sampling. Pedro used to live in Tim’s building before he expanded his studio’.

. Don had an idea what Mark was talking about although he had lost interest in contemporary music long before sampling had come into vogue. The music Sandra played had guitars and drums and probably no samples. It featured angry girl singers who sounded like they were against irony and for interpretation.

‘Well, Don, I’d best be off. I have to go visit Wayne Bennett in half an hour.’.

‘Say hello to Wayne. Mind you, I’m meeting with Wayne tomorrow - the day before he flies to Toronto.’.

‘Yes. He’s looking for work there, and not doing all that well. Things are tight.’.

Mark kissed Don, and then paid the bill. Don decided to order another tea for himself and find a periodical to keep him distracted.

Later that evening Don was watching an interesting experimental homo film when Sandra quietly joined him on the sofa

.’How’s your day, Sandra?’.

She shrugged and lit a cigarette.

‘I don’t really know. I might have script-continuity work on this movie and I might not. I really don’t know about the film world.’.

Don kissed her.

‘I’m enjoying this film.’.

‘What are you watching?’ , she exhaled and walked over to the refrigerator.



‘A British and Greek co-production about interactive male sex fantasies. I can’t remember the title or the director.’.

Sandra returned with a beer and looked over the cassette case.

‘Looks good to me, Don. Mind if I join you?’.

‘Of course not?’, he looked at her. She didn’t seem to be quite herself tonight.

They watched silently while Sandra smoked her cigarette. Don had quit smoking ten years ago and the odor had long ceased to annoy him.

‘There are some gorgeous men in this movie, Don’.

‘There certainly are.’.

She took a long pull on her beer.

‘Which ones do *you* fancy?’.

He sighed.

‘I could drop for any of them in a flash. But would they even look at me?’.

‘You underestimate yourself, Donald.’.

He watched her rolling a joint.

‘I don’t think so, Sandra. And you’re the same as I am here. You like girls but you pick up guys because you have more power with them.’.

She ground out her cigarette before lighting the joint.

‘That’s too neat, Don. There are emotions involved.’.

‘Not in this movie there aren’t. That’s part of the appeal.’.

She toked and then passed the joint over to him.

‘I wish that I had the option of doing what Wayne does and cruising the hill or going to a women’s bathhouse. I hear they had one in Toronto and it was wildly successful.’.

‘If you were in Toronto you would have gone?’.

She accepted the joint back from him.

‘Probably, Unless my schedule interfered.’

‘So why were you talking about emotions, aside from those of the moment?’

She passed the joint back to him and sipped her beer thoughtfully.

‘Well, there’s the moment and then there’s the long term. That’s sort of what happened with Kim. We started becoming friends and losing our erotic attraction for each other. I think that happened to both of us, not just myself.’

‘That’s too bad. I like Kim and I hear she’s doing well in Toronto.’

‘Oh yes. I mean, we do keep in touch. But I’m going to contradict myself, Don. Why shouldn’t people be friends and occasionally have sex? What’s with this friend or lover either/or bullshit? It’s so fucking puritanical, that’s what I think.’

Don shook his head.

‘Wayne and I have *never* had sex, not even when we first met. We wouldn’t have the friendship we still have if we were ever to cross that line.’

She finished her beer and walked to the refrigerator for another.

‘But some really good friends finally become lovers. And all their friends applaud when it finally happens. It’s like what the fuck took them so long to realize it!’

He laughed. He knew a few couples who certainly fit that pattern.

‘Don, you’re probably my best friend. It’s not this movie, but I have a strong desire to make love to you. Have you ever had sex with a woman?’

‘No’. He had occasionally been curious but afraid that he would not be very good at it.

Don placed his hand on Sandra’s knee after finishing the joint.

‘I don’t believe everybody should be able to have sex with everybody in the dark. Some men are exclusively gay and so are some women. The everybody is really bisexual scenario to me ultimately plays into the straight is normal scenario.’

‘Oh shit, Don.. Now you sound like Jeremy.’

Sandra kissed Don slowly and then with greater intensity. He was astonished that his cock began hardening. He wanted to reciprocate somehow.

‘Look, Don. If I feel we’re making a mistake I’ll say so. Okay ? I mean, I am quite pissed.’..

He nodded. Her bluntness was largely why he’d become so fond of her.

‘Let’s go to bed and see what happens, my dear Enough of these two solitudes.’.

Sandra giggled as Don took a final look at the video and then hit the remote control. After their erotic adventure they could always return for more movies and more refreshments.

Wayne Bennett was looking intently at a single man standing against a wall at Woody’s when Jeremy finally arrived for their meeting.

‘Sorry I’m late, Wayne.’.

‘That’s all right.’.

Wayne declined to inquire as to why Jeremy might have been delayed.

‘What are you drinking?’.

‘Cameron Cream Ale. Have you tried it?’.

Jeremy nodded. He had tried this local brewery before at Woody’s but he couldn’t remember the date and the company.

‘How’s Halifax,. Wayne?’.

Wayne looked at Jeremy

‘How’s Toronto, Jeremy. I always feel weird when people here ask me about Halifax. It isn’t as if my home town is some strange exotic place.’.

Jeremy ordered a beer.

‘Well then. Toronto is unsettled. Ontario is not having a provincial election but the Quebec election is having an odd tangential effect on everything here, as far as I’m concerned. ‘.

‘How so?’, Wayne sipped on his draft while trying not to look at the single man against the wall.

‘Ontario, and its premier from *hell*, is the bogeyman. The great federalist hope has played right into Bouchard’s hands. Charest’s economic proposals reek of Mike Harris, and Bouchard is having a field day.’.

Wayne signaled the waiter for a refill.

‘You know where I stand, Jeremy. Whatever I think of simplistic federalism and economic conservatism; I can’t align myself with Quebec sovereigntists who openly despise all non-Quebecois.’.

Jeremy squirmed.

‘But why this binary to begin with, Wayne?’.

‘Because those are Bouchard’s terms, damn it.’.

Jeremy realized that he had best find another topic of conversation as he had argued about the Quebec problem with Wayne previously on several occasions. He realized that Wayne had eyes for the single man against the wall, so he did not broach that subject. He wanted Wayne to be a successful predator.

‘Cheers, Wayne’.

The waiter brought a second draft over to Wayne who tipped the boy well.

‘I have something to tell you, Jeremy.’.

‘Oh?’

Usually whenever they would meet in Toronto, Wayne would begin by translating a big wet kiss from Don. Jeremy now realized that Wayne had not done so this time.

‘It’s about Don.’

‘What is it, Wayne?’.

Wayne took a long pull on his beer and looked at Jeremy.

‘Don and Sandra are sleeping together.’.

Jeremy stared at Wayne blankly for a very long second.

‘Bullshit!’.

‘I’m not making this up. Jeremy. I couldn’t believe it either when they both told me.’.

‘I still can’t believe it. Wayne. Don has never sexually been attracted to women.’.

Wayne sipped his beer.

‘But Don is probably emotionally more heterosexual than homosexual. So is Sandra. It’s not like they’re going to have this traditional heterosexual marriage or anything like that. But they are definitely sleeping together.’

Jeremy swallowed his draft and tried to flag the waiter for another.

‘I still don’t believe what you’re telling me, Wayne. Don has never had sex with a woman in all of his forty- two years.’

‘Yes, Jeremy. But Sandra and he are a couple *emotionally*. So they experimented physically and opened up a can of worms.’

‘This is ridiculous. I know Sandra covets Don and is jealous of me, but I can’t believe they’re fucking. Don is such a bottom.’

Wayne groomed at him

‘Yes, and Sandra is I suspect quite the top. I’m telling you this because I like you. We’ve had our problems but I like you. And I don’t want you to find out about Don and Sandra the hard way.’

Well that was considerate of Wayne, Jeremy cursed to himself. He decided to flag the waiter and tell him to cancel his second draft. It wasn’t as if he didn’t want another drink. He would’ve preferred to be drinking elsewhere, with somebody other than Wayne Bennett. He did not want to know anything further about Don and Sandra’s new found heterosexual happiness. He wanted the pair of them to go somewhere else and have a fucking baby. He wanted Wayne Bennett to be the bearer of somebody else’s bad news.

‘I’m getting out of here, Wayne. I have nothing further to say to you.’

Wayne had expected this reaction. He finished up his draft and sat for a while. The man against the wall had left but he still felt like drinking some more at Woody’s. He had done his best friend Don a huge favour and he felt like celebrating.

‘Cheers, Jeremy.’

Wayne toasted the man whom he was positive he would never be drinking with again. Then he moved

over to the video monitor, in search of a man more handsome than the one who had been standing against the wall and ignoring him.

**EACH LITTLE PLANT** copyright Andrew James Paterson, 1999

Ruth and Ron Taylor sat down in front of the television after dinner with their coffees.

They silently watched *The Nature of Things*, which featured yet another report on endangered tigers.

‘Endangered my foot, Ron. Those animals are dangerous.’.

‘Yes. But they are practically extinct, Ruth.’.

He turned his head back toward the television monitor, thus discouraging any further retorts or replies.

Ruth did not wish to look at tigers or elephants or bears or any other wild animals. She had made it clear to her children that she did not wish to have even cats or dogs in their house.

She became aware of Dr. Arthur Belmont who was working in the back yard of the house behind theirs, very carefully watering his plants.

‘There’s that Dr. Belmont again, Ron. He spends so much time with each individual plant- as if they are each and every one of them his patient.’.

Ron looked at her with an exasperation.

‘I more than suspect you are correct, Ruth. But Dr. Belmont seems a nice enough man - not at all a bad sort to have for a neighbour. His wife seems quite friendly , even if she is much younger than him.’.

Ruth nodded assent to this observation. She had seen Jane Belmont relaxing out in her back yard and had decided to keep a distance from the woman..

‘That son of theirs definitely takes after his father. Very quiet. Probably gets good marks in school.’.

Ruth agreed but did not indicate so to her husband. She knew that Lisa had a crush on Todd Belmont that was unlikely to be reciprocated.

She knew that Charlie was rehearsing his parts for an important recording session tomorrow. The best thing she could say about her son’s living at home was that he practiced his bass with headphones. The best thing she could say about Charlie’s having become a Scientologist was that his religion helped keep him away from drugs.

Her daughter had gone out to a movie. She had said that she would be going with her friend Pam but Ruth knew better than to take Lisa at her word.

‘More coffee, Ron?’.

He shook his head.

‘No thanks, Ruth. Any more and I’ll never get to sleep. You know that.’.

She did., but she had momentarily forgotten this detail. He usually stayed up longer than she did.

*The Nature of Things* finished and another programme commenced.

‘Time to get to work, Ruth. I’ll see you in a couple of hours.’.

Ruth nodded and then switched off the television and resumed her paperback.

The next day was a school holiday and Lisa was entertaining her friend Pam upstairs in her bedroom. As Ruth walked past the door she could overhear their conversation.

Lisa had been with Pam the previous night after all. They had double-dated.

‘You and Wayne are an item, Pam. Admit it.’.

Pam Fielding snorted.

‘Depends what you call an item, Lisa.’.

‘Maybe the last few times I’ve seen you, you’ve been with Wayne.’..

‘‘Hmmp. Well, what about you and Gary?’’.

Ruth stopped in the hallway , perfectly positioned outside the door.

‘One date does not constitute an affair.’.

Ruth could visualize Pam egging Lisa on.

‘Gary’s cute. He’s sexy. Face it, you’ll *never* get anywhere with Todd Belmont.’.

‘I ‘m afraid you’re right there, Pam.’.

‘Todd Belmont’s a fag. He doesn’t like girls.’.

‘ Fuck off, Pam. How would *you* know.?’.



Ruth decided that she'd heard enough. She was wearing her slippers and therefore able to avoid making her footsteps audible.

She retrieved her blanket from upstairs and made coffee for herself. She had a feeling that Lisa's friend Pam was right about Todd Belmont., Ruth felt sorry for the boy. Having to hear all about Freud and his acolytes from an early age on had damaged the boy. It had given him a bad male role-model.

Ruth had no time for Scientologists. But, if her own son Charlie had to belong to any religion, she preferred the Scientologists over any other group of religious zealots. At least the Scientologists had the correct attitude to psychiatrists.

There he was *again*. Dr. Belmont was out in the back yard, watering each little plant as if it were a case study . Ruth wished for the Belmonts to move out of the neighbourhood as quickly as possible.

She wished that the school holiday had also been a working holiday for Ron. Not that he paid any attention to the calendar when it came down to work.

Ron worked all the time. Ron never took holidays and he needed one badly. Ruth and Ron desperately needed a holiday.

'I've found a place, Mom and Dad.'

Charlie almost beamed as he made his announcement at the dinner table .Ruth and Ron were anxiously curious. Lisa said nothing

'Where did you find a place, Charles?'

'Parkdale - on a side street'.

'Oh.'. Ruth was visibly worried.

'How did you find this house?', Ron was still smiling.

'My friend Ben- the saxophonist- he knows a keyboard - player who lives on the top floor.'

Ron poured another glass of wine for himself. Ruth declined a refill.

'So, its a musicians' house?'

Charlie nodded. He and Ben and Frank upstairs would all practice together or apart, depending on their moods. They would all look out for one another.

‘There are a lot of drugs in that neighbourhood, Charlie.’.

‘I know, Mom’, he flushed angrily. ‘I haven’t touched any drugs for two years now. Okay?’.

Charlie silently ate the remainder of his dinner and then excused himself from the table. He had a session later that night and then he would be moving out at the end of the month.

‘Have a good session, Charles.’.

Ron was proud of his son. He was worried about his daughter, whose marks were down and who barely even spoke to him.

Lisa quickly finished her dinner and then attended to her homework, or whatever she really read for herself in her upstairs bedroom. An hour after dinner, she came downstairs to the refrigerator and asked her mother a question.

‘Mom? Parkdale is where the mental hospital is. Right?’.

Ruth tended to her plants a few days later as a rainy spell had finally ended. A thunderstorm with hailstones had damaged many of the taller plants and she was not pleased about this. She had zero tolerance for bad weather and for pests and for children who took short cuts through the back yard strip between their house and the Belmonts’

A ginger-coated cat crept down the strip and into Ruth’s field of vision. Ruth disliked cats - she felt that they were evil and destructively selfish animals who preyed on birds and made messes on the properties of humans

Jane Belmont was also attending to her garden. Although the weather had cooled off considerably, she still wore shorts and Birkenstock sandals.

Ruth frowned.

‘Is this cat yours, Mrs. Belmont?’.

'No', Jane laughed. 'It 'belongs' to the McGilivrays across the street from us.

Ruth appreciated Mrs. Belmont's observation about cats. They did not belong to people; rather, people belonged to them. At the same time, the woman talked as if she herself had spent too much of her time in the company of a psychiatrist.

'By the way, Mrs. Taylor, I use the name 'Jane Keeler'.

'Oh', Weren't Arthur and Jane legally married?

'My last name is 'Keeler'. And my second name is actually 'Christine'.

Jane Keeler laughed. Ruth at first didn't make a connection between these two names, until she remembered that 'Christine Keeler' had been the name of a call girl in a movie she had recently seen on television about a British parliamentary sex-scandal.

'Would you like to take a break and come over for coffee or tea, Mrs. Taylor?'

Ruth fumbled for an excuse to decline this invitation. She did not want to set foot in Dr. Belmont's house - no matter how friendly the man and his wife or mistress acted toward her.

But she now felt that she really had no choice in the matter. Sometimes the best way to keep a distance from a person was to not always literally be keeping distance.

Jane Keeler led Ruth into the kitchen through a large living room and a dining room.

'Coffee or tea, Mrs. Taylor? Or perhaps something else?'

It was too early for anything alcoholic, Ruth decided. She rarely drank more than one glass of wine a day and she did not want to make an exception today.

'Tea, please.'

Jane Keeler put the hot water on, prepared the kettle, and then sat down with a cigarette.

'Do you smoke, Mrs. Taylor?'

'Ruth, please. No, I never started.'

Jane smiled.

'Never? How admirable of you. Occasionally I think about trying to quite. But only occasionally.'

Ruth did not like the odor of cigarette smoke. She disliked people who smoked. Perhaps they had become addicted before it became common knowledge about smoking and lung cancer; but tobacco was still an unsanitary habit. She more than suspected that her daughter had started smoking. Lisa was becoming an adult - cigarettes and driving lessons.

‘Your daughter’s in grade ten?’.

Ruth accepted a cup of tea that Jane had poured for her.

‘Yes, Miss Keeler. And so is your son I believe.’.

‘No, Todd’s in eleven. He skipped a grade.’.

Jane Keeler drew on her cigarette and then carefully exhaled away from Ruth Taylor.

‘Todd’s a serious student. Sometimes I wish he’d enjoy life more. Have some fun once in a while.’.

‘Sometimes I wish Lisa would pay more attention to her classes. In fact, more than sometimes I wish that she would.’.

‘She’s an attractive girl. A lot of boys are after her, I’ll bet.’.

But not Miss Keeler’s own son. Todd was definitely her son - similar face with similar mannerisms.

‘What does your husband do, Ruth?’.

Ruth fidgeted.

‘Ron is an engineer. He’s a serious engineer. He brings his job home with him. I wish he didn’t have to do so every night and every weekend.’.

Jane drew on her cigarette.

‘I like the fact that Arthur is so absorbed in his work. It frees me to spend time by myself or with my friends.’.

Ruth sipped her tea. She and Ron had pretty well the same friends. Ron had a couple of working associates whose wives she did not particularly care for; but she didn’t have any real friends who weren’t also her husband’s.

‘I think it’s good for couples to have different friends - except for a few close mutual ones. I can only take

so much of Arthur's professional colleagues Most of them are too damn pretentious for my taste . ' .

Ruth wondered how Dr. Belmont felt about his wife's circles of friends.

'More tea, Ruth?'

Ruth mulled this over, then accepted the offer.

'Help yourself from the pot. I have to pee.'

Jane Keeler abruptly walked out of the kitchen and into a washroom adjoining the dining room. As Ruth poured more tea for herself she could hear Jane sniffing as the toilet flushed.

'Do you have a cold, Jane?' . Jane returned to the kitchen table, appearing slightly flushed.

Jane stared at Ruth for a second, then shook her head. She lit another cigarette and exhaled.

'And you also have a son. He's older, right?'

Ruth nodded.

'Charlie's a musician. He does very well for himself. In fact, he's moving out in a few days.'

'He seemed a bit old to be still living at home.'

'He went through a rough patch', Ruth looked at Jane. 'Drugs.'

'Oh', she smiled as she exhaled. 'Occupational hazard.'

There was a knock on the front door.

'Excuse me', Jane Keeler frowned as she stood to answer.

Ruth tilted her head toward the front door which was around the corner from the kitchen. She could see a young woman greeting Jane with an enthusiastic kiss.

Jane didn't seem to be pleased to see the woman at this moment.

'I wish you'd phoned first, Karen.'

'I didn't realize our relationship was that formal, Jane.'

Jane leant over toward the woman at the front door and whispered. Ruth couldn't decipher the content but she knew that they were discussing her.

Ruth realized that her tea was becoming cold and decided that another refill was unnecessary.

'It's okay, Jane. I really should resume my gardening. Thanks for the tea.'

Ruth walked out in front of Jane and her friend Karen. Presumably Jane had no gardening chores that couldn't be postponed until after she'd finished her business with Karen.

Todd Belmont probably *was* gay, she asserted to herself. Lisa's friend Pam was right on the money for once. If the mother was a lesbian or even a 'bisexual' then the son would be a male homosexual, especially with the father being so out of touch.

Ruth snorted to herself as she let herself back into the Taylor home How typical for a psychiatrist - to think that he knows everything about everybody and everything and yet know nothing about both his wife and their son.

Charlie had moved out uneventfully, leaving his new telephone number and mailing address with his parents. Ruth worried about Charlie but felt powerless to say anything. She knew that the relapse rate for drug addicts was very high and she suspected that it would only be a matter of time until Charlie had to work with an addicted musician.

Not even the Church of Scientology would protect him if the temptation became strong enough.

She realized that she needed more bread and garlic from the shopping plaza down the street. When she arrived at the plaza she could see several teenagers, including her daughter, sitting on a wall at the plaza's north end. All of the teenagers were smoking.

Ruth stood for a moment. Lisa had still not seen her and so she weighed her options. She was trying to decide between confronting her daughter at this moment and having a word with her after dinner.

Then she noticed Ron emerging from the liquor store .Her husband was talking to Jane Keeler and her friend Karen. The three of them were laughing and bantering - there was obviously some familiarity.

Ron walked toward her without seeing either herself or their daughter. Jane and Karen jumped into a Japanese sports car parked a fair walk from the liquor store.

Suddenly Ruth decided that she had to make herself invisible. *She* was the intruder who had to remain

hiding. Ron and Lisa and Jane and Karen and everybody else were the people in the neighbourhood. She, Ruth Taylor, did not fit in. She was an outsider, someone to be either avoided or dealt with very carefully

Ruth walked quickly toward the house. If anybody was aware of her presence; then they chose not to call out after her..

Ruth and Ron were again watching *The Nature of Things* after having enjoyed a fine roast-beef dinner. This week's episode focused upon the wild-life situation in India Human overpopulation was brushing up against endangered species and creating a serious crisis.

'You see, Ruth. The farmers consider the tigers to be their allies, because tigers kill deer and deer kill their crops.'

Ruth shook her head.

'But the tiger *killed* that little boy, Ron'

Her husband looked at her with exasperation.

'That's true. But it's a spatial issue ultimately.'

Ruth decided not to pursue this argument any further. She wished to change the channel but she knew Ron would object and she couldn't immediately think of an alternative programme.

There was a knock on the front door. It was a gently insistent knock by somebody who felt certain that either Ruth or Ron, if not both of them, was home.

