

LOONIE LOIS

by MJ Politis

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mjpolitis@yahoo.com

CHAPTER 1

To the eye, and the camera lens, it was an ideal community. The Mountains were sculpted by the loving hands of Mama nature. The trees feed from the milk of her bussom lined the horizon. The blue sky was interrupted only by clouds which seemed to have the shape of angels, the gray outlines letting down gentle sprinklings of rain. The rivers gently followed the contour laid down by the Maternal Presence, laying on their shores soil that sustained every kind of botanical life that could provide pleasure to the eye, along with homes for wildlife bearing fur as well as feathers. Between the rivers dwelt the people. Grains of carbon and hydrogen containing sand on the planet who fancied themselves as mountains of their own between their ears. And who dreamed that they all was perfect. And it was, for those who chose slumber rather than Spirit. Complacency to challenge. And comfort to that highest of Passions for the Alive Spirit...transformative struggle.

The blissful ignorance that most of the people in the valley called 'life' was all by design, perhaps by a demonic power posing as the angel of light. Or an indulgent experiment by mortals. Perhaps made possible by the latest generation of Soma from Orwellian Pharmaceuticals. Perhaps a new brand of now-legalized weed, or some other such pleasant-thought-inflicting drug from the smokestack of the mill that employed more people in town than any eco-promoting politician would care to admit. Or maybe something on the computer screen that lured even the most imaginative 20 year old into aspiring to neaten the lines on an image of big horizons on the screen saver rather than to become absorbed by, or challenge, the ones felt by the Third Eye, or even seen by the biological ones. Or maybe humanity had just become tired in this bucolic community nestled in the middle of British Columbia, a province nestled in the country of Canada. A country which would be the first to be listed on the roster of most pleasant countries to live in, except for January of course. And the last to be invaded, again because of that month in which all but 5% of that land was possessed by some life-challenging expression of old man winter.

It was the Old Woman in the town that the world forgot who felt most threatened by all the 'happy' that permeated it. A town where, one way or another, even the poorest of citizens could cover her table or stuff his belly with something that make them feel 'regal'. Of course, the Old Woman considered this as another plot by the Manipulation Committee, as she called it. The self-taught Lady of the Mountain, who was anything but ladylike when she came down the hill for supplies, claimed on more than one occasion that the deadness of spirit in the town in the valley was also due to specially spiced chicken and tastefully flavored ice cream eaten to excess by its inhabitants. These, she claimed, were the ways that Dull Out Disease had sedated every artist she knew into creating works that were safe and happy rather than challenging to the status

quo. “The spice in the chicken and the sprinkles in the ice cream were formulated in a lab operated by the US Defense department operating out of their new central headquarters in Alberta, the undeclared 51st state of America,” she screamed loudly at the city council meeting, where the droning voices of the Mayor and the City Council had put all of the camera personal charged with filming the event into sound, solid slumbers. “The cream in the ice cream is the mush made from the brains sucked out of the heads of what used to be free thinking and assertively acting people here!” she went on. “And the meat in the fried chicken is from old farts and young farts who stood up to all of this, who have sacrificed ourselves for all of you! But mark my convictions, once-fellow-free thinkers, if you partake of my body, I swear by all that is Sacred and Alive that you will inherit the Fire in my Soul.”

Half of the City Council Members shared condescending eyerolls with each other. The other half looked at their watches. No one expected the Old Woman, who regularly came to the Thursday night meetings (that no one else did because it interfered with their watching first runs of Big Bang Theory and Mom) to fend off the security guards escorting her away after she had used her legally-required ten minutes. “Take that!” she said to them, as she threw a banana peel at one of the blue uniformed bubba belly's feet, causing him to slip-slide down the ramp on his fat ass. “And that!” she continued, throwing a home made apple pie into the face of the other.

The cameras captured it all, one of them anyway. The operator of that camera watched as the Old Woman looked into the lens, then removed a large ceramic jug from under her weather-worn, grass-stained leather fringed coat. “This is to make eating my body more interesting,” she sneered. “And palatable,” she laughed as she poured the contents on the jug on top of the long, uncombed white-on-greyish-brown mop of thick hair which was her trademark. She pulled out a match from the ankle of her swollen mocassined left foot, and struck it on the still functional heel of her right Value Village work boot. Then she set the ends of her long locks ablaze, exclaiming. “This is my body, and this is my...”

The Old Woman's body burst in to flames faster than anyone could even think about putting it out. And when they did, there was nothing under it. No flesh reeking of burnt tissue and the trademark tang of her Mountain Magic barbeque sauce, which she on occasion sold at the Farmer's Market on Saturday so she could pay for gas, beans and flour to keep her 98 pound body alive the rest of the week. No bones to send back to Toronto for her sane accountant sister and sensible banker brother to bury in the family plot in cottage country. Not even the leather coat that had survived thirty years snaring rabbits and spearing fish in the high country, and during more desperate years, dumpster diving for rotten tomatoes and 5 day old pizza down below. No, there was nothing left. Just a white light, which the single camera operator caught on his camera lens.

“Spontaneous combustion,” the camera operator pondered with the muscle between his ears, which had experienced only twenty years of incoming data. Data which he still could not figure out, except for knowing that he would not process it like the others in his generation. “Yeah, spontaneous combustion,” he said to himself, again, as he felt the

Old Woman smile at him though a spirit that he could feel but not see. A spirit that he could feel move around the room, darting all of the watchers on who were more concerned with putting out the Fire than saving the woman who had sacrificed herself to it. A spirit that circled around him, hung around, his head, contemplated something for two or three orbits around his body, then dove into his chest, and set up home in side his gut.

“What a long strange trips it's BEING,” the Old Woman's Spirit sang to the tune of the Grateful Dead's 'Truckin' as her final words to the young cameraman just before she merged with the Silence. And a future that the old woman and the young man could have never imagined possible.

Marcus woke up from his slumber behind the camera, recalling the dream about Lois the Loony Mountain Woman disappearing into a cloud of dust, then fire, then Light. He didn't know if he was out for a minute, an hour or an eon. All he knew was that he felt like he had woken up in another worm hole. But one from which everything on planet earth looked the same, at least to his earthly eyes.

As always on a Thursday night, 'Loony Lois' ranted on at the podium about why the town should fund the old College Radio station which played NONE of the hits on the three commercial broadcast antennae that dominated most of the places on the dial. And that musicians on the hot streets should be paid just as much as broadcast executives who passed by them on their way to their air conditioned offices. And that horseback riders should be given back the streets taken over by cars. And as always, she was heard but not listened to. And as always when the buzzer rang, after the half-blind hermitess was finished with her ten minutes of pontification, she hobbled out toward the door, declining rides offered by well-meaning citizen-serfs to drive her back up the mountain. And as always, Lois promised and threatened to return to the City Council Thursday Meeting to share the Visions the mountain would bestow upon her during the upcoming week.

But there was one thing that Lois did that night which was different than normal. Instead of ignoring Marcus, or collectively pointing out to him and his buds that they were victims of dull out disease, she stared into his soul and said, “I know you're not ready, but Life says you have to be,” she said to him after her speech to the council with a warm and apologetic smile.

“Ready for what?” the 20 year old dweller of basement suites in town and computer stalls at the library asked the old Mountain Woman.

“We both will find out,” she replied, placing her frail, arthritic hand on his moderately-muscular shoulder. “And for the gift I passed on to you, I apologize,” she continued. She then did a 180 turn around with her eyes, voice and Essence. “No, I...eh...eh...”

For the first time Marcus could remember, Lois' mouth could not come up with words.

And it seemed that her mind could not connect to another Vision, or message from the Extraterrestrial relatives she claimed visited her periodically on the planet they were told to dump her on. No, Lois was going senile. Her eyes seemed to see a world that Marcus' camera could not record. And no patient who didn't want to be committed to the psych ward would dare describe. Yes, Lois seemed to be saying something through the ascultations that non-Visionaries would call jiberish.

But, Marcus seemed to feel something Real and Relatable about those nonsense words. Just about when his benignly-inquisitive mind was about to grasp their meanings, they stopped. Replaced by Lois' daughter rushing in the front door, talking down to her mother as if she was a child. Promising to take care of her. Then passing Lois off to her son-in-law, who this time insisted that it was time to put her in an assisted living facility. Two of Lois' generically-suburban grand-kids, who had sprouted into behimiths despite their mother's small framed genetics, assisted their crazy granny out the door.

“We apologize for all of this,” Lois said to the citizens in the small, hard-backed chairs waiting their turn to voice their complaints or boasts to the City Council who carried, and to the Council Members who sat in the comfy chairs as if they were royal thrones.

“It won't happen again,” Lois' husband added with a professional, lawyerly grin. “We found her a spaceship where she can safely fly anywhere she wants or needs to go.”

Marcus heard Council Members chuckle. Then he felt the echo of their laughter bouncing off every wall in the room. From outside the half opened door, he heard Lois screamed loudly and defiantly, 'no' in English, French, German and several other tongues with sounds that felt other-worldly. Indeed, Marcus' sense of hearing felt otherworldly. He could not see the sounds fluctuating in the air as colors or clouds, but he could feel where they were. He attempted to move his camera to follow the 'orbs' that moved into the room, but was more concerned with those that now hung around him, about to enter his own body, mind and, if such a thing even existed, soul.

CHAPTER 2

Ivan wasn't much better at operating a camera than most of his film school graduates but there was one thing that made him far more hireable than the slackers and hipsters he endured the Interior Television Academy program with. “You are great with people,” Ivan's current client, Mr. Diamantis, said to him as he aimed his video camera across the tables of napkins, vases and placemats towards the designated center of attention in the room. “I think of no one better to shoot my daughter's wedding than you, Mister Petrovitch,” the Old Greek said as he pounded his behimith-sized hand on Ivan's small, never hauled a bail of anything in his life shoulder. “You and your wife make a great team to work with. And maybe you want to renew your vows next week, in my restaurant, for a special family discount?” the old Greek offered to the young Russian immigrant. “And I give it to you for free for your next child's Christening, yes?”, he

continued patting the belly of the woman next to Ivan, who was taking cutaway shots of various people in the crowd to edit into the video of the wedding.

“A very generous offer,” Canadian born and bred Lori said as she discretely pushed away the Old Greek's hand from her belly before it made its way to her ass. “But first, we should get some shots of you toasting the bride and groom,” she continued, backing away from Mr. Diamantis before Mrs. Diamantis could see or intuit anything.

Anticipating the rhythm and beat of the video Ivan was already editing in his head, he motioned for the waiter to bring a tray of oozo to the father of the bride. Ivan watched Lori aim the camera lens at Mr. Diamantis as he toasted his daughter, son in law and then the videographers with Greek and English salutations. Salutations that sounded corny if said sober, but somehow were musical to those functionally intoxicated. They were appended by loud applause by the entire, still relatively sober, congregation.

A volley of toasts followed, initiated by the groom's Scottish-Canadian Criminal Science Professor father. Professor MacKensie was determined that he would not be outclassed by an uneducated Greek restaurant owner who made some of his living feeding overfed kids on their way back from school, and the rest by means that Revenue Canada would never be able to trace. The waiters and waitresses were kept busy bringing trays of oozo and scotch whiskey to the wedding guests as each of the fathers tried to outdo each other in their lyrical praises of the wedding couple, and whatever else came to mind as said mind became sloshed with firewater. Mackensie seemed as determined to both bankrupt the old Greek with the liquor bill as was as to prove that descendents of Scottish Highlanders can drink any son of a Greek fisherman under the table. Mr. Diamantis was up for a fight and a celebration, and would let his silent partners absorb the cost for the excess liquor. The bride and groom went along with it all, lost in a blissful world of their own making. Until the fifth round, when Ivan noticed something in their eyes, and heart.

“Yeah, I saw it too,” Lori replied through the lapel mic on her collar to her co-director from the other side of the room. “They're colorful drunks with each other now, but they'll be ugly drunks with each other just after the honeymoon, if they make it that far. Maybe we should do something about it?”

“We are,” Ivan said, noting what both he and Lori were both doing, or not doing. “We're capturing the happy faces of the still-sober people in the crowd and not the ugly and regretful faces of the happy couple.” He perused the crowd for cheerful faces to edit into the wedding video that would have to portray that emotion. Such was required if Ivan was going to get paid for his services, as well as for a higher agenda the competition-hating immigrant from a socialist country he considered a functional paradise. “The last thing the happy couple needs for their wedding video is to see their faces when they look away from each other, and to the camera lens.”

“They're not looking at the camera,” Lori asserted. “They're looking at us, Ivan,” she continued with a big, happy smile. “Us. Their friends who have been happily and

solidly married for 8 years.”

“And about to sign our separation papers tomorrow morning, Lori,” Ivan replied, forcing the corners of his lips to turn upward, as discomfoting to his sleep-deprived cheeks as it was painful to his heart.