'Good evening', Dr. Arthur Belmont addressed Ron. 'Do you have a minute?'

Ron looked at Ruth, who nervously assented.

'Would you like to come in for coffee, Dr., Belmont?'

Dr. Belmont smiled and then entered the Taylor home. He found a seat in front of the television, which Ruth now switched off.

‘Another programme more concerned about big cats than about human beings.’.

Dr. Belmont smiled without verbally responding.

‘Could I interest you in a brandy, sir?’.

Ron poured a shot for himself and looked at the psychiatrist.

‘No thank you, Mr Taylor. I still have work to do tonight.’.

Arthur Belmont waited for Ron Taylor to sit down beside his wife and then cleared his throat..

‘I’ll get to the point. It’s your son I ultimately need to speak to.’.

‘Charles?’ . Ron and Ruth looked at each other blankly.

‘ He is a Scientologist, am I correct?’

‘Yes, Dr. Belmont. But Charles no longer lives at home.’.

‘He lives in Parkdale.’, Ron added.

‘Oh.. *Parkdale.*’ Clearly Dr. Belmont disapproved. ‘That would explain something to me.’.

‘Explain what?’., Ruth sipped her coffee too quickly.

Dr. Arthur Belmont looked at her particularly - not angrily but rather like an impatient teacher.

‘Scientologists , you might say, have it in for my profession. A group of them have staked out a position in front of my workplace and are harassing patients - either upon dismissal or when they’re allowed out on business.’.

Ruth glared at the psychiatrist.

‘This is a free country, Dr. Belmont. This buisness is between the patients and the pickets. It’s none of your business.’.

‘Oh, please.’ , Dr. Belmont’s face now reddened . ‘There are people, who themselves have been abused by malpractice within the psychiatric system, with legitimate grievances against psychiatrists and psychologists and their institutions. And *then* there are those who are solicensing recruits. They are parasites, exploiting people who are still capable of making serious decisions for themselves.’.

‘That’s a matter of opinion, sir.’, Ron finished his brandy and walked toward the kitchen.



Arthur Belmont regained his composure.

‘Not *all* psychiatrists are evil, Mrs. Taylor. Some of us try to work beyond institutional systems. If you ever want to talk further about any of these issues, please feel free to drop by and chat.’

Dr. Belmont rose as Ron returned with another shot of brandy.

‘There’s really no point in continuing this discussion now, especially now that Charles has relocated. Whatever the Scientologists’ position; they *have to* respect people’s rights to deal with mental illness by whatever means they themselves have either selected or consented to.. Thank you and goodnight.’

Ron escorted Dr. Belmont to the front door.

‘There are, Dr., Belmont, many individuals who function perfectly well in society who are not case studies .. But you probably are incapable of understanding that. Goodnight to you, sir.’

As Ron closed the door firmly he could see Dr. Belmont standing on the sidewalk, systematically attempting to decipher the architectural and psychological dynamic of the Taylor house and home.

It was only a matter of days until Lisa’s sixteenth birthday and she had already enrolled for her driving lessons. She had enthusiastically brought home her Rules of the Road manual and her course information from Young Drivers of Canada.

‘As soon as I’ve passed the written test, I get picked up by the instructor at Warden Station. Then I’m expected to get behind the wheel and function in traffic.’

‘Isn’t this just a little too much at once?’, Ruth was alarmed.

‘There’s a brake on the passenger’s side. If I make a mistake the instructor will hit the brake immediately.’

Ron nodded.

‘That’s the way to learn, Ruth. If you’ve passed the written test then you’d better learn to apply it. Or else, what’s the point of the written exam?’

Ruth sipped her soda water while Ron enjoyed his red wine. Ruth did not feel like imbibing alcohol this evening.

‘Well, Lisa, I’ll let you borrow the car when I absolutely don’t need it myself .Please, no smoking in my car?. And, needless to say, we’d better deal with your insurance policies.’.

‘Young Drivers of Canada have the best reputation, Dad. Hey, *look*. The Belmonts are having a garden party.’.

‘So they are’, Ron confirmed. He had not spoken to Arthur Belmont since their recent altercation about Charlie, nor had he wanted to speak to the psychiatrist. Jane Keeler, who was usually friendly to him, had herself become formal and cold.

‘There’s quite a few people in their back yard. More women than men.’.

Ron nodded.

‘I don’t think Dr. Belmont likes men very much. I think he prefers the company of women.’.

So does his wife, Ruth observed to herself. She could detect a whiff of something that she recognized as marijuana. She had suspected that Lisa and her friend Pam had been smoking marijuana one day after school.

Todd Belmont or Keeler-Belmont or whatever his name was also at the party. He was intensely in a conversation with a young man who bore an eerie resemblance to Charlie - before Charlie had lost interest in both vanity and social skills.

‘Dr. Belmont’s taking pictures, Dad.’.

Lisa drew her parents’ attention to Dr. Belmont taking a party photograph of Jane and her friend Karen, who were both dressed like French waiters and playing hostess .

‘It’s the passing of the torch’,.

‘I beg your pardon , Ruth?’.

‘Nothing’.

She sipped her soda water as she watched Ron pour himself another glass of wine.

‘Ron?’.

‘Yes, dear?’

‘I think I’d like to take driving lessons. It’s still not too late.’.

He was almost stunned. She had never even hinted to him that she was interested in learning or wanting to drive.

‘I think it would be good for me. It would allow me to get out of the house more frequently’.

Ron frowned. What did his wife need to get out of the house for except shopping, and there was always the plaza down the street that did have all that they needed.

But he saw no harm in her taking lessons. He realized that she needed to stop feeling helpless and stuck at home - that she could develop new interests if she were able to drive to wherever those interests could be satisfied.

‘Well, Ruth, I don’t see why not. Mind you, then we’ll have three people sharing my car.’.

He knew that Lisa wanted to have her own car. She had always been sarcastic when it came to describing the family sedan

Ron looked at his wife.

‘If you do get your license, Ruth, what kind of car would you like to drive?’.

It was *her* turn to be shocked. Then she regained her composure as she watched Dr. Belmont finish taking photographs of Jane and Karen in their matching outfits. and then focus on his son and his male friend.

‘I don’t know, Ron, I’ll have to think this question over.’.

Ron kissed her.

‘It’s okay, darling. You still have lots of time to make up your mind.’.

Ruth decided that she did feel like having a glass of wine after all. In her own small way, she felt like celebrating.

## ELECTION SIGNS

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‘Well, Ted, today we were canvassed by both the Liberal and NDP candidates’.

‘Oh’, Sarah groaned while Daniel tilted his ears toward his mother, who sat at the head of the dining table.

‘Mrs. Tapscott, the Liberal., impressed me She had a very good grasp of both the national and local issues.’.

‘Yes, Mom. But was she speaking off-the-cuff or just reiterating the party line?’, Dan smiled.

‘Platitudes, you mean’, Sarah finished her salad and watched the others eating their pork chops.

Ted Stewart cleared his throat and smiled at his family benevolently.

‘You all do realize that neither Cynthia Tapscott nor the NDP or Green candidates have a chance in hell of being elected in our riding, so why waste your vote?’.

‘Do you always vote for the incumbent on principle, Dad’, Dan’s face flushed.

‘Dave Greenberg is nobody’s definition of a bigot, Daniel. He joined Reform because there was no way he could ever be elected as a Conservative. He’s not at all anti-French or anti-immigration, he simply believes in fiscal accountability. And I think he’s doing a good job.’.

‘I can’t vote Reform, Ted.’, Brenda Stewart frowned at her husband. ‘I could never vote Conservative and, now that the Conservatives have been swallowed up by Reform; I have no choice but to vote Liberal.’.

‘Yes, Mom’, Dan shook his head. ‘But do you really think there’s any difference between Liberal and Reform.’.

‘You don’t, and I disagree completely’, Brenda looked at her son with concern.’.

‘You think the NDP’s any different, Dan.? Give me a break ’.

Sarah finished her juice and looked at her family. She was almost sixteen and she had made plans to leave home and then transfer to an anarchist free school which had established itself downtown over the last year.

‘Sarah, I think not voting is a mistake. You’re still too young, but I went through that stage and now I think it’s self-defeating.’.

‘Right’, Sarah snorted at her older brother. ‘Can we please talk about something besides electoral politics?’.

Ted and Brenda realized that they were stuck for a conversation subject if they didn’t. They watched helplessly as Sarah declared dinner to be finished and marched up to her room so that she could either read or cruise the Internet or babble on the telephone or whatever the hell she did behind closed doors.

‘Dessert?’, Brenda looked at Ted and Daniel.

Brenda was tending to the small garden on the Stewarts’ front lawn when she became aware of Nancy Guerin saying hello to her.

The Guerins had a VOTE LIBERAL, ELECT TAPSCOTT sign on their front lawn.

‘I presume you’ve been enumerated, Brenda’.

She smiled at Nancy Guerin who had always smiled at her.

‘Oh yes. All the Stewarts’ old enough to vote have been accounted for. Mind you, Ted will vote Reform and Daniel NDP.’.

Nancy shook her head.

‘Those are wasted votes. Neither of those parties will ever form the federal government.’.

‘Ted argues that this riding, always having been Conservative, will now always be Reform so what’s the point of voting otherwise and Dan argues that voting for the party the media tells you is the only electable party is part of some media conspiracy to preserve the status quo..’.

Brenda tilted her head toward the Nelsons’ house on the other side of the Stewarts’

‘I see Ian and Pam Nelson are for Reform.’.

‘What’s *that* all about?’.. Nancy offered Brenda a cigarette, which Brenda declined.

‘I don’t know. I don’t really know the Nelsons.’., Brenda could not imagine how a black couple or any black person could be voting for Reform. The argument that the Conservatives had been replaced by Reform did not hold water, as far as she was concerned.

‘Well, Fred’s always voted Liberal’, Nancy lit her cigarette and exhaled. ‘He’s always been very centralist.’.

‘Yes’, Brenda observed. Fred Guerin had always been a very balanced gentleman. Too balanced. The Guerins had a fourteen year-old daughter, Heather, who attended a private girls’ school in the downtown area. Sarah, who had already made arrangements to continue her education in an anarchist free school somewhere downtown, condemned Heather Guerin for attending a snotty private school.

‘There’s a debate on the CBC tonight, with all of the federal party leaders.’.

Brenda shook her head. She didn’t care to watch political debates surrounded by her family. They always argued and drowned out the debaters.

‘I guess I’d better get back to work, Nancy. You don’t have to worry about *me* because I’m all for Cynthia Tapscott. She came to the door and I liked her.’.

‘I’ll talk to you later, Brenda.’.

Nancy Guerin returned to her own front lawn chores as Brenda decided to move back into the house. She had the feeling that Nancy would have liked to have seen an ELECT TAPSCOTT sign on the Stewarts’ lawn and was disappointed in her for not overruling her husband.

Ted toasted his after-dinner cigar after cutting a slice off of the end not intended to be lit. Brenda had grown accustomed to this occasional ritual, and the odor didn’t bother her as long as it was confined to the den.

‘Well, Brenda, the polls show Greenberg with a comfortable lead.’.

She frowned as he lit his cigar. That meant that the Cynthia Tapscott’s campaign managers had to work much harder in order to get their voters out on Election Day.

‘I’m worried about Sarah’, she changed the subject.

Ted directed smoke toward the ceiling.

‘I’ve *stopped* being worried about Sarah. She’ll be a shit-disturber for a few years and then she’ll snap out

of it.’.

Brenda shook her head. She poured shots of Glenfiddich for herself and her husband.

‘Cheers’, he sipped his scotch heartily. ‘What you liberals don’t understand, dear, is that the overwhelming majority of anarchists are really business people. Look at those squeegee kids. If Revenue Canada were to audit any of them they could probably amass a fortune in personal income taxes.’.

She sipped her drink.

‘I think Sarah’s more complex than that, Ted. I think she and her friends are the ones defacing election signs’.

The Guerins’ ELECT TAPSCOTT sign had been spray-painted over with VOTE FOR CINDY DIPSHIT. GREENBERG / REFORM signs installed on the front lawns of the Nelsons next door and the Wards across the street had merely been altered to VOTE GREENBAG. Tina and Tony Ward had threatened to go to the police, and *they* certainly did suspect the Stewarts’ punk-anarchist daughter of being one of the offenders..

‘I doubt it, Brenda. Sarah’s far more literary than the morons who’ve been defacing everybody’s campaign signs. Anyway, most anarchists eventually become conservative, because they strongly support the individual’s rights over those of the state.’.

‘You’re wrong, Ted.’, Brenda sipped from her drink. ‘You’re talking about libertarians. Sarah *is* an *anarchist*. Many of her friends are getting themselves arrested whenever they go downtown. When our daughter leaves home, she will be joining the club.’.

He savoured his cigar.

‘Well, that may well be a necessary part of her political education. I’m more concerned about Daniel.’.

‘Why, Ted?’, Brenda frowned.

‘Our son is not paying attention to what is really happening in the larger world. He is missing the Big Picture. Globalization is *fait accompli*, and young Daniel and his stupid old socialist friends are living in the past.’.

‘Ellen is nobody’s fool. I think she’s really good for him, Ted.

‘Maybe. We’ll have to get to know Ellen better before we can really make a decision about her. And as for his political friends, they’re being nostalgic for something that never was to begin with.’.

Brenda nodded. She agreed with her husband’s observations about their son, although she felt that he too was simply going through a phase.

‘Sarah will be leaving the minute she turns sixteen, Brenda. And there’s nothing we can do about it.’.

‘I know, Ted.’

She finished her scotch and left him alone to enjoy his cigar. She would wash the dishes and then return to a novel she had begun reading. The novel was *THE CEMENT GARDEN*, written by an English writer named Ian MacEwan.

As soon as she was certain that her parents would not be returning until their movie had finished, Sarah knocked on Daniel’s bedroom door.

Daniel looked up from his required reading, which was actually *THE PRINCE* by Nicolo Machiavelli.

‘What, Sarah?’.

‘Do you have a joint?’.

He smiled at her.

‘I suppose you don’t have one yourself?’.

She stood silently as her brother decided that it was now break time. Her brother’s one redeeming personality trait was that he was more than a bit of a pothead.

Daniel lit the joint and passed it to Sarah.

‘Come on in, and close the door.’.

She grudgingly obliged.

‘Shit, Dan. It’s not as if Mom and Dad are home.’.

‘Odors travel’, he shook his head at her.



‘As if they don’t know. Christ, I can still smell Dad’s stogie.’.

Dan nodded as he accepted the joint back from her. He didn’t want to become too stoned and this unable to pursue his required reading.

‘Hey, Sarah. You’re not responsible for vandalizing our neighbours’ election signs, are you?’.

‘You ought to know better than to ask me such a dumb question, Daniel. I have neither the timer nor the energy to waste on a stupid federal election organized and controlled by people naive enough to believe that democracy actually works.’.

‘It can and it does’, he took the joint back from her.’ on a *local* level.’.

Sarah shook her head.

‘Elections are nothing but popularity contests. Somebody with half a brain gets elected locally. And then they have to tow their party lines, which are about nothing more than achieving power and then maintaining it.’.

He’s heard this rhetoric before. He pretended to hear it again.

‘The Wards think you’re part of the gang who wrecked their sign.’.

‘So?’, she took the joint back and had a long toke. ‘Fuck the Wards. He’s a hothead and she’s a lush. They can’t prove anything because they don’t know anything.’.

‘I believe you, Sarah.’., Dan took a final toke and then ground the joint out in an ashtray.

‘That’s nice of you.’. She turned away and walked toward her bedroom. What business was it of his if she *had* been one of the vandals?

‘Thanks, Dan. Thanks for the dope.’.

Heather Guerin rapidly walked up the sidewalk leading toward her parents’ house. She couldn’t wait to change out of her private school uniform and into something more user-friendly.

As Heather approached her house she became aware of Sarah Stewart glaring at her from her window . She knew that her neighbour considered her to be an upper-class snob and she wanted nothing better than to set records straight.

As soon as she had changed into her green dungarees and her sweatshirt, Heather marched over to the Stewarts' house and rang the doorbell.

Sarah opened the door. She'd never seen Heather Guerin out of uniform.

'Yes, Miss Guerin? Is there something I can do for you?'

Heather looked at Sarah.

'I want to make it clear to you that, just because my parents send me to a snotty private school, I am not a snotty little girl. And I get pissed off every time I see you so righteously staring at me like I'm some sort of symbol of everything you want to blow to smithereens when actually I'm nothing like what you think I am.'

Heather stared at Sarah, daring a retort. Sarah decided to back down.

'So, Heather. I'm relieved to hear this. But what do you want from me?'

Heather whispered.

'Are your parents home?'

Sarah looked around.

'My mom is.'

'Then come over to my place because mine are out for at least an hour. I have some grass if you're interested.'

'For sale?'. Whenever she her personal supply was short her brother was usually reliable.

'No, silly . Come on.'

Sarah decided that she didn't need a coat and followed Heather into the Guerins' house. She watched while Heather quickly rolled a joint and lit it.

'This is good shit', Sarah complimented her neighbour as she enjoyed a long toke. 'This grass is far better than the shit Dan and I have been smoking And I'd like to apologize for labeling you a snob, just because your parents make you go to a private school. '

'I can get you some of this dope , at wholesale value.'

Heather giggled and Sarah followed suit.

'Sure thing Just name your price.'

'I'll get a quote from Alison.'

Sarah nodded. She deduced that Alison must be a student at Heather's school who had access to her older sibling's drug stash. She observed Heather as her new friend inhaled deeply. She was beginning to find her neighbour more than attractive .But it was up to Heather to make the first move

'I wouldn't have figured your brother for a pothead, Sarah.'

She laughed. Heather must have actually talked to Daniel about politics on at least one dreary occasion.

'It's his one redeeming characteristic, my friend. Actually, Dan has been seeing a fourth year psychology student named Ellen Roseman who's been talking some sense into him. I sort of like Ellen..... she's our dope supplier. Let me have another hit before it gets too low.'

Heather looked at Sarah

'Fuck it. Let's smoke another one.'

'Do many of the girls at your school....which one is it, anyway.....do drugs?'

Heather nodded as she rolled a second joint

'Quite a few. There's one girl who's become a serious heroin addict and the shit's about to hit the fan.'

Sarah shuddered. She knew a few too many junkies and she preferred to avoid their company.

'So where's your mother, Heather? She doesn't work, does she?'

Heather laughed and passed the joint across to Sarah

'Unless you call fucking the man across the street work. Dad works long hours, and Mom takes advantage of this.'

'Tony Ward? Your mother is having an affair with *him*'..

Heather nodded as Sarah passed the joint back to her.

'Affair, arrangement, whatever. 'Mom likes real men. Dad doesn't quite satisfy her, I guess.'

Sarah herself found Fred Guerin to be pathetically unattractive.

'I think Tony Ward's an asshole. I kind of feel sorry for his wife.'

‘I don’t’, Heather scowled. ‘Tina used to be married to a jerk and now she’s picked another real winner. She should wake up and smell the coffee, but then she ain’t exactly bright.’

Sarah wondered whether *Heather* had a preference for real men. She knew that she could go for her newly friendly neighbour in a very big way.

‘Too bad the Nelsons’ son ran away from home, Sarah. He was pretty hot.’

Sarah had never paid very much attention to the comings and goings of Roger Nelson.

‘I guess so. Perhaps I’ll find myself attracted to boys again, but I certainly have no taste for men right now.’

She accepted the joint back from Heather. As she helped herself to an extended toke she realized that Heather was inevitably going to be curious about men because there weren’t any at her stupid school. She reminded herself that crushes could be wonderful as long as they remained crushes.

Brenda sat beside Fred and Nancy Guerin at the all-candidates debate in the local library. Aside from herself and the Guerins, Brenda couldn’t recognize any multitude of Tapscott supporters among the audience..

‘I’m afraid we’re outnumbered’, Fred Guerin muttered to Nancy and Brenda.’

‘Don’t give up the ship yet, Fred.’. Brenda attempted to put a smile on her face. ‘There’s always the secret ballot.’

Fred Guerin now looked puzzled.

‘What are you getting at, Brenda?’

‘Wives and husbands who secretly vote for opposing candidates.’

Nancy Guerin removed her reading glasses.

‘I doubt very much that Ted would *ever* be voting Liberal. I’m going outside for a cigarette before the debate starts.’

Fred nodded. Fred didn’t smoke.

As Nancy departed toward the front doors Brenda observed Tony Ward, wearing a prominently-displayed

Greenberg button, also walking toward the front door and presumably the outdoor smoking area.

‘There aren’t too many young people here tonight, Brenda.’

Brenda had to agree with Fred’s pronouncement. She felt sorry for the NDP candidate, Hakim Dos. She felt anger at the NDP for typically running an ‘ethnic’ candidate in a riding where the NDP didn’t have a hope in hell of winning. And the Green candidate, Janet Ramsay, hadn’t even bothered showing up for the debate. Had Ms. Ramsay been excluded from the evening’s event ?

Brenda scanned the audience and feared the worst. Cynthia Tapscott was putting on a determined face while David Greenberg was relaxed, chatting with his team. Greenberg looked as if he was ready to begin celebrating with a vengeance. Ted was right - Dave Greenberg was no Bible-thumping evangelical Reformer. He was an urban Jew who believed in fiscal responsibility. David Greenberg didn’t seem like a bad sort of all; but Brenda could never vote for Reform. She did not believe in rubber-stamping incumbents just to make life easier, she felt this constituted a threat to participatory democracy..

Nancy and Tony chatted with each other as they returned from their cigarette break. The debate was about to begin.