Lori and Ivan dared not look at each other for the remainder of the toasts, the roast beef dinner, and even the cutting of the cake. Whatever words spoken between them were about camera angles and lighting. And the only thoughts they dared to think about were how they would split the proceeds from selling the video to the happy couple. A couple that Lori envied. And Ivan pitied, along with everyone else in the room, particularly those who were smiling, be they drunk or sober.

It was a new insight for Ivan, visited upon him by the spirit of Something came into the room, choosing him and him alone as its host. Delivered from a light that shot through the window, behind which was a shadow with long white hair that moved aside as soon as Ivan was able to see that it was connected to a face that he could not recognize, but somehow knew.

CHAPTER 3

The summer Powwow was something that everyone in town looked forward to, no matter what shade of complexion their skin. Some looked forward to the cultural connection to their ancestral roots, or to the roots of a culture they wish their ancestors came from. Some looked forward to making money off of rich White folks who couldn't tell the difference between feathers the Great Spirit enabled the eagle to make on it majestic body and those manufactured from plastic petroleum products in sweat-shops in China. Some looked forward to the aromas and succulent taste of freshly baked banuk topped or embedded with everything from Saskatoon berries to Polish sausage. But all looked forward to the music of Wendy Sandstorm, who starred in every play when she went to grade school on the Rez, and who was unanimously voted the best musical and comedy talent at Vancouver Arts High.

By the time Wendy hit the big two one, her face had appeared one way or another in every comedy or drama funded by Aboriginal People's Television Network, and she had been a day player in three mainstream Paleface procedural cop shows. Her natural beauty was always in fashion, and with the exception of opera or blues, her voice always fit into every song presented to her. Every guy wanted to be with her. Every girl, or guy who wanted to be a girl, wanted to be her. And, as fate had granted it, Wendy wanted to be her too. As long as she got applause, and it was sincerely meant, of course. And the most sincere applause Wendy ever got was when she came back home every August long weekend to play at the Powwow.

This Powwow was no exception. As was custom of the tribe, the Chief, who was also

her father, got on stage to introduce her. As was custom of the Great Spirit, the afternoon sun blazed hotter and brighter than it had for any other Saturday during the entire summer. As was the custom of the crowd of those Wendy grew up with, and outgrew soon after she left, the applause was deafening when she took the stage, wrapping her perfectly-shaped legs around the stool in a pose that felt natural to her and seemed, by sheer accident, goddess-like to others. As was the custom to hire one or two white roadies to run the sound recording booth when the Indians trained at the Tribal Vocational School were too drunk to show up on time. Such was required so that accompanying musicians and background singers behind Wendy would not override each other, or her.

For almost two minutes, Wendy bowed 'thank you's' to the crowd, thanking them with phrases in several Native languages and street English through the mic, while trying to strum the first few chords of her latest hit single. Finally, the crowd chose to focus on the music rather than the musician. Said musician closed her eyes, took in a deep breath, and began to sing "Needing You", a tune that celebrated one soul needing another to give meaning to itself, and life.

Wendy listened to the sound mix with the ear buds implanted behind her diamond feather-covered earrings. The women and girls mouthed the lyrics to her song, leaning on the strong shoulders of their male companions. Then those Y chromosome-bearing souls put their arms around their woman's shoulders, pulling them close to them. So close that they would never fall down. Or slip away. Or, as Wendy started to realize, not knowing why, move away to become their own souls. To become their own persons who didn't need a man to make them feel important, or loved. Or even a need to be loved.

As Wendy sang the lyrics that make her popular, and loved, she found herself hating what she had done. For the first time in her life, she found herself distrusting and despising the lyrics that celebrated inter-dependency over self-reliance. Being needy rather than having self respect. Dragging someone else into your life rather than helping them figure out where their own Life Path should be.

But, out of habit, or courtesy, Wendy finished the song. As was custom, and habit, the crowd gave her a standing ovation. But, as was now a new Passion that possessed her, the applause that once pleased her felt repulsive. Instead of feeling a wave of energy turning her road-tired body into a light, carefree carrier of unbridled glee, her chest tightened. Wendy self-observed herself cringing, looking for an escape from the stage. An escape from her life as she had lived it. And an escape from a Presence that seemed to have taken her over, inviting as well as needing her to become its host.

That Presence felt like a thunderbolt electrifying to Wendy's body, turning it into a feather which was blown into every one of the Four Directions. Wendy walked off the stage, without a bow, leaving the audience of sheep without a shepherd to lead them. And her father to try to fill in the gap before the next act came on with some of the lamest Indian humor Wendy ever heard. Humor that made the audience laugh, without a single

thought behind any chuckle, kafaw, or belly laugh. Indeed, Wendy was the only one at the Powwow who wasn't laughing.

CHAPTER 4

Marcus didn't sleep well the night Lady Lois was taken to the retirement home. He used every trick in the book to try to get some badly needed shuteye in the bed nuzzled into the basement of his parent's house. But finally the combination of counting beebie pellet holes on the walls put there by his father and brother, counting the stacks of beer caps they built into monument inside the window and the surf against shore CD that his landlocked mother used to try to calm down her clients when she tried to hypnotize them into accepting Jesus as their savior did their job.

Marcus got an entire hour of sleep, woken up, as usual, by the need to evacuate his bladder rather than want to embrace the world in an awake state for the next 16 hours. As he pulled his weary body from bed to the can, evacuating his bladder then settling in for the morning shit, an event which usually gave him one of the bigger pleasures of the day, he felt like he wasn't himself. The kind of self he could be to his fellow workers at the computer store, and his boss, an old fart who knew more about what to put in the windows to bring customers in than using anything beyond Windows 3 to bring them into the internet. Besides, he had other business which was now more important than the only twelve dollar an hour job he could hold onto.

After wiping the remnants of a mildly moist Mister Hanky off his hands, and seeing the face of Lady Lois in the lump of terd he couldn't make himself flush down the toilet, Marcus decided that it was time to call in sick.

"Too many shots of screech with the lads, and too many snuggles with the ladys?" Jack 'squid whisperer' Brady inquired at the other end of his land line phone at his office at computer shop, the outdated connected to the wall with a cord. The 'so last century' owner of the computer store demanded an honest answer.

"Eh...I..eh," was all that Marcus could come up with.

"That'd be a good enough affirmation, don't ya know," his boss replied with pride, slipping gleefully into a full Newfy brough. "The mornin' after I kissed the cod I didn't know where my hands was, but I knew that what was between me legs got exercised real good, by Jeez. About time that ya shook a wicked hoof steada bein' the Sonny Jim what stays on shore while all his brother goes out fishin' fer squid, salmon and sluts, don't ya know."

Marcus answered with a 'yeah', trying to sound like he had a hangover worse than any Saint Johns skipper who crashed his boat into a shack filled with moonshine, as Old Man Brady kept blabbering on with Newfy expressions praising Marcus for getting out of

cyberspace and into the real world of hard drinking men and loose women. "Maybe there would be a raise for me if I come back to work with the smell of pussy on my pants and beer on my breath," Marcus thought to himself. "If I come back to work at all," he continued as he gazed at the Ms. Hanky floating on the surface of the porcelain pond turning into the face of Lois. That brown on brown face showed him an even more inviting, and sorrowful, smile.

"You do know what I have to do, Lois," he observed himself saying to the illusion that felt like reality.

"Yes," she seemed to say. "Time for me to merge with the Eternities, and you to become a shepherd who leads the sheep to..."

Before Marcus could hear the voice inside his still not woken up head instruct him any further, the toilet flushed on its own. "Sorry," he yelled down into the bowl as it filled up with water again. "I didn't know that my brother put an automatic flusher into this thing that responds to the weight of what goes into it. Suppose he had to do that because of the barfing he did when he---"

"---Marcus?" he heard from behind him, in a voice from the real world. "Time for you to go to work," his mother continued, as if he was still 6 years old. "You know what the Lord says about those who neglect their worldly duties, now, do you?"

"They don't go to heaven," Marcus replied in a monotone voice to the matronly-looking woman who came down the stairs with a tray of orange juice, oatmeal and toast lightly buttered with the edges cut off.

"And they certainly go to hell, as we both know," she said with a warm smile, unable to face the fact that Marcus had lost belief in the Salvation of heaven a year before he stopped believing in Santa Clause. But, Marcus bowed his head as his mother said the morning blessing over the food, her head bowed as well, her eyes of course closed.

Marcus' eyes were now wide open, in more ways than one. Instead of getting angry at his mother for believing in the fairy tales passed on to her by her God FEARING father, and friends, Marcus pitied the old-before-her-time woman. A woman who had the biological potential to look like a hot babe, but instead decided to keep her hair in a plain jane bob, and her still '9 and a half' Barbie figure below the neck hidden under a sac-like Granny Clampet dress. A woman who believed that her husband really was out with the guys three nights a week talking at the tavern about sports, zoning laws and how to make Jesus a bigger part of your family's life. A woman who Marcus finally knew was so convinced of the lies she told herself about life, and herself, that no amount of arguing or debate would change it. Or maybe should change it. Indeed, maybe this woman, who Marcus now saw as someone who was his maternal unit only in the biological sense, could not handle life with eyes open. It would scare the shit out of her, as it was scaring the crap out of Marcus right now.

Still, an awakened Soul had to do what an awakened Soul had to do. Marcus grabbed his backpack, got on his bike, and peddled towards the computer store, turning left rather than right at the intersection as soon as he was out of view from his mother's loving, yet still internally closed, eyes.

It was a hard uphill pedal to the Old Folks Home, otherwise known as Sunset Horizons. Indeed, anyone with any brain in their head or sense in their ass knew that after sunset, there was no horizon, particularly under the usually cloudy skies of Interior British Columbia. But it was still day-time, and Marcus was determined to confront Lois personally. Or maybe discourse with her. Or maybe, like he and his buds used to do, goof on her by making her think she was being listened to like a Wise Sage while all the while she was being considered as a fool. A source of ridicule rather than wisdom. The butt of cheap jokes told behind her back, or sometimes in front of her, until she figured out what was going on.

“No,” Marcus pondered as he recalled those times he and his buds used the woods behind Lois' cabin as a place to get high. Or when they planted the mushrooms and weed on her property so they could sell them town for an easy buck. Even bigger dollars if they could get a ride into Kamloops, Kelowna or Vancouver. “I'll apologize to the old hippie battleaxe,” Marcus said to himself as he locked his bike in front of the door of the nursing home to which Lois was condemned to a 'comfortable retirement' by her well-meaning daughter. “Or maybe I shouldn't tell Lois that we were making fun of her, so she can die thinking that we went up to visit her because we valued what she had to say and wanted to lend a hand,” Marcus considered inside his head as he strode into the lobby.

Once there, he encountered Krystyl 'with two ys's' McDermod, a girlfriend who almost became a fuck buddy who landed a job as receptionist at the final resting place for half of the residents of the town that so few people born to it ever really left. “It isn't right for someone to spend their golden years believing lies, but its harder if they know the truth about the people around them, maybe. To live in illusion is easy, but should one die in it?” Marcus self observed him mumbling loud enough to hear, in a voice he didn't recognize.

“That's, like really profound, ya know? Really awesome,” Krystyl 'with two y's' said with a hip grin on her face. “What song is that from?” she asked.

Marcus looked at the slender chick with big boobs, shapely hips and multicolored hair with a tinge of red added to the green streaks. It was the first time the coolest and hottest girl in Grade II ever smiled at Marcus. It shocked him. Had something happened to Marcus that he didn't know about? She knew that he wasn't dealing dope anymore. What else was it that she wanted? Was it that Marcus had finally grown into being 'cool', despite the fact that in his hand was a bicycle head protector rather than a chopper helmet to accompany a 1200 cc Harley outside?

Truth bore its ugly and ultimately redeeming head in the form of a security guard, a spitting image of Kris Holms in Thor, as handsome as he was tall and muscular. He

looked with jealousy at Krystyl, and then threw an angry stare at Marcus. “So, Krystal is looking to make her new boyfriend jealous,” Marcus thought, but did not say, as Krystyl edged closer to him, wiping some dirt off his helmet and then adjusting the misaligned buttons on his shirt. “And he's buying into it,” Marcus observed as the handsome looking behemoth walked behind the reception desk, giving her a peck on the cheek, along with a man-sized hug around her small framed shoulders. “Heap big Ken claim small, brain-dead big breasted Barbie?” Marcus thought to himself. “I'm sure you'll spawn many happy, brain-dead children with each other,” he continued to project, and ponder, between his ears. “Lois LaBlanc. Is she here?” Marcus finally said, with his mouth.

Krystal looked up the name on her computer screen, having never known Loonie Lois by any Surname. Ken the Security Guard Neanderthal, gave Marcus the “I can outdo you at the pick up bar, on the catwalk and the wrestling mat, so keep your eyes off of my property Krystyl,” he sneered with his eyes.