Hakim Dos went first and there was a polite silence. He zeroed in on Reform’s anti-immigration policies and how the Liberals in power had been negatively influenced by opposition-party pressure tactics.. He insisted that both Reform and the Bloc Quebecois were simply different sides of the same coin, both were displaced Conservatives but one advocated Quebec sovereignty and the other wished to subdue the French. He commented on Reform’s cynical recruitment of ‘ethnic’ candidates who advocated assimilation and who held grudges against Quebec. Hakim Dos was not only uneluctable in this particular riding but he was also well to the left of the NDP’s party platform , Brenda commented to Nancy and Fred.

Cynthia Tapscott was now forced to over-assert herself. She found herself insisting that the voters had to elect her because there was a serious danger of a minority rather than majority Liberal government. Reform had steadily infiltrated rural and suburban Ontario with the overt assistance of the Conservative provincial government, and Dave Greenberg was expecting an easy second term..

Mrs. Tapscott was stuck in a defensive mode, Fred quietly observed to Nancy and Brenda She seemed to be incapable of going on the offensive. She spoke in terms of what shouldn't be done as opposed to what should.

When she finished the Guerins decided to leave. Neither of them could stomach Reform no matter how personable the candidate and both of them were depressed. Brenda herself became listless during Dave Greenberg's speech. She felt that her riding was a lost cause for the Liberals and she felt sad that so few young people cared about electoral politics. Her daughter was a hard-line anarchist and the Guerins private-school daughter was following in Sarah's footsteps. At least her son was committed, if only to a losing cause.

Brenda decided that remaining for the question period would be a waste of time. As she walked toward her car she could now see why people simply voted for incumbents or took their cues from the polls. She turned on the ignition and country music emerged from the car radio. She frowned. Ted must have developed a secret fondness for country music that he hadn't told her about.

When she arrived back at the house Ted still wasn't home and neither was Sarah. But Daniel and his girlfriend Ellen were entertaining themselves in the lounge with beer and crackers, watching an episode of a new CBC drama called *DaVinci's Inquest*. Brenda knew that *DaVinci's Inquest* had nothing to do with the famous artist named Leonardo.

'Would you two like to join me for a scotch?'

'I'd love to, Mom', Daniel replied affectionately as Ellen Roseman smiled at Brenda. As she poured three shots of Glenfidich, Brenda could tell that her son and his girlfriend were pleasantly stoned and unusually happy.

Ted and Brenda had treated Daniel and Ellen to a movie that they had all agreed upon - an Irish historical drama which hadn't been all that impressive in retrospect.. They had invited Sarah to join them but Sarah had declined, preferring to go to another movie with her friend and neighbour Heather Guerin.

'*Velvet Goldmine*, that's their movie', Brenda informed the others.

Daniel snorted..

‘That’s right up their alley. It’s pretentious and campy and trendy and bisexual.’.

‘Come on, Dan. It’s sound like fun’, Ellen Roseman laughed. ‘Let’s go see it and *then* we can talk about it.’.

Brenda tuned out the back seat argument. She was certainly not interested in any movie celebrating homosexuality. She more than suspected that Sarah and Heather were having an affair.

‘Oh, *no!*’,

Ted turned the corner and nearly lost control of the wheel.

‘The election sign vandals are at it again.’, Brenda noted wearily..

The Reform signs on the Nelsons’ and Wards’ and the Liberal sign on the Guerins’ lawns had been spray-painted in two stages. White spray-paint covered the party and candidate names and then red spray-paint instructed people to VOTE FOR NOBODY.

‘Really subtle’, Daniel gritted his teeth as Ted parked the car in the Stewarts’ driveway.

‘Well, *one* by-product of the two of you supporting different parties is that you don’t have any signs on your front lawn for them to vandalize.’.

Ellen’s attempt at humour fell flat as Ted fumed.

‘It’s *censorship*, damn it. That’s what is it - nothing more and nothing less.’.

‘No, Ted.’.

‘Well, what is it then?’, Ted looked at the others defiantly. ‘I’m going to see if Fred and Nancy are home.’.

‘Easy.’.

He ignored Brenda and marched up to the Guerins’ front door. After three rings of the doorbell Nancy Guerin opened the door.

‘It was three kids with black hoods on, Ted. All male, all white, all in their early teens. I’ve called the police and they told me that election signs all over the neighbourhood are getting sprayed.’.

Ted shook his head.

'We didn't see any others, did we?'

Daniel and Ellen shook their heads.

'Oh damn. Here comes trouble'

Brenda drew the others' attention to Tony Ward walking belligerently toward them. Tina Ward followed at a distance, clearly drunk.

'*You and you*', Tony hoarsely pointed at the Stewarts and the Guerins. 'Your kids are in on this.'

'Oh lighten up, Tony!', Nancy glared at Tony Ward. I witnessed the kids in action. It was too late to intervene, but I saw them. It wasn't. Heather and Sarah because they went out to a *movie*.'

'So? That doesn't mean they're not in on this.'

Ted turned on Tony Ward.

'How the hell can you prove *anything* here? You can't. Nancy saw three boys doing the damage and she's never seen any of them before. They may not even live in the fucking neighbourhood. Get it, Tony?'

'Forget it..', Tina Ward clumsily placed her right hand on Tony's left shoulder. 'You're not covering up for your kids, are you?'

Tina looked at Brenda and Nancy hopefully.

'Of course not!', Brenda decided to head inside.

Daniel and Ellen followed her.

'Tony Ward suspected Sarah to be the culprit for the earlier vandalism. I think he's completely off his rocker.'

'We do too, Mom.'

Daniel pulled two beers from the refrigerator for Ellen and himself.

'Can I have a beer, Daniel?'

'Sure, Mom.' He'd never seen his mother drink beer before.

'Cheers', Brenda, Ellen, and Daniel clicked their bottles in a toast.

'God, I'll be happy when the Wards move out.' Ted opened the front door and poured himself a scotch.



'The Wards are moving out? That's the best news we've heard in *ages*.'..

Ted nodded as he toasted Brenda.

'Tina's filing for divorce. On the grounds of Tony's adultery with Nancy Guerin.'

'No?'

Brenda looked at Daniel and Ellen, who obviously knew nothing.

'Where did you obtain *this* information, Ted?'

Ted smiled. as he fired up a cigar. 'A little birdie who shall remain nameless.'

Brenda took a long sip of her beer.

'I thought something might be funny between Nancy and Fred but I can't believe what you've just told me. I mean, Nancy can definitely do better than that!'

The others looked at each other and then laughed. uncomfortably.

'Well, thank God we never put up any election signs...'

'Yes', Ted raised his glass. 'To hell with this damn election, anyway.'

'To hell with it', they all chorused in unison.

Ruth and Ron Taylor sat down in front of the television after dinner with their coffees.

They silently watched *The Nature of Things*, which featured yet another report on endangered tigers.

‘Endangered my foot, Ron. Those animals are dangerous.’

‘Yes. But they are practically extinct, Ruth.’

He turned his head back toward the television monitor, thus discouraging any further retorts or replies

Ruth did not wish to look at tigers or elephants or bears or any other wild animals. She had made it clear to her children that she did not wish to have even cats or dogs in their house.

She became aware of Dr. Arthur Belmont who was working in the back yard of the house behind their, very carefully watering his plants.

‘There’s that Dr. Belmont again, Ron. He spends so much time with each individual plant- as if they are each and every one of them his patient.’

Ron looked at her with an exasperation.

‘I more than suspect you are correct, Ruth. But Dr. Belmont seems a nice enough man - not at all a bad sort to have for a neighbour. His wife seems quite friendly, even if she is much younger than him.’

Ruth nodded assent to this observation. She had seen Jane Belmont relaxing out in her back yard and had decided to keep a distance from the woman..

‘That son of theirs definitely takes after his father. Very quiet. Probably gets good marks in school.’

Ruth agreed but did not indicate so to her husband. She knew that Lisa had a crush on Todd Belmont that was unlikely to be reciprocated.

She knew that Charlie was rehearsing his parts for an important recording session tomorrow. The best thing she could say about her son’s living at home was that he practiced his bass with headphones. The best thing she could say about Charlie’s having become a Scientologist was that his religion helped keep him away from drugs.

Her daughter had gone out to a movie. She had said that she would be going with her friend Pam but Ruth knew better than to take Lisa at her word.

'More coffee, Ron?'

He shook his head.

'No thanks, Ruth. Any more and I'll never get to sleep. You know that.'

She did., but she had momentarily forgotten this detail. He usually stayed up longer than she did.

*The Nature of Things* finished and another programme commenced.

'Time to get to work, Ruth. I'll see you in a couple of hours.'

Ruth nodded and then switched off the television and picked up her paperback.

The next day was a school holiday and Lisa was entertaining her friend Pam upstairs in her bedroom. As Ruth walked past the door she could overhear their conversation.

Lisa had been with Pam the previous night after all. They had double-dated.

'You and Wayne are an item, Pam. Admit it.'

Pam Fielding snorted.

'Depends what you call an item, Lisa.'

'Maybe the last few times I've seen you, you've been with Wayne.'

'Hmmp. Well, what about you and Gary?'

Ruth stopped in the hallway ,perfectly positioned outside the door.

'One date does not constitute an affair.'

Ruth could visualize Pam egging Lisa on.

'Gary's cute. He's sexy. Face it, you'll *never* get anywhere with Todd Belmont.'

'I 'm afraid you're right there, Pam.'

'Todd Belmont's a fag. He doesn't like girls.'

' Fuck off, Pam. . How would *you* know.?'.

Ruth decided that she'd heard enough. She was wearing her slippers and therefore able to avoid making her footsteps audible.

She retrieved her blanket from upstairs and made coffee for herself. She had a feeling that Lisa's friend Pam was right about Todd Belmont., Ruth felt sorry for the boy. Having to hear all about Freud and his acolytes from an early age on had damaged the boy. It had given him a bad male role-model.

Ruth had no time for Scientologists. But, if her own son Charlie had to belong to any religion, she preferred the Scientologists over any other group of religious zealots. At least the Sceintologists had the correct attitude to psychiatrists.

There he was *again*. Dr. Belmont was out in the back yard, watering each little plant as if it were a case study . Ruth wished for the Belmonts to move out of the neighbourhood as quickly as possible.

She wished that the school holiday had also been a working holiday for Ron. Not that he paid any attention to the calendar when it came down to work.

Ron worked all the time. Ron never took holidays and he needed one badly. Ruth and Ron desperately needed a holiday.

'I've found a place, Mom and Dad.'

Charlie almost beamed as he made his announcement at the dinner table .Ruth and Ron were anxiously curious. Lisa said nothing

'Where did you find a place, Charles?'

'Parkdale- on a side street'

'Oh.' Ruth was visibly worried.

'How did you find this house?', Ron was still smiling.

'My friend Ben- the saxophonist- he knows a keyboards- player who lives on the top floor.'

Ron poured another glass of wine for himself. Ruth declined a refill.

'So, its a musicians house?'

Charlie nodded. He and Ben and Frank upstairs would all practice together or apart, depending on their moods. They would all look out for one another.

‘There are a lot of drugs in that neighbourhood, Charlie.’

‘I know, Mom’, he flushed angrily. ‘I haven’t touched any drugs for two years now. Okay?’

Charlie silently ate the remainder of his dinner and then excused himself from the table. He had a session later that night and then he would be moving out at the end of the month.

‘Have a good session, Charles.’

Ron was proud of his son. He was worried about his daughter, whose marks were down and who barely even spoke to him.

Lisa quickly finished her dinner and then attended to her homework, or whatever she really read for herself in her upstairs bedroom. An hour after dinner, she came downstairs to the refrigerator and asked her mother a question.

‘Mom? Parkdale is where the mental hospital is. Right?’

Ruth tended to her plants a few days later as a rainy spell had finally ended. A thunderstorm with hailstones had damaged many of the taller plants and she was not pleased about this. She had zero tolerance for bad weather and for pests and for children who took short cuts through the back yard strip between their house and the Belmonts’

A ginger-coated cat crept down the strip and into Ruth’s field of vision. Ruth disliked cats- she felt that they were evil and destructively selfish animals who preyed on birds and made messes on the property. of humans

Jane Belmont was also attending to her garden. Although the weather had cooled off considerably, she still wore shorts and Birkenstock sandals.

Ruth frowned.

‘Is this cat yours, Mrs. Belmont?’

‘No’, Jane laughed. ‘ It ‘belongs’ to the McGilivrays across the street from us.

Ruth appreciated Mrs. Belmont’s observation about cats. They did not belong to people; rather, people belonged to them .At the same time, the woman talked as if she herself had spent too much of her time in the

company of a psychiatrist.

‘By the way, Mrs. Taylor, I use the name’ Jane Keeler’.

‘Oh’, Weren’t Arthur and Jane legally married?

‘My last name is ‘Keeler’. And my second name is actually ‘Christine’.

Jane Keeler laughed. Ruth at first didn’t make a connection between these two names, until she remembered that ‘Christine Keeler’ had been the name of a call girl in a movie she had recently seen on television about a British parliamentary sex-scandal.

‘Would you like to take a break and come over for coffee or tea, Mrs. Taylor?’.

Ruth fumbled for an excuse to decline this invitation. She did not want to set foot in Dr. Belmont’s house- no matter how friendly the man and his wife or mistress acted toward her.

But she now felt that she really had no choice in the matter. Sometimes the best way to keep a distance from a person was to not always literally be keeping distance.

Jane Keeler led Ruth into the kitchen through a large living room and a dining room.

‘Coffee or tea, Mrs. Taylor? Or perhaps something else?’.

It was too early for anything alcoholic, Ruth decided. She rarely drank more than one glass of wine a day and she did not want to make an exception today.

‘Tea, please.’.

Jane Keeler put the hot water on, prepared the kettle, and then sat down with a cigarette.

‘Do you smoke, Mrs. Taylor?’.

‘Ruth, please. No, I never started.’.

Jane smiled.

‘ Never? How admirable of you. Occasionally I think about trying to quite. But only occasionally.’.

Ruth did not like the odor of cigarette smoke She disliked people who smoked. Perhaps they had become addicted before it became common knowledge about smoking and lung cancer; but tobacco was still an unsanitary habit. She more than suspected that her daughter had started smoking. Lisa was becoming an adult- cigarettes and driving lessons.

'Your daughter 's in grade ten?'

Ruth accepted a cup of tea that Jane had poured for her.

'Yes, Miss Keeler. And so is your son I believe.'

'No, Todd's in eleven. He skipped a grade.'

Jane Keeler drew on her cigarette and then carefully exhaled away from Ruth Taylor.

'Todd's a serious student. Sometimes I wish he'd enjoy life more. Have some fun once in a while. '

'Sometimes I wish Lisa would pay more attention to her classes. In face, more than sometimes I wish that she would.'

'She's an attractive girl. A lot of boys are after her, I'll bet.'

But not Miss Keeler's own son. Todd was definitely her son- similar face with similar mannerisms

'What does your husband do, Ruth?'

Ruth fidgeted.

'Ron is an engineer. He's a serious engineer. He brings his job home with him. I wish he didn't have to do so every night and every weekend.'

Jane drew on her cigarette.

'I like the fact that Arthur is so absorbed in his work. It frees me to spend time by myself or with my friends.'

Ruth sipped her tea. She and Ron had pretty well the same friends. Ron had a couple of working associates whose wives she did not particularly care for; but she didn't have any real friends who weren't also her husband's.

'I think it's good for couples to have different friends- except for a few close mutual ones. I can only take so much of Arthur's professional colleagues Most of them are too damn pretentious for my taste. '

Ruth wondered how Dr. Belmont felt about his wife's circles of friends.

'More tea, Ruth?'

Ruth mulled this over, then accepted the offer.

'Help yourself from the pot. I have to pee.'

Jane Keeler abruptly walked out of the kitchen and into a washroom adjoining the dining room. As Ruth

poured more tea for herself she could hear Jane sniffing as the toilet flushed.

‘Do you have a cold, Jane?’ Jane returned to the kitchen table, appearing slightly flushed.

Jane stared at Ruth for a second, then shook her head. She lit another cigarette and exhaled.

‘And you also have a son. He’s older, right?’.

Ruth nodded.

‘Charlie’s a musician. He does very well for himself. In fact, he’s moving out in a few days.’.

‘He seemed a bit old to be still living at home.’.

‘He went through a rough patch’, Ruth looked at Jane. ‘Drugs.’.

‘Oh’, she smiled as she exhaled. ‘Occupational hazard.’.

There was a knock on the front door.

‘Excuse me’, Jane Keeler frowned as she stood to answer.

Ruth tilted her head toward the front door which was around the corner from the kitchen. She could see a young woman greeting Jane with an enthusiastic kiss.

Jane didn’t seem to be pleased to see the woman at this moment.

‘I wish you’d phoned first, Karen.’.

‘I didn’t realize our relationship was that formal, Jane.’.

Jane leant over toward the woman at the front door and whispered. Ruth couldn’t decipher the content but she knew that they were discussing her.

Ruth realized that her tea was becoming cold and decided that another refill was unnecessary.

‘It’s okay, Jane. I really should resume my gardening. Thanks for the tea.’.

Ruth walked out in front of Jane and her friend Karen. Presumably Jane had no gardening chores that couldn’t be postponed until after she’d finished her business with Karen.

Todd Belmont probably *was* gay, she asserted to herself. Lisa’s friend Pam was right on the money for once. If the mother was a lesbian or even a ‘bisexual’ then the son would be a male homosexual, especially with the father being so out of touch.

Ruth snorted to herself as she let herself back into the Taylor home How typical for a psychiatrist- to think



that he knows everything about everybody and everything and yet know nothing about both his wife and their son.

Charlie had moved out uneventfully, leaving his new telephone number and mailing address with his parents. Ruth worried about Charlie but felt powerless to say anything. She knew that the relapse rate for drug addicts was very high and she suspected that it would only be a matter of time until Charlie had to work with an addicted musician.

Not even the Church of Scientology would protect him if the temptation became strong enough. She realized that she needed more bread and garlic from the shopping plaza down the street. When she arrived at the plaza she could see several teenagers including her daughter sitting on a wall at the plaza's north end. All of the teenagers were smoking.

Ruth stood for a moment. Lisa had still not seen her and so she weighed her options. She was trying to decide between confronting her daughter at this moment and having a word with her after dinner.

Then she noticed Ron emerging from the liquor store .her husband was talking to Jane Keeler and her friend Karen. The three of them were laughing and bantering - there was obviously some familiarity.

Ron walked toward her without seeing either herself or their daughter. Jane and Karen jumped into a Japanese sports car parked a fair walk from the liquor store.

Suddenly Ruth decided that she had to make herself invisible. *She* was the intruder who had to remain hiding. Ron and Lisa and Jane and Karen and everybody else were the people in the neighbourhood. She, Ruth Taylor, did not fit in. She was an outsider, someone to be either avoided or dealt with very carefully

Ruth walked quickly toward the house. If anybody was aware of her presence; then they chose not to call out after her..

Ruth and Ron were again watching *The Nature of Things* after having enjoyed a fine roast-beef dinner. This

week's episode focused upon the wild-life situation in India. Human overpopulation was brushing up against endangered species and creating a serious crisis.

'You see, Ruth. The farmers consider the tigers to be their allies, because tigers kill deer and deer kill their crops.'

Ruth shook her head.

'But the tiger *killed* that little boy, Ron'.

Her husband looked at her with exasperation.

'That's true. But it's a spatial issue ultimately.'

Ruth decided not to pursue this argument any further. She wished to change the channel but she knew Ron would object and she couldn't immediately think of an alternative programme.

There was a knock on the front door. It was a gently insistent knock by somebody who felt certain that either Ruth or Ron, if not both of them, was home.

'Good evening', Dr. Arthur Belmont addressed Ron. 'Do you have a minute?'

Ron looked at Ruth, who nervously assented.

'Would you like to come in for coffee, Dr., Belmont?'

Dr. Belmont smiled and then entered the Taylor home. He found a seat in front of the television, which Ruth now switched off.

'Another programme more concerned about big cats than about human beings.'

Dr. Belmont smiled without verbally responding.

'Could I interest you in a brandy, sir?'

Ron poured a shot for himself and looked at the psychiatrist.

'No thank you, Mr Taylor. I still have work to do tonight.'

Arthur Belmont waited for Ron Taylor to sit down beside his wife and then cleared his throat.

'I'll get to the point. It's your son I ultimately need to speak to.'

'Charles?'. Ron and Ruth looked at each other blankly.

'He is a Scientologist, am I correct?'

'Yes, Dr. Belmont. But Charles no longer lives at home.'

'He lives in Parkdale.', Ron added.

'Oh.. *Parkdale*.' Clearly Dr. Belmont disapproved. 'That would explain something to me.'

'Explain what?'., Ruth sipped her coffee too quickly.

Dr. Arthur Belmont looked at her particularly -not angrily but rather like an impatient teacher.

'Scientologists ,you might say, have it in for my profession. A group of them have staked out a position in front of my workplace and are harassing patients- either upon dismissal or when they're allowed out on business.'

Ruth glared at the psychiatrist.

'This is a free country, Dr. Belmont. This business is between the patients and the pickets. It's none of your business.'

'Oh, please.' ,Dr. Belmont's face now reddened . 'There are people, who themselves have been abused by malpractice within the psychiatric system, with legitimate grievances against psychiatrists and psychologists and their institutions. And *then* there are those who are soliciting recruits. They are parasites, exploiting people who are still capable of making serious decisions for themselves.'

'That's a matter of opinion, sir.', Ron finished his brandy and walked toward the kitchen.

Arthur Belmont regained his composure.

'Not *all* psychiatrists are evil, Mrs. Taylor. Some of us try to work beyond institutional systems. If you ever want to talk further about any of these issues, please feel free to drop by and chat.'

Dr. Belmont rose as Ron returned with another shot of brandy.