“Maybe she considers you HER property,” Marcus replied, in his head, taking note that maybe it would wind up in a song he would write one day. In a life that now finally would require him to stop thinking about writing songs, and get down to the business, and Calling, of actually doing the work.

Finally, Krystyl located Lois' name, after asking three times how to spell LaBlanc. “She left here last night,” she related with an indifferent grin.

“Back home, up the mountain?” Marcus asked looking out the window at the tree covered slopes that hid Lois' sanctuary, hideout and Temple from the view from the ground, or the air.

“With a detour at Olson's Mortuary,” 'Ken' the security guard informed Marcus. “I think.”

“Closed casket funeral Monday night,” Krystyl added, with upturned corners of her ruby-red, pierced Barbie-21st Century lips. “Free food after the ceremony. Her daughter would, like totally, really appreciate it, if everyone came and brought something for the table.”

Marcus had never experienced grief. But he was relieved of one thing. Lois didn't have to spend one day in the nuthouse. Unless of course that was where she was the previous night, where Lois maybe had ended her life in such a way that the method of her death would be obvious to anyone who looked at the body. But, for the moment, that arthritic, pain-carrying, weakened body was not bringing down Lois' soul. A soul that seemed to say to Marcus every time he looked to wind blowing through the trees outside the window, and the mountains she dedicated her life to, “I am still alive, and need you to find me.” It was the most hopeful thing Marcus had heard in the real and imaginary dimensions all day, which he dared not share with Ken, Barbie or the other walking manacins calling themselves staff at Sunset Horizons, or citizens in the streets of a town which, only 24 hours ago, Marcus had called home.

CHAPTER 5

Ivan was not sure who would get the lion's share of the paycheck for videoing the Diamantis wedding, him or Lori. But he was sure that if he didn't deliver it on time to the Old Greek who hired him, no one would get paid. With respect to his day job, Ivan was able to put together electrical wiring the same way on the three types of grids without any complaints from the boss, or the customers who frequented the factory outlet. He could do intricate electrical work as well as numerous other technical tasks in record time to acceptable standards even when in severe sleep debt. But editing was an Art to Ivan that had to be Great, not just good, even if it was for not-so-great clients like Mr. Diamantis.

Even if Ivan got his agreed upon 50% of the commission for doing the wedding, he would be earning two bucks an hour. Meanwhile, his soon to be ex-wife Lori was to get twenty times that per unit time she had spent behind the camera, and behind the scenes getting the client in the first place. Ivan didn't mind spending an hour of time in post-production with his overtaxed computer for every two minutes of time that would wind up on the final video.

Though he hated most of the videos he was paid to edit with respect to their topic, Ivan somehow found a way to make the final product interesting. He had done a music video for Connie and the Cowpokes that actually made them look like they had more creativity and brains than the merry-go-round horses they rode while performing 'Wild and Free at Last'. By maneuvering camera angles, color tones and subtle changes with the assigned musac, Ivan was even able to make golfing videos seem exciting. The ability to find Life within soul and brain dead clients, and their products, was not without many hours of unsolicited, and usually unpaid for, work. It was something that Lori got pissed off at, but Ivan tolerated. Besides, the way his marriage with Lori was going, spending more time at the computer editing beat the continued attempts to revive love with someone who had dumped him years ago, in her heart anyway, truth be painfully told.

As such, Ivan spent more time than usual editing the Diamantis video. Finally, it was done, after four nearly-sleepless nights. He pressed 'save' for the final edit, then allowed himself to exhale a sigh of relief. That relief was short lived when he looked at the couch next to his computer screen, and the half-opened door behind which Lori was sound asleep. Her smile was as wide as her snore was loud. Such pleased Ivan, as such indicated that Lori was somewhere else. Indeed, she was in a blissful slumberland which he himself wished to go himself.

Ivan helped himself to a smoke, then a small glass of vodka, as he was so tired that he could not sleep. Not easily anyway. But after he replaced the small glass with a larger one, and got through the second smoke, and playing hide and seek with bright 'orbs' outside his window that seemed to be talking to him in tones too somber to ignore but too

low to hear clearly, slumber overtook him.

Three brief hours later, Ivan was awakened to the sight of a video camera aimed into his half-sleeping eyes. The operator of the camera was as hurt, and angry, as he was exhausted. "So, there IS someone else!" Lori screamed into his face. "I heard and saw you talking to her!"

"Who, what?" Ivan said as Lori turned on the replay button, flashing images of him sleeping onto the big screen tv which he and his wife used to enjoy watching movies with, during the good old days anyway. "Why are you.---?"

"---Filming you while you're sleeping?" Lori barked back at Ivan as he wiped the slumber from his face. "Watching you smile, laugh, and be, according to your words on that screen, 'yourself for the first time'? And before laugh, grin and sigh of contentment, you say the name of the girlfriend you're sharing in your own private Tralfamador, and in the awake state, share a lot more with when I'm away, or you're on your video shoots out of town. A private paradise shared by you and Lois, whose name you say with---!"

"---Lois?" Ivan finally interjected, shaking his head. "I don't have any girlfriend named..." Ivan said, then stopped. recalling a vague image of the dream he just had. And the face of a crazy old hag who was transformed during her sessions with him into a young, attractive and cerebrally interesting young woman. "Loony Lois..." he recalled, remembering the videos he had done on the mountain woman's sustainable energy cabin, the way to talk fish into a boat, or a conversation she was having with ET spaceships during the middle of the day. Videos that he made for group of young psychologists who, it turned out later, were high school kids who had burrowed their parent's clothes and tricked a traveling make up artist to do them up as 30 something academics.

Ivan had forgotten the names of the prankster kids pretending to be adults who paid him to make serious videos of Loony Lois that wound up being re-edited to be ridiculing satirical music videos that lampooned the Old Sages. But one face and name among the pipe-smoking 'Young Professor' came to mind, as he recalled the dream he just had. "Professor Ivan," he uttered through his quivering lips and bone dry, salty mouth.

"The pet name that Lois gave you?" Lori inquired, arms folded, staring directly through Ivan. "Who is Lois?"

"A misunderstood soul who, like the song said, sank beneath our wisdom like a stone," he replied.

"Great. You're fucking 'Susanne' who you fucked by the river," Ivan's enraged mate blasted out to the ceiling with a condescending eyeroll.