'There's really no point in continuing this discussion now, especially now that Charles has relocated. Whatever the Scientologists' position; they *have to* respect people's rights to deal with mental illness by whatever means they themselves have either selected or consented to.. Thank you and goodnight.'

Ron escorted Dr. Belmont to the front door.

'There are, Dr., Belmont, many individuals who function perfectly well in society who are not case studies .. But you probably are incapable of understanding that. Goodnight to you, sir.'

As Ron closed the door firmly he could see Dr. Belmont standing on the sidewalk, systematically attempting

to decipher the architectural and psychological dynamic of the Taylor house and home.

It was only a matter of days until Lisa's sixteenth birthday and she had already enrolled for her driving lessons. She had enthusiastically brought home her Rules of the Road manual and her course information from Young Drivers of Canada.

'As soon as I've passed the written test, I get picked up by the instructor at Warden Station. Then I'm expected to get behind the wheel and function in traffic.'

'Isn't this just a little too much at once?', Ruth was alarmed.

'There's a break on the passenger's side. If I make a mistake the instructor will hit the brake immediately.'

Ron nodded.

'That's the way to learn, Ruth. If you've passed the written test then you'd better learn to apply it. Or else, what's the point of the written exam?'

Ruth sipped her soda water while Ron enjoyed his red wine. Ruth did not feel like imbibing alcohol this evening.

'Well, Lisa, I'll let you borrow the car when I absolutely don't need it myself. Please, no smoking in my car?. And, needless to say, we'd better deal with your insurance policies.'

'Young Drivers of Canada have the best reputation, Dad. Hey, *look*. The Belmonts are having a garden party.'

'So they are', Ron confirmed. He had not spoken to Arthur Belmont since their recent altercation about Charlie, nor had he wanted to speak to the psychiatrist. Jane Keeler, who was usually friendly to him, had herself become formal and cold.

'There's quite a few people in their back yard. More women than men.'

Ron nodded.

'I don't think Dr. Belmont likes men very much. I think he prefers the company of women.'

So does his wife, Ruth observed to herself. She could detect a whiff of something that she recognized as

marijuana. She had suspected that Lisa and her friend Pam had been smoking marijuana one day after school.

Todd Belmont or Keeler-Belmont or whatever his name was also at the party. He was intensely in a conversation with a young man who bore an eerie resemblance to Charlie- before Charlie had lost interest in both vanity and social skills.

‘Dr. Belmont’s taking pictures, Dad.’.

Lisa drew her parents’ attention to Dr. Belmont taking a party photograph of Jane and her friend Karen, who were both dressed like French waiters and playing hostess .

‘It’s the passing of the torch’,.

‘I beg your pardon , Ruth?’.

‘Nothing’.

She sipped her soda water as she watched Ron pour himself another glass of wine.

‘Ron?’.

‘Yes, dear?’

‘I think I’d like to take driving lessons. It’s still not too late.’.

He was almost stunned. She had never even hinted to him that she was interested in learning or wanting to drive.

‘I think it would be good for me. It would allow me to get out of the house more frequently’.

Ron frowned. What did his wife need to get out of the house for except shopping, and there was always the plaza down the street that did have all that they needed.

But he saw no harm in her taking lessons. He realized that she needed to stop feeling helpless and stuck at home- that she could develop new interests if she were able to drive to wherever those interests could be satisfied.

‘Well, Ruth, I don’t see why not. Mind you, then we’ll have three people shirring my car.’.

He knew that Lisa wanted to have her own car. She had always been sarcastic when it came to describing the family sedan

Ron looked at his wife.

‘If you do get your license, Ruth, what kind of car would you like to drive?’.

It was *her* turn to be shocked. Then she regained her composure as she watched Dr.Belmont finish taking photographs of Jane and Karen in their matching outfits. and then focus on his son and his male friend.

‘I don’t know, Ron, I’ll have to think this question over.’.

Ron kissed her.

‘It’s okay, darling. You still have lots of time to make up your mind.’.

Ruth decided that she did feel like having a glass of wine after all. In her own small way, she felt like celebrating.

**Filter Tipped**  
**Andrew James Paterson 1998**

## **EIGHTH FLOOR**

Michael Standish was very annoyed by the sudden fire alarm. As he walked quickly down the fire escape he found himself exchanging obvious observations with his eighth floor neighbour Keith, to the effect that of course there wasn't any fire. Michael couldn't smell smoke- nobody could.

He had no idea how a false alarm was even possible in the high-rise in which he had lived quite comfortably for the previous two years. There were no children above the third floor; and even on the lower levels there were no inconveniently vulnerable alarm boxes.

He remembered the day when, as a ten year old at the Yonge and Eglinton YMCA, he had been the culprit. He had thrown a bad forward pass with his tote bag and hit the alarm.

As he reached the ground floor and opened the door leading to the outside walkway, Mike looked around for the building superintendent. There was obviously no fire because there was no goddamned smoke. So could the superintendent just say the magic word and authorize all of his tenants to return to their self-contained units?

He recognized the other eighth floor dwellers- Lewis the junkie painter, Jean-Marie the 'actress', Keith the antiques queen and even Terry, the hermit who was probably a writer Terry appeared even more slovenly than he usually did. Although he rarely changed his clothes or took showers, Terry at least made an effort to comb his hair. But today he hadn't. Perhaps he had either been sleeping or else having a moment of inspiration.

The tenants of the eighth floor blended in with those of the other nine floors. When the alarm finally subsided and the superintendent informed everybody that all was safe and clear; Michael quickly staked out a position in front of the elevators. He could see Keith casually flirting with a man from the seventh floor. He could observe Jean-Marie making arrangements with a client who lived somewhere in the apartment building. He could smell Terry, walking slowly and steadily behind.

Mike hoped that the elevator would arrive before Terry did.



He tried to resume the illustrative assignment he had been working on prior to the alarm, but his concentration was failing him. He was angry at whoever on presumably one of the other floors had overcooked their potatoes or committed whatever other minor negligence that would have activated their smoke-detectors.. The high-rise at 35 High Park Avenue, a two minute walk from the subway station, had been *intended* to be a building offering self-contained units for self-contained individuals. His neighbours were, most of the time, laudable examples. The antiques queen was certainly chatty, but he knew enough to maintain his distance after an initial tentative flirtation. The moonlighting actress was a model of constructive discretion. The junkie posed no problem as he didn't need to steal in order to subsidize his addiction and he wasn't exactly a noisily social type to begin with.

It was *Terry* who was impeding Mike's concentration. Terry was indulging in one of his truly annoying personal habits. Mike didn't usually notice music played by his neighbours unless they played the same fucking song over and over again the way Terry occasionally did and the way he was doing at this moment. He was playing something unrecognizably bombastic and significant over and over again in the manner of a child who needed to hear a story repeated *ad infinitum* even though he or she had already memorized every single nuance and detail.

Mike understood *background* music. He did not understand music that became foreground due to the listener's insistence on interrupting the preprogrammed sequence of his or her CD player and then fetishize one singularly stupid piece of music. He wanted to knock on Terry's door and tell him to please lower the fucking decibels because he, Mike Standish, had a very important assignment that he needed to complete as in the immediate near future. But Mike knew that doing such would only open up a can of worms that was definitely best left unopened.

He realized that the day of the week was Wednesday and that there was a sensible means of relieving the tension that involved getting out of his temporarily uncomfortable building for at least a few hours. He shut down his computer and departed in the direction of *The Cellar*, at which a middle-aged unfit gentleman such as

himself could enjoy a very playfully weird Wednesday as long as he didn't spend too much time outside of the dark areas.

By the time he anticipated returning to his apartment; surely to God Terry would have either solved his conundrum and moved on to something quieter or else bored himself into a deep sleep by means of mindbogglingly numbing repetition.

Two days later Mike had successfully completed his graphic assignment .which meant that he had managed to submit it to Demi Mondo magazine without having to personally deal with either the textual or visual art directors of that transparently insignificant rag. His design had been approved and then paid for without his having to leave his work station except for purposes of sleeping, reading, and masturbation. He had again become very comfortably entrenched within his apartment at 35 High Park Avenue.

And the neighbours had not intruded on his privacy. Certainly he heard Keith kissing his boyfriend Colin good night and good morning by the elevator. Certainly he heard Jean-Marie admitting least one male visitor with cash to spare and libidos to satisfy. He thought he heard Lewis' supplier making a clandestine delivery at three in the morning. But he was spared any distractingly irritating music. Terry had either taken a well-deserved vacation; or he had fallen into a pleasantly deep sleep after struggling with some terrible personal demon..

Suddenly there was a knock on Michael's door. A policeman identified himself and then insisted upon entering the apartment.

The Homicide Detective's business was urgent, to put it mildly. Terry, bless him, had entered into something far deeper than an extended beauty sleep..

The Homicide Detective, whose name was Ted Willis, inquired after Michael's alibi for late Wednesday afternoon and early Wednesday evening past. Mike matter-of-factly informed the detective that he had gone to *The Cellar* for sexual purposes and that the gatekeeper was familiar with him and would therefore be able to supply recognition Detective Ted Willis frowned upon hearing this alibi and then demanded information about

Mike's eighth floor neighbours. Unfortunately, there wasn't a lot that Mike could really tell him.

*Keith was an aspiring antiques dealer and Jean-Marie was an actress and Lewis was a painter and Terry had been whatever Terry had been - probably a writer although Mike really had not known the gentleman .*

Terry had called upon and spoken to he, Michael Standish, exactly once since he had moved in next door to him.

Terry had wanted to know if he had possessed a spare computer-disc and Mike had grudgingly obliged.

And, no, Mike had not been at home during the late afternoon and early evening of Wednesday September the ninth. Which meant how the fuck was he supposed to know what any of the other tenants of the eighth floor at 35 High Park Avenue were up to during those particular hours .Or, for that matter, if they were at home and functioning.

After the cop bade him a stern good-bye, Mike poured himself a shot of scotch and mulled events over .Terry had left a suicide note; but the handwriting had not been Terry's.. Now, *this* was definitely food for speculation. .

About one hour after Detective Willis' departure, there was another knock on Mike's apartment door. He scowled. E-Mail and faxes and the occasionally necessary telephone call were to be expected; but yet *another* person wishing to speak to his person was not a good sign.

'It's Jean-Marie. Do you have a minute, Mike?'

He opened the door to her. He realized that she expected to be invited in.

'Yes, I have a minute. Please sit down and make yourself at home.'

She tentatively walked through the main living room and sat down in his wicker chair. As she retrieved

her cigarettes from her handbag, Mike realized that he needed to get an ashtray for her. He had stopped smoking dope two months ago and consequently had relegated his ashtray to a spare cupboard.

‘Did the detective call upon *you*, Michael?’.

He nodded as he handed her the ashtray. Presumably the detective had covered the entire eighth floor as well as the building superintendent. He hoped Jean-Marie hadn’t been entertaining company at the time of the call.

She drew on her cigarette and exhaled away from his direction.

‘I told him that I was rehearsing a scene with a male actor at the time. It’s sort of the truth.’.

They shared a laugh, then her face became clouded.

‘The gentleman whom I was servicing knew Terry. He asked me questions about our now deceased neighbour. I’m very disturbed about this’.

Mike frowned.

‘Would you like a beer?’.

‘Sure’, Jean-Marie nodded nervously.

Mike stood and returned with two bottles of Red Baron from his refrigerator. He liked Jean-Marie. He thought she appeared remarkably composed for a woman pushing fifty who had recently left her husband in Don Mills and then begun a new life for herself- even if prostitution hadn’t *quite* been her first choice for a new career.

‘You’ve just passed on some information to me that I really don’t need to know about or hear. But you don’t need to worry, Jean-Marie. My lips are sealed.’.

She laughed as she exhaled, still nervously.

‘Like I said, Mike, I don’t *know* that Gerald visited Terry after finishing his session with me.’.

‘Exactly. What he does after rehearsal is his own business. Cheers.’.

Mike and Jean-Marie clicked their bottles and smiled at each other.

‘I have a joint in my purse. Would you like to share it with me?’.

Mike nodded assent. Somehow this seemed an appropriate gesture .

Things were pleasantly and not atypically quiet at 35 High Park for the next three days- .no loud music, no other people's guests coming and going, no anything distracting or suspicious.

*Discretion is the root of all that is good and comfortable*, Mike remarked to himself as he realized that he had to do a little shopping in the downstairs tuck shop.

In the fruit and vegetables section he almost collided with Keith.

'Hey, Mike. Careful. *Careful*'.

Mike laughed, even though Keith had managed to draw undue attention to the pair of them.

Then Keith lowered his voice.

'Gossip time. Lewis is in rehab and Jean-Marie is on vacation.'

"Oh?"

Mike's body stiffened. He hoped Jean-Marie wasn't still panicking about her client who had possibly acted out his grudge against Terry .He chose not to comment on any possibilities.

'Well, Keith, this could explain why things on the eighth floor have been even quieter than they usually are.'

He also decided against asking Keith about his interrogation session with the homicide detective.

'Got to get moving, Michael. I'm having some friends over for cocktails tonight. Are you free?'

Mike looked at his neighbour.

'I'm not sure. If I'm free I'll drop by. Okay?'

'Please do. It would be nice to see you before I move out.'.

'Oh?'

Keith abruptly paid for his groceries and walked toward the elevator before Mike had finished his shopping

Mike wasn't particularly inclined toward going to Keith's cocktail party. He's been to one before and that one had been quite enough.

But he was very curious as to why Keith was suddenly moving out of 35 High Park. He was also curious as to whether his other neighbours were really in rehabilitation or on vacation or whether they too had moved out- for whatever possible reason.

Upon returning his apartment Mike almost tripped over a notice from the superintendent. He now understood why all of his neighbours were moving out.

His rent was being raised because a new refrigerator was to be installed. Mike had not requested any new refrigerator. His own had never caused any problems in terms of available space and functionality. The superintendent of his parents' building had tried to pull the same stunt on them- forcing refrigerators owned by one of his friends onto the tenants and then gouging them for additional rent.

Mike agreed with Keith. He wasn't going to stand for this shit.

But where would Mike go? He couldn't just move in temporarily with his lover the way Keith would. Mike didn't have a lover and he didn't want one.

He knew one tenant on the seventh floor. He decided to call on Lois Bromley, who was also a graphic artist working out of a similar set-up one floor below him.

Lois Bromley had not been handed any notice of any rent increase. She wasn't in any hurry to move out of her apartment as she had no reason to. She was proficient and she had a girlfriend living on the fourth floor. Lois had the best of everything.

'Sorry to hear about your neighbour, Michael.'

Lois invited Mike to join her for a beer. They toasted each other.

'Well, Lois. The man wasn't exactly my best friend. I mean, he literally and figuratively smelled.'

“My friend Gerald used to know Terry quite well- years ago. They had quite the nasty falling out.’.

Lois’ girlfriend Barbra emerged from the shower and helped herself to a beer from the refrigerator.

*Gerald?*

‘Terry and my friend used to be partners in an architecture firm. Then Terry lost it.

Mike didn’t want to know any more. He tuned out as Lois and Barbra gossiped about Keith’s strange relationship with his lover Colin. He wondered how long their relationship would last, now that Keith was being forced to move in with his lover.

*And it was all Terry’s fault.* Damn Terry for not being as self-contained as he had fancied himself to be. Somebody, maybe the mysterious Gerald or maybe even the superintendent himself, had had some outstanding business with the hermit. Terry hadn’t spoken to other people unless absolutely necessary. Well,, just possibly somebody attempted to confront him and didn’t appreciate receiving the silent treatment..

Mike finished his beer quickly and bade Lois and Barbra cordial farewells. Then he E-mailed his notice to the superintendent and began packing. He would stay at a B&B until finding another apartment - one hopefully even more self-contained than the one that he was being forced to vacate..

He took a break from his packing and stood out in the hallway outside what had been Terry’s apartment. Nobody else had moved in and nobody else was going to be moving in .The apartment was now cursed- just like the entire damned eighth floor..

## **BROWNSTONE ANONYMOUS**

Tim Barnes finished his beer and then put his coat on. He felt secure that there was no ostensible reason for him to sleep in the apartment that had the superintendent sign on its front door. All of his tenants were quiet enough and reliable; and none of them were likely to have plumbing emergencies overnight.

He adjusted his cap as it was raining outside, and then locked the apartment door behind himself. He was expected at Mary's place within the next hour. He preferred Mary's place to his own - because it was where she lived and because it was a house.

Tim Barnes had once been a promising college quarterback but a serious football injury had nearly paralyzed him. It had only been recently that the owners of his apartment building- Bob and Sally- had awarded him the paying job of being a live-in superintendent. But Tim saw no harm in spending many of his nights elsewhere- just as long as he was home and functioning on the mornings when he had to be there.

He smiled at Afua Cooper, one of his tenants who paid her way through university by copy-editing. She was a nice, tall black girl who never made demands on either himself or his time. Most of his tenants were similar- self-contained and relatively quiet. He could never tell how many people were actually living in one of the units; but the rent was always on time and there were never any noise complaints.

Tim saw the street-car approaching and reached for his TTC token. Mary was expecting him for dinner and for company.

'You're *late*'

. Mary Savidge kissed Tim good-naturedly as he let himself into her house in Parkdale

Dinner was all ready for him. Dinner was fish and chips, which was always fine by him. Mary retrieved two beers from the kitchen and then they sat down to eat.

'How's that older man in your building? That Harry or whatever his name is?



'Henry. Mr. Henry Chadburn. He's the same as usual- for better or worse.'

'I think he's just a bit, shall we say, *eccentric*. Well, you have to admit it, Tim. He just *is*.'

Tim squeezed more lemon juice onto his cod.

'I won't argue with you there, Mary. But I think he's quite harmless; and he's indispensable to Bob and Sally. They'd be up Shit Creek without him. And he does *not* drink, which is useful.'

Mary shook her head as she sipped her beer.

'He does have another source of income, doesn't he?'

'Oh, for sure', he sipped *his* beer.

'Well? What is it? How much do you really know about this Henry? Or about any of your other tenants?'

'As much as I need to.', Tim frowned. She never talked about *her* workplace but she always expected to hear anecdotes about his. Her salary was considerably higher than his; so presumably there must have been a few strings attached to her workplace.

They ate silently for a few minutes. He had often wondered about one unit in which the number of overnight guests had frequently been plentiful. And he had been cornered by Henry Chadburn on a few too many occasions when he had only been able to deal with the most basic of conversations. Henry would yap on and on about conspiracy theories - the CIA's experiments with LSD and Canadian guinea pigs and of course the Kennedy assassination.

Sometimes Tim suspected that Henry had taken a large amount of LSD in his younger years.

'Dessert, Tim?'

Mary carried in two slices of lemon meringue pie. Tim couldn't refuse such a dessert if he were paid to.

She switched on the CD player and pit on a blues CD by John Lee Hooker. Tim liked to listen to blues at the end of a long day as well. One of his tenants was a musician who mercifully used headphones in his little studio. Tim suspected that he would dislike young Pedro's music if he were actually to hear it.

But the young man's little business paid the rent. And the tenant with all the friends, room-mates and possible lovers of more than both official genders was also economically reliable. If George and his friends sold

drugs; they certainly didn't appear to be using them.

'We should watch the news after this CD, Tim. There's a good story breaking.'

Mary relaxed on the sofa with a cigarette, inviting Tim to join her. They sat together, listening to the music and smoking. When the CD concluded, she switched on the television with her remote control.

*'Good evening. This is Sandra Larson with tonight's report. The RCMP is looking for a man who they say is a Heritage Front member passing as an RCMP undercover agent. John Stansbury is wanted for questioning. We cannot show you a composite picture of this individual at this time ; but the suspect is known to be operating in downtown west Toronto.'*

Tim scowled. If the cops didn't have a picture of their suspect; then what could the good citizens of downtown west Toronto possibly do about this man?

'Well, so what? I don't know John Stansbury. Do you, Mary?.'

'No, Tim. I don't.'

She walked to the kitchen and returned with two more beers.

'Perhaps this John Stansbury character not only has other names- he has many different faces?' .she smiled at him mysteriously.

'Maybe.. I don't know.'

Tim took a long drink of the beer and took in the news silently .Mary's idea of a good story wasn't particularly his. At least, not for tonight.

He didn't arrive back at the west-downtown brownstone until ten o'clock the next morning, and the building's managers were there- waiting for him.

Bob and Sally Rendell. frowned as Tim unlocked the building's front door.

The apartment's business managers had always warned him at least a day before their building

inspections. Something was not right.

Bob and Sally had been his friends for longer than anybody else had ever been. They had helped him get back on his feet after the near-paralyzing accident and they had given him a job.

*Why* were they acting so strange this morning?

‘We’re going on vacation, Tim. So we need you to be *here*.’

Tim was the superintendent of this particular building of theirs. This meant that he was on the premises pretty well all of the time and overnight. He had his holiday break in January; and they could take holidays whenever they damn well felt like taking one

He knew that Bob and Sally were aware of his relationship with Mary. They’d even met Mary on a few occasions and they’d been able to put two and two together.

Bob and Sally hadn’t particularly made any effort to get to know his girlfriend. They were downtown property-owners and she was a secretary who rented a the ground floor of a house out in Parkdale.

Well, his car was a Volvo and they had a BMW and a Camry between them. Mary’s car was a used Volkswagen. Maybe her fur coat was the first one off the rack and not all that great a fur. And Tim had overheard his tenant George and some of his vegetarian-punk friends making derogatory remarks about the superintendent’s wife and her cheesy fur coat. They should all mind their own damn business..

‘Your girlfriend can stay with you *here*’, Sally spoke in an irritatingly bright voice as she often did..

‘Two heads are frequently better than one’, Bob smirked.

Tim did not want to be confined to the downtown brownstone. Mary spent as little time in it as possible. Tim wondered whether Bob and Sally had a mole among the tenants- somebody who would keep an eye on his whereabouts and inform them in case he decided to spend time with Mary at her house..