"Actually, it was a discourse by the lake," Ivan answered, intensely concerned with the meaning of the dream in which Loony Lois came to him as an old, dead woman, and

transformed herself into a younger one, who was still very much alive, in the world of dreams, and reality. A woman who invited him to find her after she walked into the woods, one step ahead of a luminescent fog that undulated to the rhythm of his favorite Lithuanian folk song, a tune that Lori hated, with lyrics that none of Ivan's Canadian friends ever really understood, despite many attempts at translation. "Yes. Lois," Ivan lamented, recalling that it was just a dream. "A dead woman, by all accounts any sane or sensible soul would assert as true," he continued, seeing behind his possessed eyes the one paragraph article on a back page of the local newspaper that reported Lois death.

"Sane and sensible are the last things you are, Ivan," Lori proclaimed with a disapproving shaking of her head as she took off her wedding ring, re-inserting it on third finger. "God help, and bless you," she whispered fondly while tenderly stoking Ivan's left cheek, after which she gave him and a loving kiss on his right side of his pale, white face. With that, she affirmatively strode into the bedroom, pulled out her bag, and packed her things.

"Where are you going?" Ivan asked, pulling himself on his feet. He tried to follow his once-beloved, but felt a wall tripping him en route. It was an invisible wall that was as hard as the stone of the Berlin Wall that kept his father in East Germany, so he could meet his mother. As it kept the mosquitoes and houseflies from passing through as well. That wall kept him in the hallway, on the floor, looking like a delusional boy or a hung over drunk, until finally, he twisted his very real, flesh and blood ankle, barely able to stand on it.

It didn't take long this time for Lori to pack her bags. She slithered her way past a husband whose ankle was hurting as much as his heart. She stopped at the door, and turned around. "Goodbye, Ivan," she said, but not with the usual anger displayed when she had walked out on the other passionless discussions with her husband about their deteriorating relationship. No, this time pity permeated every fiber of her being, and voice.

"Lori, if we can talk about whatever you're thinking, I'm sure we can..." Ivan offered, but the words were delivered to a closing door. "I love you!" he said to a closed door, those words finally coming out of his heart and mouth for the first time in years. "I love you!" he screamed out as she drove away, giving him the finger.

"Love?" Ivan heard from a voice behind him. "You don't know what that is, but then again, very few people really do. But soon.--"

"---I'm going to be one of them?" Ivan interjected, feeling the need to reply to the auditory hallucination he heard but did not turn around to see. "But tell me one more thing, Lois," he continued, daring to turn around to face the visitor from his dreams who decided to drop in to the world of reality. "Isn't it illogical for someone to understand love and feel it, but not receive any of it?"

"Not getting love makes you a better giver of it," the fog in front of Ivan's bloodshot eyes

seemed to say, this time to the accompaniment of the music 'The Young Professors' used in the video ridiculing the Old Coot.

“And 'it' is what?” Ivan demanded.

Lois, or whatever the light-infused hallucination was, laughed, vanishing from Ivan's sight, but not his mind, or heart. Both of which he could feel being worked on by Surgeons from another Realm, without him signing any kind of patient consent form. But the music remained. It was a song composed and sung by Wendy Sandstorm, whose music Marcus and the other Young Professors had pirated on more than one occasion, though they never mocked it. Ironically, or perhaps by cosmic design, Wendy Sandstorm was a high end client who Ivan never was hired to work for. But he had a feeling he would be doing a lot of Work, big W, with her, very soon.

CHAPTER 6

The little hand on the town clock slithered past 2 and the big hand pushed its way past 12. Other than the legally required street lights and the flashing red, yellow and green traffic signals, the mountain community's lights went to sleep, surrendering whatever illumination there was to a half moon. With of course the exception of the convenience stores that stayed open for stoned and/or drunk stragglers for whom night and day merged into one uneventful entity. And the odd trucker who came in to get resupplied with smokes for his lungs, beef jerky or his belly, and gas for his truck, said vehicle more trusted than any of the women he had just visited or was on the way home to.

Five floors above where the townsfolk, during the day, went about their business of keeping the wolf away from the door at bill collecting time, a single room in the only four star hotel in town was still in full throttle. Accompanied by the recording equipment her manager was sure she was never without, Wendy Sandstorm did holy battle with the guitar again, strumming out the old tunes, then the new ones she was commissioned to do from clients who always paid very well. “Perfect. Big hits. Luv 'em, and you. New deal in place, need to hammer out details” Agent Sol Rabinowitz had texted her four hours ago after being sent the last round of musical assignments. “U ok? Worried about you,” flashed on Wendy's phone now, his having not received word from her.

Wendy was tired, hearing low level voices from the phone that she knew were not there, but couldn't get out of her mind. Or maybe it and a loud buzz that felt like Silence in the woods was coming from the walls of the hotel room. “White Noise from people who met or initiated THEIR own end in this Presidential Suite after they reached 'the top',” she mused to herself. “Or Geeks for Jesus in the rooms around me who are trying to get laid by ET girlfriends, sending them messages to bring pizza, beer and condoms,” she continued inside her head. “Or,” she said through her mouth, as she looked at the plate of steak she had finished five songs ago. “Some dude in the kitchen put some special ingredients in the sauce. Or in that hot-dog I gobbled down before going on stage today.”

Wendy's speculations about her altered states vanished when Sol texted her again. She felt like telling the money grubbing, sizzle without any steak Jew who lived down to every racial stereotype of his Hebrew ancestors what he wanted to hear. She always called his shit shinoa. Maybe because she bought the bullshit herself, or she realized at the Powwow that she was a producer, creator and distributor of bullshit, as guilty as 'Uncle Sol' for that legally non-prosecutable felony regarding the human spirit.

For the fifth time, Wendy listened to what she had produced on the audio files. She tried to convince herself that she was wrong, deluded, tired, or maybe drugged with a strange brand of mushroom that someone sneaked into her late-night ommlet made specially by the chef at the hotel, who was a big fan of hers. But, Wendy stopped being a fan of herself. Yes, the notes she had just composed and recorded were all on key. All perfectly balanced with the other tracks. All pleasant to the ear and soothing to the overwhelmed mind. But with strange eyes that had been implanted into her ears, she now perceived them all as notes. Lifeless notes that were procedural, boring, and psychologically simplistic.

Wendy's agonizing reappraisal was interrupted by Uncle Sol. "Call me. Worried about you. Really No BS. Let me be real honest with you here, Wendy," he said on her voicemail after Wendy refused to respond to the call.

"You're worried about your bottom fucking financial line, Uncle Sol, not me," Wendy said to herself, recalling her Shuswap Grandmother saying to never trust any Paleface who said he cared about you more than once. And that if ANYone said that 'I'm being honest with you', it means that he was lying before, and most likely would not break the habit.