‘How long are you going away for?’, Tim looked at Bob and Sally pleadingly.

Bob and Sally looked at each other.

‘We really don’t know’, Sally appeared genuinely confused by Tim’s question.

*Henry!* Tim more than suspected that Henry Chadburn would be clandestinely keeping an eye on his

comings and his goings. *Damn!*

Tim relaxed with a cigar, quite intensely watching a baseball game between the hometown Blue Jays and the New York Yankees. Tonight's game was a close one- it kept his attention as he played armchair manager.

He still couldn't watch contact sports. He could barely stand being in a room where somebody else was even talking about football let alone watching it. But baseball was harmless entertainment. It was slow- it was all about put that left-handed slugger in against that right-handed pitched.

This was a close game; and he resented the phone call. But he knew that he had to answer it.

'Hi, Tim. What are you up to?.'

'Smoking a cigar and watching the ball game. It's a close one.'

"Oh'., Mary's response was unenthusiastic. She herself enjoyed both the occasional ball game and the occasional cigar

.But she wanted him to get on the street car and get his ass out to her house; and this was not tangible for him tonight.

'Fuck Henry .Whether or not he's a mole for Bob and Sally, to hell with him. How long are they going away for again?'

Tim didn't know. Bob and Sally had provided neither the time or the place.

'Well, does this mean that I can't see you until your employers return from their mysterious vacation?'

Tim drew on his cigar thoughtfully. He wished that he could come up with an answer to her question, aside from inviting her to spend the night at his apartment.

She had not stayed with him for some time now. She had not appreciated the nasty looks from his militant animal-rights tenants. Even though it was now spring and there was no need for Mary to wear her fur coat; she would always find some other excuse for avoiding his building and its tenants.

'I have to go now, dear. You're welcome to come over, you know that.'

'I'll call you tomorrow, Tim. Enjoy the rest of your baseball game.'

Them Mary hung up. During her call the Yankees had homered and gone ahead by three runs.

And now he could hear his tenants George and Henry engaging in a conversation about animal-rights -whether or not the animal-rights movement was hopelessly middle-class and white. Henry was insisting that it was definitely and hopelessly so and George was angrily refuting him.

Tim steps out into the hallway and told the pair of them to just shut up and to stop distracting him. George walked away from Henry and out of the building temporarily ending the argument.

Tim hated arguments. He tried his damndest to avoid them in his relationship with Mary and in his personal life. They never sorted themselves out- they just went on and on. But sometimes he wished that he were better at resolving them- by making it clear to the other person that certain subjects were closed simply because they *were*.

The ball game finished its course with the Yankees holding on to their lead. Tim scowled as he decided to avoid the post-game analysis and switch the station to the one with the nightly report.

The municipal, provincial, and national police forces were all looking for the man calling himself John Stansbury .There was still no composite picture of this man. How could anybody inform on him if nobody knew what the man even looked like.

Then Tim realized something. The law-enforcement agencies themselves did not have a composite picture of the man. They only knew about him- from somebody who had been either unable or unwilling to supply a picture.

As he butted out his cigar he heard a knocking at his door. He could guess who the caller was; but he couldn't pretend not to be at home with the newscast being so audible.

Henry Chadburn invited himself in. Tim offered Henry neither beer nor coffee; but Henry made himself at home regardless.

'Timothy, we need to discuss those punk morons in our building.'

Tim opened a beer for himself.

‘Why, Henry?’.

‘They are beyond stupid. They can’t even out one and one together let alone two and two. They claim to be anti-racist yet they’re for animal rights.’.

Tim scowled at Henry.

‘I don’t understand. Why does that *have* to be a contradiction?’.

‘It just is’, Henry lit a cigarette. ‘Banning hunting and trapping is unfair to native North Americans who literally have to hunt in order to eat.’.

Tim sipped his beer.

‘That’s too pat, Henry. That’s too convenient.’.

‘Come on, Tim.’, Henry drew on his smoke. ‘The anti-racist groups with their anti-hunting and animal rights rhetoric are unwitting fronts for anti-native settler-population agendas; and they’re too caught up in their own self-righteous bullshit to know it.’.

‘You’re wrong, Henry. George and his revolving room-mates are too naive for their own good; but they’re not unaware of these contradictions. They don’t feel that they have to give up just because of some obvious contradiction.’.

‘You don’t get it, Tim.’.

‘No. Maybe I don’t.’, Tim glared at Henry. ‘Maybe I’m a naive idealist too. I’m really too tired to continue this conversation. Okay, Henry?’.

Henry appeared ready to challenge Tim, to accuse him of cowardice or something similar. But he scowled something inaudible and then walked out of Tim’s apartment- back to the apartment’s office and the books that he slaved over.

Tim could visualize Henry working all night in front of the computer screen- working all night for Bob and Sally who were God knows where for God knows how long.

He wished that Mary didn’t have such a bee in her bonnet about the building that he worked and lived in.

He wished that she would get over whatever was holding her back and make a commitment.

But he resisted the temptation to call her. The ball was now in her court.

The next day Tim noticed that Henry had gone out somewhere for the day- looking far more official than he usually did. Henry more often than not worked at home- either sending faxes via the machine in his own apartment or working on the computer in the building's office. Henry didn't seem to have his own personal computer, which seemed odd..

Tim remembered something. He remembered that he had found a key for which he had not been able to identify an owner. Possibly the key had belonged to a former tenant- one who had either moved elsewhere voluntarily or else been evicted for whatever reason.

The key was a duplicate for the key for the office door. Tim looked around, and then entered the office.

There were hardly any old-fashioned files or filing cabinets. Everything was stored in the Macintosh computer .

Tim wanted to see what comprised 'everything'.

He sat down behind the computer and switched it on. He had never become much of a computer person; and the last thing he wanted to do was wind up erasing things.

Tim entered into Microsoft Word programme 5.1 and moved the mouse up to 'File". Then he highlighted 'Open'.

A vertical list of files stared at him. He moved the list further down , staring at the titles and not seeing any that he wanted to open up.

Then he came to one labeled ' John A'. File' John A.' was dated last December eleventh. There were many' John' files- running up to T.-which meant that there were twenty.

Tim opened up' John A'.. He could not believe what he was reading. It was a report written to the RCMP about local anarchist kids in Toronto. His tenant George figured prominently in this report. 'John' was describing George as being a ringleader of sorts- a kid who pretended to be a pacifist but who was really armed

and dangerous. The report went on to identify George as the mastermind behind a series of posters designed to provoke local neo-fascist organizations by implying that their ranks consisted mostly of self-loathing and closeted homosexuals.

Tim heard the sound of footsteps walking up the stairs. He quickly closed file John a and then pressed the 'Escape' key in the upper left corner of the keyboard. Then he killed the lights in the office and returned to the hallway.

*He was on the premises. He was available for his tenants.*

'Good morning, Pedro.'

The young musician smiled at him.

'Are you doing book work while Bob and Sally are out of town? You know, I saw Bob and Sally at the airport.'

'Really?'. Tim stood for a moment. Then he remembered to ask Pedro whether he knew what flight his employers were standing in line for.

'Yes. They were flying to the Bahamas. I didn't talk to them for very long because I was meeting a friend arriving from London. But they were definitely headed for the Bahamas. That was the lineup they were standing in. I didn't get the chance to ask how long they were going for.'

Tim nodded. He wished that Pedro had been able to find that out for him.

'See you later, Pedro. Have a good day.'

The musician nodded and returned to his home studio.

Tim returned to his apartment and phoned Mary at home. He knew she was at her workplace but he never called her there

Mary was far more computer-literate than he was; and he needed her to not only open up the John files on the office computer but to duplicate them. He needed to get this done as soon as possible.

Henry didn't arrive back home until rather late in the afternoon. He appeared both somber and agitated as



Tim nearly collided with him on the first staircase.

‘Grueling day, Timothy. And I have to return tomorrow.’.

‘Return to what, Henry?’., Tim was now all ears.

‘My nephew’s drug trial. It seems that dear old Uncle Henry was Jason’s alibi. I had seen my nephew very early that evening- not after midnight when he got himself arrested. The defence lawyer of course considers me to be a liar; so I will have to undergo further cross-examination tomorrow. This is very annoying, to put it bluntly.’.

Henry scowled. Obviously he expected no responses- affirmative or negative- from the superintendent.

But Tim had a question for Henry Chadburn..

‘By the way, Henry, where *did* Bob and Sally go for their vacation ? And did they tell you when they’d be returning?’.

Henry shook his head.

‘Arizona, I believe. I think Sally needs a rest for some or other convoluted medical reasons...Today is the twenty-ninth; so of course you’ll make sure we have all the rents by the top of the month. No exceptions this month- not George, not Pedro, not *anybody*. Do you understand, Timothy?’.

Yes, he understood. But he chose not to respond. He returned to his own apartment and resumed reading a murder mystery that he had begun a few days previously. He would call Mary again after he she had had ample time to go home from work and then relax for a while.

She arrived downtown in time for a simple meat and potatoes dinner. Her work day had been long but not stressful and she seemed much more perky than she been usually during the last few weeks.

‘Things are slow, Tim. So I killed time on the Internet.’.

‘Really?’. Tim opened another two bottles of beer.

‘There are some serious lunatics out there, I tell you. There is a ‘John Stansbury’ referred to on some of the really racist local sites.’.

‘Yes, John Stansbury. Who I strongly suspect lives very close to home.’.

Mary helped Tim clean and rinse the dishes.

‘Let’s not watch baseball, Tim. Let’s listen to music.’.

‘Sure’. Tim had checked in on the ball game earlier and it was clearly going to be a rout for the Yankees.

‘Elvis Costello perhaps. Or Tom Waits, or Bob Dylan. Somebody in that vein.’.

‘Bob Dylan I have.’.

Tim found his CD for Bob Dylan’s Highway 61 Revisited and inserted it into the player.

Mary sat on the sofa, unwrapping two cigars she had brought with her.

‘Why don’t we smoke these cigars and then have sex? How does that sound to you?’.

It sounded perfect to Tim.

Mary toasted her cigar, then lit it and exhaled.

‘It’s not *only* the reward I want. I really want to help put your Nazi neighbour out of circulation.’.

‘Reward?’, Tim lit his.

‘Well yes, Tim. Who knows. It might be enough for you to get out of this cursed building. I mean, you were the only tenant who could deal with the garbage problem, so Bob and Sally made you the superintendent. There’s nothing wrong with having a just a *little* bit of ambition.’.

‘Hmmm. I suppose not- if you put it the way you did.’.

Bob Dylan whined on about ‘How does it feel to be like a rolling stone’, as they sucked back on their cigars. After Dylan finished they would have sex, get a good sleep, and then wake up and do the necessary dirty deeds after they were sure Henry had left for his nephew’s drug trial.

Mary planned to phone in sick the next day. Her company allowed her twelve sick days a year, in addition to a two-week vacation.

Tim had begun to suspect that Bob and Sally had gone to the Barbados or wherever they had then gone to from there for more than two weeks. He suspected that Bob and Sally were gone. Things were collapsing and things were beginning to fall into place, he smiled to himself as he fell into a pleasant sleep.

Sex before bedtime had been such fun that Tim and Mary indulged themselves again as soon as the alarm clock went off. Then a quick breakfast and strong coffee; and, just as Mary was nonchalantly getting dressed, there was a knock on the door.

‘Phone company’s coming this morning to re-install Afua’s phone. You’ll be here to let them in?’.

Perhaps Henry thought that Tim would be eloping with Mary or indulging in some other romantic foolishness?

‘Of course I’ll be here to let them in. Afua will be at school so I’ll be here.’.

‘Excellent’, Henry nodded. ‘Well, I certainly hope this is my final day on the stand. Just put the damn kid in jail, that’s what I say.’.

Tim refused to comment .As Henry caught sight of Mary who was still casually nude; he parted with one final shot of wisdom.

‘You realize that marijuana is actually legal and marketed by the potato-chip companies, don’t you?’.

‘Whatever you say, Henry’, Mary smiled at him as he close the door.

‘What the fuck?’ , Tim shook his head.

‘Our poor Mr. Henry Chadburn is so fried about something that he can’t distinguish pot odor from cigar stench Although a little toke might be a nice way to put ourselves in a relaxing mood before we get down to work.’.

Tim scratched his head, then assented. He had never been keen on recreational drugs of any sort but Mary liked to smoke grass. Henry was at least partly right- he found that the stuff only made him hungry.

‘Mary passed him the joint as she threw on her jeans.

‘I suspect our poor Henry is also somewhat frustrated in the sexual department.’.

‘I suspect you’re right, honey. Let’s get working- now that he’s gone.’.

Soon Henry could be heard slamming the front door behind him and with no further ado Tim let himself and Mary into the office.

‘It’s al yours, Mare.’.

Mary sat down and quickly opened up the special 'John' files, She scanned through them, sight-reading some more quickly than others.

'Which one are you reading now, dear?'

Mary pored her head for a few seconds more and then informed him that she was particularly revolted by 'John5'..

'This is a dispatch to the RCMP informing them that Youth Against Neo-Nazis are a sinister RCMP plot to undermine other anti-racist groups.'

Tim reddened

'George is a member of Youth Against Neo-Nazis.'

'Yes, George figures prominently in this particular dispatch. Well, Tim, our 'John Stansbury' is being paid to pull the wool over the RCMP's eyes. He claims irrefutable proof that Youth Against Neo-Nazis are all cops.'

'Or worse, that some of them are neo-Nazis who have hoodwinked the cops?'

She scowled.

'Yes, damn it. Well this one alone is worth downloading; so let me get on with it.'

Tim watched as Mary systematically transferred the file 'John5' to a blank disc that she had inserted into the computer's hard drive and watched the disc transfer by percentage.

'Let's grab a few more just to rub it in. Fuck, Tim, I'd better get something under the name Henry Chadburn while we're at it.-unless that name simply doesn't exist on either paper or computer.'

Tim nodded. He didn't want the situation to be simply their word against Henry's against the cops'

'But there's loads here. This would mean accessing this computer to the cops; so we'd have to figure out how to get them here when Henry's not here.'

Tim looked at the computer screen. John6 also ranted on about the 'benign supposedly pacifist and vegetarian punks who were actually experts at crowd provocation and who were the ringleaders of an attack on a local neo-Nazi house.'

Tim had a sudden urge to stake out the asshole's house and then throw a few rocks himself. And now it was clear to him that Henry was one of them

'How are you doing, Mare?'

'We're bopping along, honey. Just let me transfer two more and then you can make the call. And then we

can celebrate.’.

Right. Mary had after all phoned in sick. And Tim knew that he had to be the one phoning the local police since he had been the one who had stumbled upon the ‘John’ files on the office computer.

He more than suspected that Henry might be using this trail he was testifying at- if it even existed- as a ruse to get out of Toronto and perhaps even Canada. Perhaps he was rendezvousing with Bob and Sally in some safety zone who really knows where.

Shit, Bob and Sally had been his friends- they had supported him. And they were obviously guilty of something in relation to Henry and his horrible mission.

‘I like your tenant George, even if he is a vegetarian.’.

Tim laughed.

‘So I guess that means we’re going out for steak?’.

‘You bet your ass it does’, Mary smiled as she closed down the office computer. “Now, make that call!”.

Tim dialed Metro Police and was whisked through the system. The investigative officer was all ears the minute his caller began talking.

**GRACE AND HER HUMANS** copyright Andrew James Paterson, 1998

Grace Lennon completed her backyard burial of Plato's ashes and then set about feeding her other five cats. She had very reluctantly found other homes for five others as the city officials and the damn Humane Society had been relentlessly pressuring her to do so.

It was all the Wellers' fault. Bob and Caroline Weller would be going hysterical whenever the Plato or Tiger or Mr. Stripes or Furballs would even walk on their lawn. It wasn't as if the cats were relieving themselves or spraying - all of her cats were neutered. It was simply that the blasted Wellers were typical suburban ailurophobes.

The combination of the Wellers on one side and the Hudsons on the other had become unbearable. But Grace was too settled in to move and besides she had lived in her house far longer than the Wellers or Hudsons or any of the others. And she wasn't moving anywhere else. She had overheard her younger daughter's stupid husband talking about her having 'lost it' with her cats and her what not. Frank Gooding had been trying to persuade Nell to have her mother relocated into a nursing home and Nell had almost given in.

Grace rolled another cigarette for herself. She had smoked all of her life so why would she be wanting to give that up now. Nell had been trying to persuade her mother to quit smoking for what now seemed like decades. Grace snorted. She knew that both Nell and Frank were occasional ‘social smokers’..

Thank God Alice wouldn’t listen to any nonsense about nursing homes or other institutions for the aged. Alice was the smarter of her daughters - the one who had never married. She had *almost* made that mistake but she had escaped unscathed..

Grace hoped that Alice would be driving up to visit her in the near future. Alice had promised her a visit quite recently.

Tiger and Mr. Stripes both ate heartily. Only Furballs sniffed at his dinner and then requested to be let outside. Grace looked out the window and called after her.

‘Furballs. Don’t go *there!*’.

Furballs was stalking a bird that had found a resting spot on the Wellers’ porch

She drove her ancient red beetle cautiously around the crescent and then onto the local main street that would take her to the mall. When Albert had died nearly twenty years ago, she had taken up driving and her record had been impeccable. The current Volkswagen was her third and she saw no reason why it wouldn’t service her for the remainder of her life.

Nell and Frank were constantly arguing that she should stop driving. In her eighties, she was a better driver than either her daughter or her son-in-law. She was convinced that Frank drank too much; and she herself was careful never to drive after even one glass of wine. She was quite capable of ordering and then picking up her groceries and then cooking for herself; so to hell with them.

She tried to remember the last occasion on which she had seen her great- grandson Justin and she realized that this must have been well over a year ago. It had been at least that long since Frank and Nell and their daughter Jennifer with her husband Mark had stopped visiting her. Frank claimed to be allergic to cats but Grace

thought Frank Gooding was full of bullshit. Nell insisted the cats hated young children yet Jennifer and Mark's two-year old son Justin loved playing with the cats - especially Mr. Stripes and Tiger. Anyway, Justin was now old enough to either play with the cats or else ignore them. And the cats didn't take it personally when Justin ignored them. They did tend to gravitate to Frank with his cashmere sweaters because cats love good sweaters and they always have gravitated towards humans either hostile or indifferent to them. Her cats were no fools.

She knew that Nell and Frank and Jennifer and Mark were also going to be keeping young Justin away from Aunt Alice. Single women without men in their lives clearly had the potential to become negative influences. Alice was quite upset about this and she didn't mind saying so.

Grace hit the brake suddenly as a cat had darted around the crescent corner. It was a lovely cat that was probably maltreated by his or her humans. She wished that she could kidnap this cat and give it another name. Scallywag, that would be the rascal's moniker. She had been forced to find another home for another Scallywag as well as Curmudgeon and Binky and Socrates and Shakespeare.

Damn the Wellers anyway! And damn Nell and Frank for being cut from the same wrinkled cloth!.

'How are you today, Mrs. Lennon?'

Christina Hudson mechanically clipped her side of the hedge between the Hudson's house and Grace Lennon's. Mrs. Hudson always seemed to find time to trim the hedge, even when trimming was not required

'I could be doing worse, Mrs. Hudson. It does look as if it will rain later.'

Christina Hudson was probably still in her thirties. She was a good deal younger than Richard Hudson who was likely in his fifties. Mr. Hudson was an aeronautics engineer, whatever that meant. He had some sort of job that kept him away from home much of the time and Grace suspected that his younger wife had lovers. The Hudsons did not have any children, which did allow the young wife leisure time that would be unavailable to her if she were an active mother.

She would see Mrs. Hudson dressed quite stylishly on her way somewhere important behind the wheel of



her husband's Oldsmobile

Grace had been so pleased when Alice had broken off with that annoying man whom she had almost married. Rodney Crevett, that was the man's name. Grace knew not what had ever become of Rodney Crevett and she cared not a whit. She knew that Alice was now a lesbian. Alice had spared her mother the painfully true confession because her mother could tell and therefore the subject did not need to ever be broached. Grace did wonder if Alice was romantically involved with that Chinese or Korean artist Kim who she had been with one day the previous summer when she had unexpectedly run into her daughter at a movie.

'One of your cats is loose in my backyard, Mrs. Lennon.'

"Oh?". Grace had almost forgotten Christina Hudson. She stood on her tiptoes and saw that Mr. Stripes had managed to leap over the hedge, probably by initially leaping onto the top of it and then jumping.

'Mr. Stripes, get back over *here*. You know that you're not supposed to sneak onto other people's property.'

Christina Hudson laughed.

'It's not like he's caused any damage, Mrs. Lennon. Although the other striped cat of yours.....'.

'Tiger?'

'Probably', Tina Hudson nodded. 'Anyway, *that* cat has definitely been fertilizing our garden.'

This was not good news. The Hudsons were easier to deal with than the Wellers, but this was potentially an ugly scenario. Dick Hudson could be a nasty one, Grace had seen this side of her neighbour before.

'I will keep an eye on him. Sorry about this, Mrs. Hudson.' Grace decided to roll a cigarette for herself.

'Thank you, Mrs. Lennon.'

Tina Hudson returned to her hedge pruning after realizing that Grace would not be continuing any conversation. Grace concluded that Mrs. Hudson considered her lawn to be unkempt and neglectful - on the basis of her unevenly-trimmed half of the hedge. Probably her neighbour disapproved of Grace's habit of rolling her own cigarettes, Grace speculated with amusement. Probably Mrs. Hudson was young enough to smoke marijuana, especially in tandem with her male friends who were not her stodgy old husband.

Grace lit her cigarette and exhaled. All of the cats were now on her property and under control. She could see that neither of the Wellers were at home and she hoped that the couple had been killed in a plane accident. But she knew this would be too good to be true. She hadn't minded Stephen Weller, their son who had left home so abruptly. Stephen Weller had been the brains of the family.

She remembered the time when she had overheard Bob and Caroline Weller complaining about her to their barbecue guests one night when they'd been unaware of her proximity. She'd eavesdropped on both of the Wellers referring to her as Mrs. Loony and Mrs. Cat Person or 'Joan Lennon', and she had not been amused.

She took another puff of her cigarette and exhaled toward the Wellers' back yard. She was going to outlast the Wellers and the Hudsons and the nameless Indian or Pakistani couple across the street. She intended to die in her house whether they or her eldest daughter and her son-in-law liked it or not.

Grace finished her cigarette and threw it forcefully over onto the Wellers' property. Then she commanded her cats to follow her as she began to prepare their dinner servings.

She was checking her grocery list when the telephone rang. Her telephone rang so infrequently that Grace actually considered arranging for her phone to be disconnected. But that would be unfair to Alice, her daughter whose calls she still appreciated and welcomed.

Alice was on the phone, informing her mother that she was on her way to Jamaica for a week's vacation.

'Why Jamaica?'. Grace frowned.

'Why not?', replied Alice.

Grace wondered who if anybody would be Alice's traveling companion. She herself had never been to Jamaica and had never even considered it as a possible destination...

'You should treat yourself to a holiday, Mother. When was the last time you took one?'

Grace rolled a cigarette for herself.

'Six or seven years ago, I think. I traveled to Ireland.'

'That's right. And you loved it, right?'

Grace had indeed loved renting a car and driving through Irish countryside and then spending time in the pubs of Dublin. But she had done so at a time when she had lived next to somebody whom she could trust with her cats while she herself was away. Who could possibly look after her cats now, except for possibly Alice?

‘If I had a neighbour whom I could trust with the cats, Alice, I’d consider another holiday. But you know how I feel about my neighbours.’.

‘Yes, Mom. You’ve told me all about them.’.

Alice parsed her lips. Grace had indeed talked to her at length about the Wellers and the Hudsons and the Indian family across the street whom her mother did not want to become acquainted with. Alice wondered whether Grace was becoming cranky about immigrants or non-white people after all these years - whether she avoided other people whose names were unfamiliar to her and thus unpronounceable.

Grace lit her cigarette and sighed.

‘Well, Alice. There has to be somebody here or else the cats will all fight each other and some of them will starve. Mr. Stripes never did learn how to nibble rather than inhale entire meals in one gulp.’.

‘Stray cats are like that, Mom. Even I know that.’.

Grace drew on her cigarette and exhaled.

‘Well, yes. They do stay like that for their entire lives.’.

‘Mom, have you even considered finding homes for, say, three or four of the cats. It’s not as if they’re some sort of family unit that needs to remain together?’.

Grace couldn’t believe her ears. Alice of all damn people was advocating some variant of family values?

‘Why *should* I have to find than another home, Alice? I’ve already complied with the damn by-laws once and damned if I will allow any more cats to be orphaned off to unappreciative homes just to make other people happy. They’re mine. I’m their human and end of discussion.’.

Alice held her breath for a second, then decided to get moving.

‘I’ll send you a postcard, Mom. I’ll call you when I get back.’.

Grace puffed on her cigarette and then ground it out angrily.

‘Have a good trip, Alice. And don’t worry about *me*. I’m fine and everything is under control. Now good-bye.’.

Grace slammed down the receiver. The cats were staking out positrons in front of the refrigerator, even though dinner was still at least an hour away. This was hardly unusual behaviour and they knew it.

‘Mr-wow’, Grace patted Furballs on the back and Furballs rubbed her legs against her human’s.

‘Mr-rrr-wow’, Mr. Stripes clamored for his turn.

Grace happily obliged. Her cats were just as much a family as Nell and Frank or the damn Hudsons or Wellers or Alice and whomever might be her unfortunate traveling companion.

She laughed when Tiger hissed at all of the other cats and scrambled outside. Tiger was hungry enough to go outside and do some serious hunting for himself.

She prayed that Tiger would not return with any mice or birds. He did this occasionally and Grace had indicated her disapproval. Not that she could do anything about Tiger’s predatory habits. Nature was not intended to be tampered with, after all.

Grace chuckled as she began rolling another cigarette. She would drive into town for more tobacco and more cat food after feeding the cats their dinners. Then she would drive over to the liquor store and buy a good bottle of French red wine for herself.

She set about cutting the grass in her back yard. There had been considerable rain during the previous week and the grass had definitely sprouted.

So Grace changed into a pair of old jeans and retrieved her ancient power mower from the garage. The power mower had served her for years now and it was still going strong. It needed a new muffler but then so did the old beetle itself.

Grace pulled on the starting cable and derived a weird pleasure from the sound of the mower. The fuel-driven machine let out an odor that would probably be anathema to self-righteous environmentalists. Grace chortled as she pushed the mower as close as possible to her garden without cutting off any of the plants.

When she had completed nearly half of her mowing she decided to stop for a cigarette break. As she rolled a cigarette she became aware of Christina Hudson curiously observing her routine from over the hedge.

‘I see your taking advantage of the good weather, Mrs. Lennon.’

Christina Hudson wore black walking shorts and Birkenstock sandals while clipping her immaculate hedge.

‘Probably should have done this on Monday, but I didn’t get around to it.’

Grace drew on her cigarette and tried not to appear angry at Mrs. Hudson

‘You know that the young man across the road from us - the thirteen year old - is always looking for odd jobs.’

‘Oh?’, Grace exhaled.

‘Yes. His name is Arif. The older son is quite skilled at landscaping. Dick and I have retained him to work on our garden.’

‘That’s nice, Mrs. Hudson. But I *like* cutting the grass. It’s a bit of a workout, you might call it.’

Grace had yet to finish her cigarette but as far as she was concerned her break was over. She reactivated her ancient lawn mower before Christina Hudson could pursue this conversation any further

Just because the woman lived next door to her that did not give her any right to make condescending suggestions. Christina Hudson had no right to be concerned about her at all. Perhaps her back yard wasn’t as immaculate as the Hudsons backyard, or the Wellers. Well, that was just too bad. For all who were unnecessarily concerned.

She took a final drag of her cigarette and threw it toward the Hudson’s fence. She hoped that Christina Hudson would interpret this gesture as an act of hostility.

Almost two weeks later Grace was driving home with her groceries when she recognized her daughter Alice’s car parked in her driveway. She could see Alice knocking on the front door of the house while an unfamiliar man sat behind her steering wheel.

As there was only room for one car in the driveway Grace parked in front of her house and then walked up to Alice, who was walking back to her car with the stranger seated behind the wheel.

Surely Alice must have realized that Grace couldn't be at home if her car wasn't in the driveway. Then she remembered that Alice might not have been able to check the garage.

'Alice! How was your holiday?'

'Wonderful, Mom. Didn't you receive my postcard?'

Grace had forgotten about Alice's postcard.

'Who's your friend, Alice?'

Alice smiled toward the man sitting patiently behind the wheel of her Datsun.

'This is Donald Sutton. He's just moved to Toronto from Halifax and he's just passed his driving exam.'

'Oh?'. Grace was suspicious about men in their forties who did not drive. 'Why don't you and your friend come in for tea?'

Alice nodded and then looked at Don Sutton. Don shook his head.

'No thank you, Mrs. Lennon. I have another errand I can run in this neighbourhood, so I'll drive by in an hour and pick you up, Alice.'

Alice nodded. Don was an easy-going man who had moved into the flat on top of hers. Don had moved to Toronto in order to salvage a long-distance relationship with a man named Jeremy Rowntree, whom she disliked. But Don was a perfect neighbour, courteous and often not home.

'Well then, Alice. Do join me and we'll catch up on each other.'

Alice walked alongside her mother into the house while Don gingerly reversed the car and backed out of the driveway.

'What happened to the girl who lived upstairs from you before - Kim?'

Alice made herself at home.

'She bought a house, with her new *paramour*. Kim used to go out with Don's roommate in Halifax, so there's the connection.'

‘How convenient.’

Grace carried her groceries into her kitchen and then sat down for a moment.

‘Tea or wine, Alice.’

Alice thought it over.

‘Wine. Why not, since Don will be driving?’

‘My feelings exactly, Alice.’

Grace poured two glasses of French red wine and delivered one to Alice who sat in one of the armchairs.

As Alice sipped her wine, Furballs pounced onto her lap and caused her to spill wine onto her slacks.

‘Furballs ! Don’t assume that my visitors want your company!’

Alice laughed.

‘It’s all right, Mom. You might notice that I’m not wearing black today.’

Grace didn’t recall her daughter ever wearing black. Today she wore khaki pants and a greenish-gray sweater. Alice did not want any of Grace’s cats to become attracted to her sweater.

‘I had a wonderful time in Jamaica, Mom. And I brought you a present.’

‘Oh?’, Grace rolled a cigarette.

‘Here it is’.

Alice retrieved a bottle of Jamaican amber rum from her hand bag and presented it to her mother. After Grace finished rolling the cigarette., she looked over the bottle of rum and smiled at Alice.

‘I’ve never been keen on rum, you know.’

‘I wanted to bring you something from Jamaica, Mom.’

Alice sipped her tea and frowned. Grace’s house was so much larger than her flat and far less cluttered. It must have been unnerving, Grace watched her daughter.

‘Well, Alice. Sometime the two of us can share it. And then we’ll talk.’

Grace lit her cigarette and exhaled away from Alice’s face.

‘Tiger! Leave Alice alone! Here!’

Grace opened her screen door, encouraging the cats to go outside. Only Mr. Stripes obliged, while the others formed a v-shaped pattern in the kitchen.

‘It’s too early for their dinner, damn it.’

Alice composed herself, and then addressed her mother.

'You seem healthy as a horse, Mom.'

'I am', Grace snorted.. 'My doctor can't find anything wrong with me. She lectures me about my smoking and suggests I change my diet and stop drinking but I ignore her. Doctors always say things like that.'

Alice nodded as Grace puffed on her cigarette.

'I had dinner with Nell and Frank recently, before my vacation.'

'Oh?', Grace exhaled

'They worry about your *mental* health.'

'I'm sure they do, Alice. Or rather, I'm sure they stopped wondering and simply labeled me insane years ago. Ordinary people don't understand misanthropy.'

'No, Mom. I guess they don't', Alice sipped her wine 'They think that you like cats more than people.'

'They're right', Grace laughed angrily. She could imagine Frank Gooding easily convincing her other daughter that ailourophiles were all mentally disturbed, just like they were in the movies..

Alice sipped her wine, agitatedly.

'They go much further than your admitted misanthropy, Mom. They think you are inclined toward violence. Even homicide.'

Grace drew at length on her cigarette.

'They think that I arranged Albert's death?'

'Yes.', Alice nodded softly.

Grace stood and poured two more glasses of wine.

'They could never accept that Albert wanted to die. He did, but I didn't help him. It was a freak hiking accident and no damn coroner turned up anything even suggesting that I could have pushed him.'

Alice looked at her mother before clearing her throat and speaking.

'I'm not suggesting anything of the sort, Mom'

'Sure you are, Alice.', Grace glared at her. 'You're mentioning the subject.'

'Because they were, damn it. Frank was threatening to have the case reopened.'



'Oh, *shit*. Doesn't that man have anything to do for a life?'

Alice took another long sip of her wine. She decided not to accept another glass even if her mother were to or insist on imbibing another.

'Look, Mom. I don't believe for one second that you killed Dad.. But.....if Frank does manage to get the case reopened, the police and their sycophants will be examining your mental health at that time and now at this time. I don't think you're remotely sick, although you've become far too mean-spirited for my taste. But even little things like outbursts at your neighbours could become inflated far beyond their importance. I hope for your sake that Frank's request is denied.'

'He has no evidence, Alice. There is no evidence *whatever* that I pushed Albert.'

Alice shook his head.

'Unfortunately, Mom, there are no witnesses to prove that you didn't. If he succeeds and gets a very ambitious lawyer, a lot of shit will definitely hit the fan.'

Grace butted out her cigarette and shook her head.

'I wish you hadn't told me about this, Alice. Why can't Frank Gooding just get a life. Why did Nell have to marry that nobody - that nothing. And he thinks *I'm* mean-spirited?'

Alice nodded.

'I've never liked him either. I *tolerate* him because he's married to Nell.'

Grace poured another glass of wine for herself as Alice vehemently shook her head. She could hear Don honking the car's horn from the driveway.

'I wrote Nell off a long time ago as well, Alice. If I were to die before her...and that's a very big if....she and her stupid husband will not receive one damn penny. Nothing deserves nothing.'

Grace heard Mr. Stripes attempting to open the screen door. It wasn't dinner time for at least a couple of hours so what were the cats complaining about?

'My ride is here, Mom. You take care of yourself now, and thank you for the wine.'

'Keep in touch, Alice. If you can find time, spy on Frank and Nell for me without being too obvious about

it.’.

Grace let Alice out and watched her walk to the car where Don sat innocently behind the wheel. She could see Don shake a finger at her daughter, mockingly.

‘Get back outside, Mr. Stripes. You still have a long time before supper time.’.

Mr. Stripes hissed at Grace as she took a long sip of her drink. She looked outside for a moment and realized that she should move her car back into her driveway, But she was on her third glass of wine and she didn’t feel like moving the car so she slammed the front door angrily. .If anybody were to knock on her door, she would simply not answer it..

‘More wine, Tina?’.

Caroline Weller treated herself to a refill and took Mrs. Hudson’s glass so that she could oblige her guest as well. Her husband and Dick Hudson were drinking beer to go with their barbecued chicken.

Beer for the men and wine for the ladies. That was the usual pattern when either the Wellers or the Hudsons entertained each other. A thunderstorm warning had been called off and the barbecue had not been canceled.

Dick Hudson lit his pipe after sipping his beer. He enjoyed the Wellers company although he didn’t feel that he had a lot to discuss with them. He knew that their son had left home abruptly and he had listened to his wife speculating as to why. He too had suspected Stephen Weller of being gay, but he certainly wasn’t about to broach the subject tonight.

‘That’s a different tobacco, Dick?’ , Bob inquired

Caroline Weller shuddered to herself. She hoped that Bob wasn’t suddenly going to discover the joys of pipe smoking

‘This one’s more aromatic than the other one’, Tina chipped in. ‘The other one drove me up the wall.’.

Dick puffed away contentedly. He knew that his wife didn’t really object to his pipe- smoking or she would have said something about it to him years ago .

‘So you’ve met our neighbours across the street?’, Caroline looked at Tina quizzically.

‘Yes’, Tina nodded enthusiastically. ‘Well, the boys, anyway. *They’re* quite friendly.’

‘Didn’t you suggest to Grace Lennon that she should hire one of the kids to trim her lawn properly?’

‘Oh yes’, Tina Hudson sipped her glass of wine. ‘But to no avail.’

‘I should think not’, Bob Weller cut in gruffly. ‘She delights in cutting her own lawn.’

‘Incompetently’, added Dick Hudson between puffs of his pipe

Bob shook his head, observing the unevenly trimmed hedge separating the Wellers’ house from Grace Lennon’s.

‘Pride can only take you so far on your own, she has to realize.’

‘Meaning’, Caroline lit a cigarette, ‘that she should have the courtesy to hire somebody who can do a better job of it.’

‘You’re referring to courtesy to her neighbours as well as to potential hired help?’

‘Exactly, Bob’, Caroline grinned at her husband.

‘Oh, blast’, Dick almost choked on his pipe

‘It’s that striped cat of hers. Mr. Stripes, or Tiger, or.....’

‘Or Nuisance’ Bob Weller cut Tina Hudson off.

‘They’re all nuisances.’, Caroline drew on her cigarette and exhaled with exasperation.

‘She should have all of her damn cats taken away from her’, Dick laid down the pipe and risen slowly to his feet. ‘She’s well past the point of controlling them.’

‘She’s past the point of a lot of other responsibilities’, Bob opened another beer for himself. ‘Do you want another, Dick?’

Dick Hudson shook his head.

‘I’m fed up with our neighbour and her damn cats. Oh, *look!*’

‘Jesus’, Caroline groaned.

Bob, Caroline, and Tina all whirled around to where Dick was directing their attention to the grass near a

tall patch of forsythia.

‘That cat is shitting on your property’, Tina gasped.

‘This is hardly the first such occasion, Tina.’, Caroline Weller assured her.

‘Well, I for one am not going to tolerate this any more.’.

Bob Weller suddenly chased after the striped cat, who barely glanced at the frantic human and ran toward the hedge which he leapt over effortlessly.

‘That was big of you, Bob’, Dick Hudson laughed.

‘It’s not funny, Dick. I’m sick of it...and of her.’.

‘So am I’, Dick reassured Bob.

‘Does she have any other children besides her lesbian daughter?’, Caroline drew on her cigarette and then sipped her wine.

‘I don’t think so’, Dick shook his head.

‘I think there is *another* son or daughter. I’m afraid I can’t remember which’, Tina tried to remember.

‘But I think the dykey-looking daughter is the only one she’s kept in touch with.’.

‘Aha’, Bob smirked.

‘Mrs. Lennon seems quite healthy.’.

‘You mean, Mrs. Loony is physically healthy, Tina’ Caroline sniffed as the others laughed.

‘I suppose when she finally does croak the lesbian daughter will inherit the house.’. Dick wasn’t exactly posing the question

‘Unless the cats do’, Caroline laughed as she stubbed out her cigarette.

‘The cats already own that house, my dear. And they’ve staked out claims to ours too’, Bob looked at Dick and Tina as if daring them to forge some sort of solution.

‘I don’t know what can be done’, Dick’s tone became grimly forbidding. ‘I hope something that’s been subliminally wrong with her suddenly flares up and then that will be the end of her.’.

‘You don’t really mean that!’. Tina Hudson gasped at her husband.

When he didn't answer she realized that her husband was being dead serious.

'Can I have more wine, Caroline?'

Caroline dutifully poured another glass for Tina.

'Keep your voices *down*, everybody.'

She pointed through the hedge where the Wellers and Hudson's could now distinguish Grace Lennon's silhouette stalking her back yard. The ember from Grace's cigarette glowed in the dark as she combed her side of the hedge and then peered over into the Hudson's back yard.

'Mr. Stripes? Are you over visiting the Hudsons? I told you never to go there again. The Hudsons are not nice people, Mr. Stripes. They don't appreciate cats.'

'Jesus', Dick Hudson shuddered.

'I'll bet she's been outside all along, Dick. I'll bet she's heard every word.'

'Good'., Bob Weller glared at Tina. 'Then maybe she'll take a hint. Maybe Mrs. Lunatic will finally up and get it.'

'*Shut up!*' Caroline signaled the others to kill their voices.

'Ah, there you are Mr. Stripes. Stay away from the Hudsons and the Wellers, do you hear me. They're not worth the trouble'

Grace carried Mr. Stripes into the house and took a final drag of her cigarette Then she decided to reward her cats with bowls full of kibble. After watching her cats eat up she then finished her glass of wine and let herself fall into a deep sleep, marked by pleasant dreams in which Mr. Stripes and Tiger ambushed both the Wellers and the Hudsons, took bites out of their individual fleshs and then abandoned the discarded humans. Then the cats literally excused themselves from the unappetizing humans, leaving them for the birds and the vultures to finish eating and then spit out..



Keith Moore poured another two martinis for himself and Philip and the two men clicked their glasses .Keith Moore Antiques, located down on Queen St. West. was doing very good business and garnering excellent reviews .The reviews were at least as pleasing to Keith as the revenue. The antique business was all about *taste*-one either had it or else one didn't.

And Philip had made such wonderful progress with the garden. Even the hens and chickens looked fabulous, Keith smiled. Buying the house in Riverdale and then inviting Philip to move in had been a good idea after all. The store and the profits made from renting out the apartment upstairs from the store had made the mortgage possible; and Philip's landscaping skills were nearly as pleasing as his body .Even though Philip did always complain about having to do everything by himself.

:To a perfect day, my dear.'

'Cheers, Keith. The weather has been perfect .Not so damn humid so that I couldn't put in a good five hours in the garden.'

'No truly annoying customers and no cranky telephone calls.'

'The only incident spoiling our perfect day was having to deal with Judith Lester.'

'Oh?', Keith frowned at the mention of their neighbour's name.

'It seems that Beauregard upset *Artemis*.'

Keith sipped his drink and walked over to the window facing out toward Miss Judith Lester's home.

'I'm sure she as usual has it all backwards. I'm sure that pint-sized tiger upset poor Beauregard.'

'Who knows. Keith. Animals have their own codes that are much weirder than our own.'

'Much stupider, Philip. So, what does our more-than-slightly anti-social neighbour want us to do about the dog problem.'

'Oh, I'm sure she wants us to have the beast put down. I did bite my tongue with her.'

Keith chortled.

'Probably the best tactic, Philip .Here's to Beauregard.'

They clucked glasses and downed their martinis. Prissy and humour-deficient neighbours were hardly about to spoil the remainder of their wonderfully perfect summer evening. They were invited for a dinner party with neighbours who were cheerfully as social as Judith Lester was chronically anti-social. And they weren't expected at Bryan and David's for at least two hours, which allowed Keith and Philip ample time for some sexy fun and games. before taking Beauregard out for his early evening run in the nearby park.

'Cheers.'

Keith and Philip, their hosts Bryan and David, and additional dinner guests Kate and Melanie all clicked their wine glasses as they sat down at the dinner table .Bryan and David not only were great cooks, they had the best Tupperware.

'Well, Philip:, Bryan Davis chirped .'I saw your ex's movie the other day.'

Philip stiffened. .His almost-famous ex was a sore subject among his new friends.

'Too pretentious by far. Don't you agree, Melanie and Kate?'