But to be fair, Uncle Sol, as he insisted on being called, was a master bullshitter. Who else could have gotten Wendy every deal she wanted? And who else was sure that every crowd she played to not only liked her, but loved her? And expressed that love with the hoots, hollars, swoons, tears, and applause that couldn't have been manufactured better.

After putting away her phone, ignoring the next two calls from whoever it was, the thought occurred to Wendy that Uncle Sol had learned from Brian Epstein, the Beatles' manager. Wendy recalled the story she had seen years ago on some documentary somewhere about how Epstein launched the Fab Four into eternal popularity by planting half-homely, half-hot screamer babes into the audience who would scream out the names of their assigned beloved Beatle and thus 'psychologically persuade' the non-believer fans to become devotees of the band. Sol of course denied that such things were true. But, considering the fact that Sol was a more sincere liar than a reliable conduit of truth, Wendy considered that her audiences were converted into fans by psychological manipulation as well. It was a hypothesis she had secretly feared, and now considered. Only this time, the hysteria has acquired new dimensions.

Wendy allowed herself to recall some key events that she never put together. Two years

ago, her fans had advanced beyond giving her adoring screams and chants. Middle aged women and teen-aged girls threw up their bras to the stage when she did an 'I'm proud to be my own woman' song. Such made more chauvinistic men rich than any women in the industry. Wage slave men who could barely afford beer on Saturday night tossed up boxes containing REAL jewelry along with keys to their hotel room on any stage Wendy walked onto. And in the last six months months, devotion to Wendy and her 'message that speaks for all of us' had escalated into women cutting off chunks, then fistfuls, of their hair and throwing it on stage. More than one man spear-chucked to the bottom of Wendy's feet divorce papers he would serve his wife in exchange for one kiss with the Indian Princess, along with their chopped off pony tails as evidence of their devotion. The plethora of testimonials on Facebook affirmed that the more hair you offered Wendy and the Spirit she channeled into her music, the better luck you had with every other aspect of your life. Wendy had found out later that Uncle Sol the 'donation of hair to Priestess Wendy' movement started with cool-looking guys and gals whose donated hair were portions of their wigs. Such led to wannabe cool commoners chopping off their real hair in tribute to their musical heroine. But Wendy was okay with it, as she had to be. It made Uncle Sol rich, the crowds happy, and afforded her what seemed to be the divine right of popularity for being born talented.

Now thinking herself anything but talented, Wendy's stare was held captive by the streets below. She opened the window, thinking about what she would do about, and perhaps to, Uncle Sol. She sought to listen to the sounds of the commoners in the town trying to be a city down below. She hoped to get lost in the non-formulated, non-sellable sounds of cars emerging from the dark highway outside of town, then disappear into the blackness of the roads going to somewhere else. She yearned to hear dogs who had been sent out into the yard by their drunk owners barking out at ghosts on the other side of the fence. She pined for the banter of tom cats facing off with each in the alley behind the Chinese Restaurants where female felines who had hid so well from being converted into Chow Mien waited to see who would be the winner. She heard something she only two days earlier had loved most, but now could not stand to be around.

"Music," Wendy muttered to herself as she noted a homeless man strumming his guitar in an alley down below trying to bring some Light into the dark night, and some sense into his dead end life. "I'd join you in the Real music YOU'RE channeling right now, if I could. No BS. Honestly. Really. But..." she continued, finding herself looking at the realm of wealth inside the four star hotel dungeon her hometown insisted on putting her up in, for free. Wealth that included hand-decorated furs, flowing bouquets of flowers, top of the line wines, caviar, jewels, plaques, and scores of 'you changed my life' thank you cards. Wealth that now meant nothing to her, particularly because she now felt that she was being paid gold in exchange for giving them...shit. Or more accurately, illusion.

Trying to see if the view would provide any more insight than before, Wendy turned her blank stare to the mirror. "So, maybe we can write a song about all of this..whatever is happening inside of me now?" she asked the long haired musical maiden on the other

side of the glass. “Maybe that homeless hobo who plays with more vitality than I ever did can write a song about it, but we can't, mirror Wendy. Not as we are anyway. And I'm open to any ideas so that we can become something else. Someone else. Something that's not illusion, or...” Wendy laughed, feeling again the presence of an orb that had entered the hotel room, despite the fact that she put a 'do not disturb' sign on the door, appending it with a note saying 'this includes uninvited guardian angels, ghosts and Spirit Messengers', written in English AND two First Nations languages.

But, no, the orb did enter the room. It felt like that same orb which came around, then into, her at the Powwow. It now 'appeared' somehow to be in the reflection of the mirror. Without warning from the universe, Wendy realized that what she had been doing for years, what she had been praised for, and what she was applauded for being, was all a lie. “What do you want?” she asked to the presence in the mirror just above her reflection. That presence which she could feel but not see.

Wendy followed the orb in the mirror, while listening to the homeless hobo strum out more music from his guitar, channeling heartwarming and brain-stimulating lyrics in what sounded like Spanish. The orb seemed to bounce up and down to the syncopated but never predictable 'beat' of the Musician. Then it settled into the reflection of a buffalo knife laying on a table with a shiney blade, a gift sent up by an anonymous fan.

“So, you want me to cut my wrists?” Wendy asked the orb.

“No”, it said, shaking its 'head'.

“You want me to cut my throat, because it's faster?” she inquired, putting her hand on her neck. “After composing my suicide album that will guarantee me fame for the rest of my next incarnation, and Uncle Sol enough income so he can buy himself a convincing hair replacement surgery, as well as a heart and soul transplant?”

“Of course not, ” the orb seemed to say with a nodding of its head, appended by a subtle laugh that was barely audible to Wendy's ears, but deafening to her admittedly hallucinating Mind.

“Then what?” Wendy screamed again and again at the orb as it hopped around the room, while she tried to grab hold of it. “What do you want me to do with that knife!”

Wendy finally was able to push down the orb when it settled onto one of the piles of gifts from adoring fans. Wendy's firm grip pushed the Orb into a flat pancake that swished away into the air, then dissolved into the ethers outside the window. Under Wendy's sweat soaked, shaking hands lay a plastic gift bag with a small hole in it. Within that hole were strands of real hair. Attached to those strands were larger chunks of hair, then what seemed to be the lioness' share of what had been the multicolored long mane of a woman. Or a man who was bold enough to experiment with color and curls.