The two sapphists shook their heads.

'I fell asleep", Melanie Richards informed the party curtly .Her partner Kate Barfireld began to pose a counter-argument, but then decided that it would be pointless to do so

Philip hoped this subject would quickly exhaust itself His breakup with the filmmaker, Jack Green, had been acrimonious. Jack was a workaholic, always by himself at the cottage and sending for Philip exclusively at Jack's convenience. But, Philip wished Jack nothing but the best with regards to his career.

'Leave Philip alone. He's had a rough day.', Keith sternly admonished all the others'.

'Oh?'

David Evans was all ears.

'Our Beauregard apparently upset Miss Judith Lester's cat.'

Kate Barfield snorted.

' *Artemis* pees in our garden I've complained to that woman and to absolutely no avail.'



'Useful information, Kate.'

'You mean *ammunition*, Philip.' Keith finished his glass of wine and helped himself to another. 'Does anybody here know the real poop-scoop on Judith Lester?'

'Like what is *she* doing in our friendly and cheerfully gay neighbourhood?'. Bryan poured more wine for the other guests.

'Well, she did live here before any of us did.. I just assume she's an old-fashioned spinster'', his partner David snorted

'She teaches at York University, doesn't she?', Melanie asked Kate.

Kate nodded. 'She's the chairperson of the Film Department, for Christ's sake.'. Kate herself held a contract position in the burgeoning Communications Department.

'No!', Keith's jaw dropped. 'Then we should invite her to dinner and see what she thinks of Jack Green's new epic.'

'Cheers.'. Philip glared at Keith.

'Is she a member of the church?', Melanie seriously wondered.

'Who knows?', Bryan folded his arms after finishing his Caesar salad.

'She drives a nice cherry-red Oldsmobile and . that's a nicer car than any of ours,', David remarked .'But I've never seen any other cars in her driveway.'

'Where does she drive her car *to*.? That's what we want to know.', Melanie' smile was an icy one.

'I suspect she was once in love'', Keith also finished his salad.

'A lot of people never quite recover from bad relationships, you know. Judith Lester just *might* be one of those people.'

Philip looked at everybody with exasperation.

'I suspect you're all out to lunch about Miss Judith Lester. I suspect she's asexual and was born wealthy and is just pissing her inheritance away. I can tell that she drinks .Just take a look at her recycling box.'

'And how is your tenant, Keith?'

Bryan and David had once seen the young man renting the apartment upstairs from Keith's store. Keith could

tell that they fancied young George.

‘George is fine .He’s *weird*, but he’s reliable.. Mind you, he told me that he’s having a dry spell with his music.’.

‘What other skills does he possess?, Philip’s tone was not sarcastic.

‘He told me he occasionally works for a small landscaping company.’.

‘I could use another pair of hands in the garden, Keith. I could offer him a few days work.’.

Keith frowned for a moment, and then smiled. Philip would pay George who would then be certain to pay Keith. All goes around that comes around.

‘Why not indeed, Philip. I can talk to him about this possibility tomorrow.’.

‘Cheers.’.

Everybody tipped their glasses as they now savored the delicious casserole.

The pleasant seasonal temperatures gave way to a prolonged heat wave that made extended working hours uncomfortable and therefore undesirable.. Philip would instruct George on the fine details and then let the younger man work at his own pace.

George was a good worker. He hadn’t been lying to Keith about his landscape experience. His punk wardrobe and Mohawk haircut was almost an anachronism in Riverdale; but Philip didn’t mind. He knew Bryan and David would needle him about hens and chickens; but the extra pair of hands was well worth the eight dollars an hour Keith had agreed on as a wage for the help.

And George truly did have a way with Beuregard. Probably the kid had been around dogs when he had been a boy and had not lost any of this rapport. George looked forward to walking the dog and scooping up all of his droppings; and Philip was pleased to have somebody else taking care of this business.

For the first two days of the heat wave; Philip and George had survived by imbibing bottled water and fruit juices. But on the third day, Philip offered George a cold beer.

'No thank you, Philip. I don't drink alcohol.'

Philip was surprised by the young man's righteous tone. It wasn't as if George was simply declining a drink at this moment- it was as if he resented Philip for even making him such an offer.

'Did you used to drink?'

George nodded sheepishly.

'In my teens. I drank all the time and took drugs. Now I don't touch any of that shit. I'm also vegetarian'.

Philip wondered whether George still indulged in any form of sexual behavior. Keith had been certain that his tenant was gay; and Philip had not seen any reason to believe otherwise.

'I wouldn't mind a glass of cranberry juice please, if you still have any.'

Philip stared at George for a second, then walked into the kitchen to retrieve the juice and the beer. George was doing a good job in the garden; but any desire to keep the kid around had disappeared. Philip had never been much of a drinker or substance user and he had been practically monogamous ever since moving in with Keith. But he had no time whatsoever for smugly moral little punks.

George couldn't mind middle-class values *too* much. Philip certainly hadn't noticed the kid being reluctant to do the work and then accept cash payment at the end of the day. Philip decided that he would ask George to sign a receipt in a couple of days after completing his work period. Even if the kid was more than likely a participant in the underground economy; why should he not be able to declare the expenses himself.

'Do you have any music gigs booked for next week, George?'

George shook his head. He instinctively understood that Philip wouldn't need his help for the upcoming week.

.For the remainder of the week the two men barely acknowledged each other, except for Philip's specific instructions. As the heat wave continued Philip would enjoy a beer during the mid-afternoon break while George either drank cranberry juice or bottled water. One day Philip invited his friends Bryan and David over for cocktails. The three men leisurely imbibed martinis while George silently worked. George knew that Bryan in particular fancied him but he certainly wasn't attracted to Bryan or David or even Philip. And he considered Keith Moore to be extremely unattractive.

.Sex was no longer at all enjoyable for him so he had no problem adhering to a strict moral code. No booze, no drugs, no meat, and no sex. Sex for him had always been just too damn messy and too consumptive. Sex for its own sake was for middle-class gay men who either loathed or else *fetishized* working-class men and punks and who almost uniformly hated women

‘Thank you, George. I think I can take care of the garden by myself for the rest of the summer; but you could have a good future in landscaping if you stick to it. Oh, and could you please sign this receipt on your way out.? ’.

George stared at Philip angrily for a moment, and then silently complied.

Beauregard followed George as he walked out the front door onto Simpson Avenue. George would have loved to have claimed the dog; but with Keith as his landlord this would have been an improbable kidnapping. He wanted to make enough money for the remainder of the month so that he could move out of his overpriced and undersized apartment on top of Keith’s antique store.

As he walked away from Philip and Keith’s house toward the street car stop on Broadview; George became aware of a fiftyish woman who was approaching him from the house almost directly across the street from the one that he had been working at.

‘Keith and Philip’s garden is looking wonderful, young man. Perhaps you might be able to work for me next week. Unless of course my illustrious neighbours still require your services.’.

George looked at the woman for a second and then made the quick decision that he should take her up on her job offer. The musicians he had been working with were all doing other jobs for money; so he really didn’t have any alternatives.

Judith Lester’s garden was far less ornamental than Philip and Keith’s but, in its own way, almost as demanding. Its relative simplicity required precision around the edges. George wasn’t surprised to learn that his duties included hedge-clipping and lawn-mowing in addition to the maintenance of the actual garden.

Judith was pleasantly distant except at morning and afternoon breaks .. Lunch break was non-existent- clearly George was expected to eat a hearty big breakfast before arriving at work.

George noticed that the tea preparation ritual in the afternoon differed from its morning counterpart .In the morning Judith steeped both hers and his in the same pot but in the afternoon she simply poured him a cup from the kettle .He could tell that her afternoon tea was blueberry tea -blended with Grand Marnier or some similar liqueur. He was grateful that she did not offer any of her personal blend to the hired help.

And he found that he could work predominantly by himself- that Judith trusted him to find assignments while she spent most of her days preparing her next year's curriculum and courses. On one occasion, she asked him what were his recreational activities and when he told her he was a punk musician Judith's response fell somewhere between a smile and a shiver. But he felt that she secretly approved- possibly because she was speculating that cacophonous hard-core music might be absolute anathema to her genteel and rather conservative neighbours.

On the Wednesday, George was spotted by Philip who was now working in his garden on his own. Philip was drinking beer with his neighbours whose names George had forgotten. He knew they were gossiping about either himself or his current employer or whatever possible combinations; but he really didn't care all that much what they said behind his back.

He still couldn't afford to move out of the apartment above Keith's antique store, so antagonizing the boyfriend was hardly the brightest of ideas.

On the Friday Judith made an extra cup of tea for George at the end of the day and inquired as to whether he could also work the next week. George had no practical reason to decline her offer.

The next Tuesday, during the afternoon tea break, George wondered whether Judith had excessively mixed in the blueberry component of her tea recipe. She had become unusually loquacious, testing him as to what did he *really* think of her male neighbours.

George pondered this request for a moment and then opined that Keith and Philip perhaps had Riverdale confused with Rosedale.

Judith snorted as she sipped her special tea.

'That's an eloquent summation, George. And that dog of their is always making trouble for Artemis.'

Artemis, who had been purring on a sofa, overheard the word 'dog' and became intensely alert.

'I'm a cat person and they are dog people', Judith sipped more tea. George understood this to mean that east

was east and west was west He himself preferred dogs to cats. They were more fun to play with.

‘I’ve read that the punks in Kensington Market and on Queen West don’t like the middle-class gay people in neighbourhoods such as Church -Wellesley and Riverdale very much.’.

George decided not to swallow the bait.

‘I can’t pretend to speak for anybody besides myself; but I can do without people of whatever sexual preference or any other identification who don’t really think about anything besides their houses and gardens and their material possessions .And your neighbours Keith and Philip, as well as their friends down the street whose names I’ve forgotten, can’t seem to think of any situation without having to sexualize it. It’s stupid addictive behaviour.’..

‘Are you *religious*, George?’’, Judith lit a cigarette for herself.

‘I am a pagan. I used to be an atheist but now I’m a pagan.’.

‘I see.’, Judith smiled as she exhaled. ‘I find of course that dialectical materialists do tend to become diabolical materialists.’.

George laughed, but nervously. Was she referring to her male neighbours or to himself?

‘I really should get back to work, Ms. Lester. Thank you for the tea and the conversation.’.

Judith watched him as he stood to return outdoors. George was more than welcome. She was glad that she could at least offer the young man *something*.

Two days later, on Thursday afternoon, a summer thunderstorm suddenly materialized and afternoon tea break was announced earlier than usually. As George gratefully accepted Judith’s invitation to take an early break for himself; he stopped dead in his tracks the exact second he opened the screen door and let himself into the living room.

‘Oh, George. This is my sister -Peggy’.

*Sister?* More like absolutely *identical* twin!

Peggy Lester grinned at her sister’s gardener as she watched a soap opera that Judith was clearly straining to

ignore.

‘Peggy’s visiting from California..’.

Peggy said nothing as she sat in front of the television. One of the prime characters of her soap opera had been caught with his pants down.

‘I always knew Ashley would get wise about Adam sooner or later. Didn’t you Judith?’.

Judith snorted contemptuously as she poured her afternoon tea.

‘I don’t need to watch the afternoon delights in order to predict their narrative trajectories, Peggy. The old prime-time soaps were *much* more interesting. The nuclear family was fragile; while in the afternoon soaps the nuclear family prevails.’.

‘Oh, bullshit.’, Peggy walked over to the refrigerator during the commercial and returned with a beer.

As the rain began to fall harder, Judith finally closed the screen window to the back yard. George watched the thunderstorm from the front window. He watched a bolt of lightning narrowly miss the chimney of Keith and Philip’s house.

Then he registered a young man running into Keith and Philip’s garage from the back yard. The young man who was physically and facially a dead ringer for himself quickly activated the garage door and let himself in.

Either Keith and Philip were both out for the afternoon; or else the hired help was not welcome inside the house regardless of the weather.

George stared out the window for an extended moment. Although the youth was taking shelter in the garage George could still look intently at his spitting image.

Where had *he* come from and how had his former employers managed to retain *him*?

‘Excuse me’

George abruptly ran to the washroom and bolted the door from the inside .He unzipped his fly and began to masturbate.

‘George? Are you all right?’, Judith called after him.

‘Oh for God’s sake Judith! He couldn’t be any finer.’.

Peggy clutched her beer bottle as she and Judith lit cigarettes. Judith sipped her tea and then nodded

agreement with her sister. She couldn't really explain *why*; but she felt a relief that young George was not an asexual person.

“To George.”, Peggy and Judith tipped their respective drinks and smiled at each other as discreetly as possible.



Nicholas Turnbull let himself in by the unlocked front door of his family's house in Don Mills at a few minutes before six o'clock.

"You're late, Nick. Dinner's almost ready."

His Dad scowled at him while his Mom looked after her final dinner arrangements.

Then Dad noticed the scrawny little cat that Nick was holding in his arms.

"Why have you brought this animal home with you?"

"Paul and I found it. He's starving. Can we keep him here?"

James Turnbull paced the floor angrily as Jean Turnbull carried the dinner contents into the dining room.

"And why can't your friend Paul look after this animal?"

"Paul already has cats. Doesn't he?"

Nick nodded enthusiastically.

"Paul's cats can barely tolerate each other - let alone a newcomer, Can I keep him, Mom?"

"And who's going to look after him - like pay for his food and his veterinary bills?"

Jean Turnbull finished carrying in the perfunctory dinner components and sat down at the head of the table.

"I don't see any problem with having a cat, Jim. I can feed him and play with him - or her - during the days."

Something about her tone effectively forced her husband to back down.

"Is he fixed, son?"

Nick stared at his Dad briefly, then address his Mom.

'Of course he's fixed. His name is Plato.'

Jean laughed at the name.

'There's tuna fish in the bottom of the refrigerator, Nick. Put a big full bowl of tuna out for our new family member. And pour him a clean bowl of water.' ..

'It's quarter to six, Paul. I have to go home now.'

'Says who, Nick?'

Paul held onto Nick's nipples in a manner suggesting that he was in no hurry to let his friend make it home in time for dinner

'Cut it out, Paul. My parents will give me shit.'

'No they won't, silly. Your Mom probably knows everything there is to know about our relationship.'

Nick pulled away from Paul and quickly threw his shirt on over his jeans.

'She does not, Paul. She's always asking me if I know any girls.'

Paul Stanley snorted contemptuously.

'Oh, she wants you to go to the school dance. Well, why don't you ask Linda?'

'Yeah, right.' Paul's sister Linda was a working girl .

'I'll let you run home to Mom and Dad, Nicholas. On condition that I can see you tomorrow.'

'It's a deal, Paul. If the weather's nice, maybe we can do something outdoors.'

'Sure. I know a very sexy tunnel underneath the bridge over the parkway.'

Nick tried to scold his friend that such activities were unlikely. But he was hardly very convincing.

After Jean had finished reading the morning newspaper, she stood and then walked in the direction of the freezer where she kept her cigarettes. She didn't usually smoke by herself - she only smoked socially after a few drinks and on rare occasions. But now she wanted a cigarette.

Jean returned to her armchair, lit the cigarette, and then exhaled toward the west wall of the TV room. If either Jim or Nick made any comment about her smoking; she would tell them that she wished to avoid afternoon snacks that were causing her to gain weight. She knew that Nick knew where she kept her smokes and that he helped himself more than occasionally; but she pretended not to notice. In the next year Nick would be old enough to legally smoke anyway. Jean also knew damn well that her son smoked marijuana and she was not particularly concerned as long as he stuck to pot and kept his grades up.

She took another puff and exhaled toward the wall, appreciating the smoke pattern that was beginning to develop. In a few years Nick would be moving out - hopefully enrolled in a quality university and quite likely living in residence. Then she might seriously try to find some form of employment. Jean enjoyed the amount of leisure time that allowed her to read voraciously; but she felt that she needed to rejoin the work force or else risk stagnation. She had once been an aspiring actress, but that now seemed like more than a lifetime ago.

She heard a knocking at the front door. Surely Jim hadn't forgotten his keys? She looked at her watch and decided that it was still far too early for Jim to be coming home

And it was absurdly early for the caller to be Nick. Nick never came straight home after school. He always went over to Paul's house and then they did whatever they did together. She felt certain that her son and his friend Paul had girlfriends.

But who could her caller be? She couldn't think of any outstanding bills that needed to be dealt

with in person. Jean butted out her cigarette and then walked toward the front door. Probably somebody had the wrong address; or looking for directions to who knows and who cares where.

She greeted her next-door neighbour, who needed to borrow measuring tape. Jean disliked Steve Furlong. Why couldn't the man go buy his own measuring tape down at the hardware store at the mall? But she realized that lending Mr. Furlong the tape would be the easiest course of action. Just as long as he returned it quickly and preferably to her husband rather than to her.

It was now almost October and therefore time to do some necessary end-of-season gardening maintenance. Jean slipped into her wind-breaker and retrieved the appropriate tools from the garage.

As she tidied up the beds and cursed the spots that Plato had marked for himself; she became aware that Lynne Furlong was also attending to her late September gardening duties. She decided to say hello to her neighbour. The pair of them had barely spoken since that initial dinner party where both Lynne and her husband Steve had imbibed far too much alcohol.

'How are you, Joan?'

'It's Jean. I could be doing a lot worse, I suppose.'

'I'm pretty well finished with the garden. Would you like to come over for tea?'

Lynne Furlong took a puff of her cigarette and then stepped on it very thoroughly

.Jean considered this invitation. She felt more than certain that tea referred to blueberry tea and it was only two o'clock in the afternoon. But her neighbour wished to say something to her and therefore feigning another duty would not be the best of tactics.

'Thanks, Lynne. I'll finish up with our garden and then I'll come right over'

Linda Stanley sat at the Stanleys' kitchen table, drinking a beer and smoking a cigarette.

'Can I have one, sis?'

Paul stood beside his sister as Nick's eyes also begged.

'No. Buy your own.'

'That's easier said than done', Paul retorted to his sister who ignored him. Her eyes appeared glassy, Nick remarked to himself Paul had informed him that his sister was a junkie.

'You guys are almost sixteen, for fuck sakes. You're almost sixteen, right Nick?'

Nick nodded. At dinner he was planning to broach the subject of driving lessons with his father.

'Here. Help yourselves to a smoke each. But I don't have any more beer.'

Linda stood and left the two boys alone. Her sneer made it obvious to Nick that Paul's sister considered the pair of them to be sissy boy cocksuckers..

Paul lit two cigarettes and passed one to Nick.

'Your Mom doesn't drive?'

'She drives, but she doesn't have her own car.'

'Oh.'. Paul drew on his smoke and exhaled. 'Well,, good luck trying to get driving lessons from your Dad.'

Jean sat patiently with Plato, simultaneously making the cat comfortable and ignoring its requests for its dinner Plato was a well - broken housecat who spent most of the days and nights outdoors, hunting. Jean was relieved that Nick had brought home a male cat which was not inclined towards bringing back any foul presents for its humans to admire and then devour.

She recognized her husband's keys opening the front door.

‘Jean? Are you home?’.

She allowed him to enter the living room where she held the cat in her arms before releasing him.

‘How was your day. Jim?’

‘Good. How about yours?’.

Jean shrugged.

‘Who was your visitor, dear?’.

Jean was unprepared for her husband’s question but she regained her bearing.

‘I’ve been by myself all day. I smoked a cigarette.’.

‘Oh?’.

‘I smoke occasionally when I’m prematurely hungry This isn’t a shocking new development, Jim.

Two or three a week won’t give me cancer.’.

She sat down again in her armchair.

‘Nick will be almost late, as usual.’.

‘I wish things would change with Nick. I don’t like that friend of his. I don’t like him at all.’.

‘He’s not evil, Jim. I agree he has a bad attitude to school; but *Nick’s* marks are consistent.’.

Jim nodded. Nick’s grades were consistently average. Surely his wife had higher standards?

‘I like not having Nick home until dinner sometimes, Jim.’

‘What do you mean?’.

Jean walked over to her husband, kissed him, and rubbed her legs against his.

‘I think you know what I mean, Jim.’.

Jim backed away from Jean. He sat down in the armchair adjacent to the one she had been sitting

in.

‘I don’t think this is a good time, Jean.’.

She stood and walked to the kitchen. She opened the liquor cabinet.

‘Then let’s at least have a drink together before dinner. Is *that* okay?’.

‘Yes! Yes! *Harder!*’.

Paul exhorted Nick as Nick aggressively sucked on the shaft of his hardened red cock. He wasn’t going to cum just yet; but he didn’t want to lose any momentum.

He wasn’t prepared for Nick’s sudden request.

‘I want you to fuck me, Paul. I’m ready for you.’.

Nick threw off his jeans and turned around so his ass was sticking out in front of Paul’s cock. Nick spread his hands out against the corner wall and held position.

‘Let me get the lube, Nick. You have to be loose.’.

‘Get it, Paul. *Now*. I want you in me.’.

Paul retrieved the lubricant and began playing with Nick’s ass. He really wanted to stay hard for as long as possible. He could wait to cum indefinitely; although Nick would eventually have to go home to the family dinner.

The roast beef was just perfect, Paul informed his mother who was grateful for the compliment. Nick noticed that his parents were drinking red wine at dinner, which was unusual. Milk or ginger-ale or the occasional beer was more typical.

‘Your father has some wonderful news, Nicholas.’.

‘I’m being promoted. I’ll be traveling more .I’ll be getting a significant raise.’.

‘Congratulations, Dad.’.

Nick smiled. He knew his mother would be pleased because she would now have access to the car

whenever Dad was on the road.

‘We’re going to have a party, Nick.’, Jean sipped from her glass of wine.

‘And we want you to be there. Next Saturday night, so please don’t make any plans.’.

Nick frowned. He really didn’t feel any great need to socialize with his parents’ friends. He didn’t have a lot to say to any of them.

‘You can be bartender, Nicholas.’.

Nick smiled in relief. Bartending would spare him from having to say anything to any of the guests besides ‘a refill, sir or madam?’.

‘I’ll keep the night open’’, Nick promised

‘Don’t invite the Furlongs. Please, Jim.’.

‘Don’t worry, Jean. The Furlongs never even crossed my mind.’.

‘Mr---wow-ow’.

Plato walked into the dining room and angrily addressed Jean.

Jean flushed for a second, then remembered that she hadn’t put out the cat’s dinner.

‘There’s a tin of Whiskas in the fridge, Nick. Can you please look after Plato’s dinner?’.

Nick kept himself occupied as a bartender, realizing that later on in the evening he would be able to sneak some wine for himself. He appreciated not having to really speak to any of his parents’ guests; and he imagined himself enjoying this role when he was living by himself in his own house or apartment.

*This* was how to be simultaneously social and anti-social, he noted to himself. He observed that all



of the men, with the exception of the one talking to his mother, were unattractive and indifferently dressed. The women, in contrast, all looked like they were decked out for the opera rather than some professional associate's house party.

The expensively-dressed gentleman had been talking to his mother for quite some time, he realized. The man, whose name was Roger, offered his mother a cigarette from a very impressive gold case. She gratefully accepted his offer and continued to chat away with Roger, ignoring her guests. His Dad was too preoccupied with being congratulated to register anything off-balance or unusual.

'Cheers'.

Nick toasted his father and his mother and the well-dressed man with the case and then himself. He poured himself a sparkling glass of wine and smiled at all those who paid not the slightest attention to him.

On Saturday morning Nick fixed himself an early breakfast so that he and Paul could get off to an early start. They had planned to go hiking in a ravine in which Paul's sister Linda would be driving them to. Linda would be dropping the two boys off at eleven-thirty and then picking them up again at five-thirty.

As he finished cleaning his teeth he overheard his parents talking in the hallway.

'I want to go shopping with Wendy so yes, Jim, I would like to use the car unless you *absolutely* need it yourself.'

Dad mulled this request over.

'I'm not sure, Jean. I do plan to play a round of golf with Al today.'

'Well. Then surely you can carry your clubs in the trunk of Al's fucking car !'.

Then his mother angrily stomped down the staircase before her husband could respond to her face.

'I'll call Al and ask him if he can pick me up, okay?. Please ,Jean. Watch your language.'

Nick heard his mother snort audibly as he decided that *now* was the right time for him to leave.

He walked stealthily down the staircase, hoping not to draw attention to himself. However, in the process he narrowly avoided tripping over Plato who was walking up the opposite side of the staircase.

'What the.....Oh. Where are you going, Nicholas?'

'Hiking with Paul.', he answered her as nonchalantly as possible.

'Every day. Every day you're doing something with Paul. You're almost sixteen, Nick. Don't you know any *girls*?'

'Of course I do, Mom. I'll be home for dinner. Have a good day.'

Nick left the house without any further ado. After he closed the door firmly behind him, he could hear his mother again demanding to use the car for the day .He felt glad that he was not in her shoes at this particular moment in time.

As late September gave way to early and then mid-October; Paul began to seem more and more distant from everybody whom he was interacting. Often he was absent from school; and, when Nick called on him to see how he was doing, he would come to the door in a daze. His eyes were glassy and his movements lethargic and finally Nick decided to confront his friend.

'Are you using heroin. Please don't bullshit me.'

Paul nodded,

'I take it occasionally. My sister's in rehab. She got really pissed off at me for using.'

'She's not the only person annoyed at you, Paul. You've got to smarten up before you get in over your head.'

'Fuck off, Nick. You have no idea what you're talking about. You've never been there, so you can't talk.'

Nick flushed. He could so talk. He told his best friend unequivocally that he would have to stop using heroin or else he could no longer be his friend.

'No, Paul. I've never been there and I won't go there. Get it?'

Nick then turned abruptly and walked away from Paul Stanley's house. When he reached the first block at which he normally turned right in order to continue walking home; he almost turned back.

He hadn't been supportive. He'd been judgmental, just as Paul had accused him of having been.

But it was now too late for him to go back there. Paul no longer wished to see him.

Jean drove slowly along the side streets of Moore Park, avoiding the Don Valley Parkway. She had been drinking and she needed to think as she drove. She was strongly leaning toward ending her affair with Roger as he was insisting on a greater commitment from her and she did not feel that she could offer him anything that she wasn't already offering him. He was more emotionally involved with her than she was with him. She realized all too clearly that this same dynamic had also set dampened the two other affairs she had engaged in during her marriage to Jim. She did not feel at all guilty about this liaison - she wouldn't have even if she hadn't been convinced that Jim was enjoying the company of call girls on his many cross-country working vacations.

No, she had to tell Roger that their affair had run its course. She did not wish at all to hurt his feelings but she now knew that seeing him again would be only continuing something that had to stop

*Shit*, Jean cursed out loud as she hit a prematurely red light at a meaningless intersection..

*Something* had to change between herself and Jim. Their sex life had become almost non-existent and

they no longer had any mutually enjoyable recreational activities that they could enjoy together.

Jean turned onto Lawrence and then drove straight up until Underhill Drive where she then turned left to officially enter the subdivision in which the Turnbells lived. As she approached the driveway; she registered a small animal lying on the middle of the road in front of the house.

She slammed on the brakes and scrambled out of the car

.Her worst fears were confirmed. Plato lay motionless on his right side, far beyond the hope of any possible resuscitation or revival.

As Jean bent over to retrieve the dead cat's body and take it into the house she became aware of Steve Furlong rushing out to intercept her.

She glared at her frantic neighbour.

'It was my fault. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I couldn't hit the brakes in time. Do you understand ? I couldn't see him on the road.'

'Because you weren't looking where you were driving , you asshole!', Jean screamed at Steve Furlong. 'Just get out of my sight! Okay!'

The intoxicated man took the hint and the opportunity to run back into his house where Jean would not follow him. She had been a guest on one occasion at the Furling house and she already knew too many details about their marriage.

She poured herself a shot of Scotch, lit a cigarette, and then dialed the veterinarian. She wanted Plato's dead body to be far away from the house by the time Nick returned from wherever he had gone *without* his friend Paul.

The school year passed on uneventfully and Nick's grades improved. He was actually a strong candidate for an end-of-the-year Proficiency Reward as long as he didn't become either sick or distracted.

Jean had gone on a tropical holiday with Jim during December and they had talked at length about

their marriage and how they might attempt to revitalize it. They vowed to go to plays together, as theatre was a mutual interest that had been practically abandoned for various reasons.

Once a week Jean took the car and enjoyed more experimental plays and, in the process, became social friends with a gay director named Brent. She began to realize that her son Nick simply wasn't sexually interested in girls and she no longer badgered him about this. She was relieved that Nick had broken off with Paul for whatever unspoken reason.

Nick rarely went out any more, except to movies. Jim and Jean invited him to plays but he wasn't interested. Nick had strongly developed a film buff's disdain for the theatre.

On the Saturday evening of Nick's sixteenth birthday, his parents intended to surprise him and treat him to a movie of his choice. They sat on the sofa together, holding hands as Nick set about his evening chores. Jean drank wine while Jim restricted himself to coffee as he planned to be the driver.

'You have the keys in your purse don't you, Jean?' ..She had used the car earlier in the afternoon.

'I think they're still there, Jim.'

'Well, we'll deal with this when it's time to leave.'

They sat and watched the evening news. Suddenly, their attention was diverted by the sound of a car starting up and then pulling out of a driveway at a highly advanced speed limit.

Jim and Jean stared at one another. The Furlongs had mercifully moved out and the new neighbours were a quietly pleasant couple of avid gardeners.

'Nick?'

There was no answer. Jim and Jean rushed to the driveway where their car was parked no longer. The car was no longer in either the garage or the driveway; and their son was no longer home.

'Damn it to hell!'. Jim rushed toward the kitchen phone, panting furiously.

Jean sat down in her favourite armchair and thoughtfully sipped her wine. This had been her son's birthday. And her son was now legally old enough to drive a car.

**UNCLE** copyright Andrew James Paterson, 1998

Jonathan King lethargically read the Globe and Mail as he sat uncomfortably on the bus to Midland. The Arts section on this Saturday morning didn't have a lot to offer him- nobody was being either provocative or insightful. Still, the newspaper was fulfilling its primary function - it was killing time.

He had long stopped looking at scenery on this ride because there wasn't any scenery. There weren't any rock formations that made him feel like there was somebody upstairs designing the landscape. There were farms and cows - functional rather than dangerously exotic animals. And he could see approaching high-rises as he finished reading the obituary page before abandoning his newspaper.

He checked his luggage under the seat. He had bought some Second Cup flavoured teas for his parents, some beer for his older brother Ben and his wife Gillian, and a drawing book for his nephew Matthew. Tomorrow was Matthew's sixth birthday and the boy had shown an interest in art. Uncle Jonathan appreciated this as an interest for its own sake and because buying presents for his nephew didn't require too much head-scratching. Matthew likes art, he mused to himself. Too bad he hasn't shown any interest in music. But then, his parents have abominable taste in music. This might, unfortunately, quickly establish a lack of interest in music for the boy.

Jonathan was taking the bus to Midland for Matthew's birthday. He would stay at his parents house

and then they would drive to Ben and Gillian's for the birthday dinner. He wouldn't have to spend too much time with his brother and sister-in-law which was fine by him. The time spent with his own parents might go easily and might be stressful, he couldn't predict these visits any more. They were about all the things left unsaid as much as they were about the conversation.

He straightened up his seat and tightened up his coat. The bus was pulling into Midland and the station was only minutes away.

'What's new with you. Jonathan?'

Roy King beamed at his son as Helen King prepared a small fruit salad.

'We'd better not eat too much before Ben and Gillian's, dear.'

Helen smiled at her husband as she offered the fruit salad to her son. Ben and Gillian tended to overcook, in all senses of the verb.

Jonathan thanked his mother for the fruit salad.

'I've been concentrating on my writing, sending some stories out to publishers.'

'Any interest?'

He frowned at his mother. Surely she knew by now that there was a lengthy process involved? Surely she knew that he would have informed them by now if any of his work was to be published?

'And you still work at your friend's bookstore? Do you?'

Jonathan nodded to his father. He would probably be working at his friend Patrick's store until either he himself died or the store went out of business. The store was an institution and so was his presence behind the cash register.

He ate his fruit salad silently. It occurred to him that, for all his mother knew, he did publish regularly. Perhaps Helen King thought that her son wrote pornography or 'erotica' under various

pseudonyms. If so, then her speculation wasn't completely out of left field. If Jonathan had a connection to that world, he would try his luck in it

.But he didn't so he couldn't..

Jonathan scratched his dry skin which was bothering him again. No matter how much Uremol he applied to the visible sore spots, the itching always returned.

'I think you'd better see a dermatologist about that skin problem, Jonathan.'

'I already have'. He snapped at his mother, who bit her tongue and then looked away from him.

'We'd better leave soon, dear.', Roy remarked to Helen. Jonathan thought this was absurd as Roy drove the car.

'We bought Matthew some baseball cards and a book of dinosaurs.', Helen informed Jonathan as she adjusted her makeup.

Jonathan smiled. Ben and Gillian must be attempting to get their son interested in masculine things like baseball. He knew that soon Matthew would be asking his parents why there wasn't an Aunt Sue or Kathy or some other girl's name.

'Well, I bought him a drawing book. It's up to Matthew to fill it up.'

His mother smiled at him as if he had something both simple and profound.

'I'm ready whenever you are, Roy.'

'Fine. Then shall we?'

The three of them walked to the garage where Roy's durable Chevrolet was parked and waiting for them.

'Use *this* crayon'

Matthew King insisted that his Uncle Jonathan switch to the darker of the two green crayons as the pair of them worked at drawing a big dinosaur . An easel and paper had been given to Matthew the



previous year and he had become an avid sketch-artist.

‘Here’s what we’re doing, Matthew. We alternate between the two shades of green and that’s how we make scales. Use the dark green for space one and two and the lighter colour for spaces two and four.’.

‘Odd numbers light, even numbers dark’., Helen King observed.

‘Now use this one’.

Matthew had become bored of the darker colour. Jonathan thought that his nephew intuitively understood his system, but that his attention span did not allow him to work with strictly one crayon for a very long duration.

‘Do you want a beer, Jon?’.

Ben was about to make a trip to the refrigerator. Roy and Helen were drinking red wine and Gillian was sticking to ginger ale. Jonathan had never seen Gillian imbibing alcohol.

‘In a bit, Ben.’ He had overeaten as he usually did when visiting Ben and Gillian.

Ben walked into the kitchen and returned with two bottles of Brew-Your-Own.

‘How’s school?’, Roy asked Gillian, confident that Matthew was too busy drawing with Uncle Jonathan to be listening to the adults’ conversation.

‘Better than it was’, Gillian asserted. ‘Thank God that awful teacher was transferred.’.

‘Yes’, Helen agreed with her daughter-in-law..

‘Mrs. Tanser must have had friends or relatives in high places, that’s what I suspect.’. Ben savoured his home brew.

‘I’m not worried about any attention-deficit now, Helen. I was before, but the teacher was the problem.’.

Roy King sipped his wine. ‘Teaching makes all the difference. So the replacement is better?’

Gillian Fenton almost beamed at him. ‘Miss Gibson is far more enthusiastic about her job. She’s

open to dealing with different children and not labeling them prematurely.’.

‘Use *this* one’, Matthew ordered his uncle to switch crayons again. The dinosaur was beginning to look almost realistic.

‘He draws very well, Helen.’.

Helen King sipped her wine and nodded to her husband. She wondered whether Miss Gibson was subtly encouraging Matthew to play more with the boys rather than with Jessica Turner, who lived two houses to their left.

‘We’ve almost finished, Matthew.’, Jonathan stood and retrieved his beer. ‘See, you can fill in the remaining spaces with the lighter crayon.’.

‘I don’t like the other crayon’, Matthew used the darker colour and was indifferent to the consequences.

Jonathan clicked bottles with his brother. He resisted a temptation to ask Ben and Gillian whether they knew of any discreet bawdy houses in their neighbourhood. Some of those bungalows looked to him as if they could be perfect camouflages for wealthy suburban bondage enthusiasts. But he refrained from broaching this or any similar subjects.

‘How’s your writing, Jonathan?’.

‘Fine’. He hoped Gillian would not ask him any further questions. He had little if anything to say to his sister-in-law.

‘What are you doing for Christmas, Jon?’.

‘Nothing’, Jonathan glared at Ben. ‘I mean, I guess I’m coming up to Midland as usual.’.

Jonathan hated Christmas. He was a hardened atheist and his parents had found a benevolent religion in their later years. This in itself did not bother him, but they believed and he didn’t and they didn’t quite realize that he did not believe, other subjects remained unspoken so why couldn’t religion ?

‘This is good beer, Ben. You should market it.’.

‘Wish I had the time, Jon. Cheers.’.

The two brothers looked at each other and then at Matthew. He was becoming tired and would soon be needing sleep.

‘Would you like a Scotch, Jonathan?’.

Helen and Roy poured shots for themselves as they sat down to watch Masterpiece Theatre. Jonathan felt that he was expected to watch along with them. He had never been able to communicate to his parents that he detested Masterpiece Theatre and Merchant-Ivory movies and that entire genre. Movies for people who didn’t really like movies, as far as he was concerned.

He was familiar with some of the actors that his parents rated so highly. He could see that Derek Jacobi for one was a highly skilled thespian. He decided to watch the Henry James adaptation and say as little as possible. He no longer really spoke to people unless they spoke to him first.

When the episode had concluded, Roy stood and announced that he would be preparing for sleep. His father did look tired, Jonathan thought to himself. He looked quite healthy, but very tired.

‘I’ll join you shortly, Roy.’.

Helen poured another shot of scotch for herself and offered one to Jonathan. He consented.

‘How many days per week do you work in your friend’s bookstore? Patrick, right?’.

‘Three.....sometimes four.’.

She sipped from her drink.

‘Is that enough?’.

Jonathan resented the question. Of course three or occasionally four days a week didn’t pay all that well. It was better than nothing.

'Look, Mom. If I could afford to tell Patrick where to go, then I would.. Okay?'

Helen stared at her son.

'I thought you and Patrick were friends?'

'When you work with your friends, often that changes everything. Do you know what I mean?'

She shook her head. She probably did not know what Jonathan meant.

'Have you considered going back to school? You know that we can help you if you need our help.'

Jonathan sipped his scotch. He was on the verge of becoming drunk.

'It's too late, Mom. It's too late.'

He thought that she knew what he meant this time. Helen stood and announced that she had also better call it a night.

'You can stay up and watch a movie if you like, Jonathan. There's a good one on with Peter O'Toole. I'm sorry that I can't remember the title.'

'Thanks, Mom.'

'Do you want to have lunch with us tomorrow?'

He finished his Scotch.

'No thanks. I'm going back to Toronto in the morning.'

'Oh?'

He began arranging his blankets and pillow.

'I have to work tomorrow afternoon.'

She looked at him.

'You didn't tell me that earlier?'

Sorry, Mom. I guess I forgot to.'

Helen King looked at her son with a tender exasperation before walking toward the master bedroom..

Although Jonathan had never embarked upon a bus to Gravenhusrt before, he quickly realized that there was no scenery along the way. The deserted farms with their cows and occasional horses were practically identical to their counterparts on the route to Midland. Small towns were small towns were small towns, he rubbed his aching head.

Gravenhusrt was some place other than Toronto and he liked the sound of the name. He hadn't thrown out his return ticket to Toronto yet, but he had decided to take a different bus to another place. He wasn't carrying very much money on his person and he didn't have all that much in his bank account either.

Jonathan wondered whether he would have enough for a hotel in Gravenhusrt. He wondered whether checking into one would be a mistake. He didn't particularly plan to establish any roots in Gravenhurst.

If he didn't check into some hotel or rooming house, then he would have to kill time in some bookstore or library for a while. Jonathan killed a lot of time in bookstores in Toronto. He worked in one where there really wasn't all that much to do except kill time reading. He had snapped at Patrick the other day. Patrick had wanted him to arrange the science-fiction section and Jonathan had told him that once that had been done then what the fuck was the point of doing it again and again.

Patrick was expecting him tomorrow, not today. Patrick could be kept waiting forever, as far as he was concerned.

He opened up his morning newspaper and scanned the front section. The big breakthrough in the Middle East wasn't a breakthrough after all. Somehow, Jonathan wasn't surprised. The Prime Minister of Canada had cracked another moronic joke about pepper spray that the RCMP had used against boisterously demonstrating college students. The Prime Minister was an asshole. Even his parents and his brother knew that, for fuck sakes. Maybe his sister-in-law still didn't get it Gillian was a very

conservative girl, even more conservative than her husband..

Jonathan hoped that his nephew Matthew would grow up and become a raging anarchist or terrorist or somebody who would put all of his neighbours out of their collective misery. Uncle Jonathan had high hopes for young Matthew.

As the bus moved steadily along the northern highway, Jonathan threw the newspaper onto the floor after crumpling it. He then did the same with his return ticket to Toronto.

Roy and Helen recognized Jonathan's face on the evening news . Their son had picked some sort of fight with a stranger in a bar and then deliberately overdosed on sleeping pills. The stranger was alive and in good condition.

Jonathan had been carrying identification so his name was included along with the bulletin. The Gravenhurst police apparently felt no need to contact any next-of-kin before permitting the aggressor's name to be broadcast both locally and nationally.

Helen cried while Roy sat stoically in front of the television which he wasn't listening to.

'Turn that damn thing off, Roy!'

Roy King obliged with the remote control as the weather forecast succeeded the crime report.

'I thought there might be seriously wrong with his skin. Something *physically* wrong.'

'Maybe there was, Helen I really don't know.'

'Something happened with Jonathan's friend who owns the bookstore. Patrick.'

'What's that?. Roy's face clouded.

'Patrick and Jonathan are no longer on friendly terms.'

'I don't know how much we can possibly make out of that, Helen. We don't really know what their

relationship really was.. It's not as if he ever talked to us about his life.'

The telephone rang and it was Ben and Gillian. They were on separate phones so they could simulate a conference call.

'I was worried about Jon but I had no idea it was this bad.'

'I know, Ben. I know.'

Roy poured scotches for himself and his wife.

Gillian Fenton was about to say something when Ben cut her off. Helen was grateful for Ben's intervention. She knew that her daughter-in-law had always been suspicious of Jonathan and would now be telling everybody else that her premonitions had been right after all.

'What are you going to tell Matthew?'

Gillian and Ben gasped, then Gillian regained her composure.

'Nothing just yet. Nothing until we have to.'

Roy nodded. That was probably the best strategy - at least for the time being.

'I guess I had better call the Gravenhusrt police, Ben. Do you want to come with me when I drive up?'

'I'll drive, Dad.'

Helen nudged Roy anxiously.

'I'll take you up on that, Ben. Let me know when you're ready to leave.'

'Fine, Dad. I'll pick you up in a few minutes.'

Ben hung up the phone and Roy got dressed. He wondered whether he would have to identify the body. The Gravenhusrt police had been in a hurry - suppose the identification had not been that of the man who had taken his own life after possibly threatening another?

But the dead man was his son, damn it. Jonathan had made the decision to end his life and he had been looking for an excuse to do so.

'You're not coming, I take it?'

Helen King shook her head.

'I don't wish to see him.'

Roy King kissed his wife and then silently waited for Ben to ring the doorbell. Helen sat beside him on the sofa, holding onto his hand. After her older son and her husband drove off, she planned to swallow a Gravol and hopefully fall into a deep extended sleep.



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