The guitar Mensch outside shifted rythms then beats, then melodies, with made to order

psychedelic lyrics. “Give up what you think you need, and you'll get more than what you could ever want,” Wendy heard with her ears, feeling both light headed and more out of her mind than she had been in any acid trip of drunk she could recall. Her eyes caught yet another glimpse of herself in one of the many reflective surfaces in the hotel room. Her stare was pulled into her face, buried within a disheveled curtain of hair. Then, the buffalo knife fell on the floor. Perhaps because the orb still left orders for its helper orbs to push it over. Or perhaps it was because a gust of wind from the still opened window had blown over a make up case onto the knife's handle, causing the vintage blade to fall to the lush, carpeted floor.

Wendy picked up the knife with her right hand, then revisited the mirror. “Hmmm,” she said to herself as she pulled up her three foot long mane with her left. She moved the razor sharp edge of the blade up and down, calculating what the image would look like on the other side if she went through with it. “A Taylor Swift,” she imagined for the longer cut, a Seena O'Conner for the ultra short version, a KD Lang for an intermediate nuevo fashion statement, or a Viking Walkurie if she decided to go with a one-sided chop. But, whatever she would do, Wendy would not look like Wendy. And she hoped she would not feel like Wendy.

“Okay,” she said to the orb that maybe lingered in the room, or the Great Spirit whose presence she finally recognized, though she had given It only lip service in her various songs and movies in the past. “Surprise us,” she continued. She closed her eyes, then let the knife holding hand have its way to the hair-grasping paw.

After chopping off what felt like a lifetime of hair, or maybe not as much as that, Wendy rushed to the closet. She pulled out her most prized custom-made clothing, then proceeded to carve holes and slashes it with as much abandonment as she had on her topknot. “I'm coming” she yelled out to the hobo Maestro while putting on the clothing that had now become rags. He seemed to say, then sing, 'I'll be waiting or you'. Satisfied that the hallucinations were real, or at the very least more powerful than reality, Wendy grabbed her guitar, smudged it up with gravy left from the room service dishes, and closed the door behind her. From the hallway, she realized that she had left something behind.

“The room key!” she recalled, trying to open the still not locked door to retrieve it. But the door would not give way, kept shut by some kind of vacuum orb inside the suite.

“It don't matter anyhow,” came from the minstrel in the alley, the lyrics buried in a song, or perhaps the hallucination of one. In any case, Wendy had no choice but to follow the yellow brick road, even though that hue was the result of urine, sweat or the melted flesh of deluded souls who would never find their way back to Kansas, or anywhere else.

“So, your name is Clarence,” Marcus said as he looked at the business card of the hobo minstrel in the alley just as the morning sun was hinting its presence into dark, Eastern horizon above the mountains surrounding the town.

“That he is,” replied the woman accompanying the forty-something hobo who sung with an Ancient voice. And with more vitality and skill than any musical celeb half his age who Marcus had ever heard.

“Clarence Cochran?” Marcus continued as he turned the card so that the dwindling moonlight could enable him to read another portion of it.

“That be who he is,” the woman with the chaotically chopped mop of androgenous hair continued as she strummed her guitar. She then joined the homeless rag-clad Maestro with a voice that sounded familiar to Marcus, delivered to the sky with a 'follow the new leader' happy grin on her dirt covered face.

“Clarence as in Mark Twain's assistant in Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's court? And Cochran as in the lackie who could build anything Thomas Edison couldn't put together himself, who sent me an e mail to be here, now, for a...?” Marcus inquired, after which something flashed to him. Something not about the hobo who summoned Marcus to wake up five hours before his biological clock allowed him to. No, Marcus noticed something about the Indian hobo mama who he recognized with his ears, then finally his eyes. “Are you Wendy Sandstorm?” he asked the raggedy-clad First Nations woman allowing the music to take her away from herself.

“I used to be,” she replied, closing her eyes to the world around her and to any of Marcus' unasked questions. Questions from Marcus that included “What are you doing playing with this street dude who looks but doesn't smell like a hobo?” “I used to hate your stuff, but now I seem to like it, sort of, to be honest with you, so are you being honest with me with that music?” And finally, a sincere “If someone gave you some bum acid or you started getting destructive with yourself, can I call a cab? Maybe sneak you in to the only Doc at the ER here who won't put you into the loony bin, or leak any story about who you are, or were, to anyone, especially the nurses who gossip more about patients than keeping their secrets secret like they're paid to do?”

But, Wendy kept strumming, and singing, with more enthusiasm than skill. It irritated Marcus' sense of music, and style. As if on cue, Maestro Cockran ambled over to another guitar case, and kicked it open. With a nod of his head, he motioned to Marcus that he should join in.

“No, I don't think so. I know great music, and sometimes I get paid to record it, but I can't play it,” Marcus confessed.

The hobo Maestro with hands more clean than blistered motioned again, till Marcus finally gave in.

“Okay, then,” Marcus said, picking up the guitar. He found his way into the melody of Wendy's solo, then the harmony and played on. Marcus felt taken away Upward with the music, serving it rather than anyone who was listening. Even the alley cats that came by, who seemed to say to him 'you are far more talented than the dumb-shit humans you've been living with have ever given you credit for'. Marcus' ears tried to convince his head that the felines were right. Then he heard something missing with his ears. Wendy had stopped playing. She had a pouting look on her face that led to a growl directed at herself, Then bites and hits were self-delivered into her own flesh. Having not spilled enough blood to fully express her inwardly directed rage, she grabbed hold of the neck of her guitar and smashed it on the wall of the alley.

“What's wrong?” Marcus asked, trying to make his way to Wendy as she pounded the guitar into splinters and wire that tore further into her sweat-soaked flesh.

Marcus tried yet again to pull Wendy out of her self-destructive rant, but her guitar swinging arm was stronger than his ability to duck under it. “It seems that she feels outdone by you,” a voice rang out behind Marcus. “And, this, I think, says she is right,” the continued, pointing to a video camera which he had pointed at the trio. “Is there anything else you need me to do, Maestro Cochran?” he asked the hobo in a Russian accent. “Can I go home now?” he barked out.

“A new home, for all of you, Ivan,” the hobo replied, after which he put down his guitar. He turned to Marcus, Ivan and Wendy, addressing them all with a humble bow. “We have an appointment with destiny, or, no, Life, big L.”

“Where?” Ivan asked.

“The Graveyard,” the reply, delivered with a wide grin and eyes filled with Vitality enriched Bliss. Cochran then put down his guitar. He walked over to a broken down van parked around the corner, inviting the trio of converted pilgrims to follow him. Upon arriving at the vintage mini hippie bus that was more rust than metal with absolutely no computer parts under the hood, Ivan was impressed with the mobile library laying on its floor. The novels included The Passover Plot, Last Temptation of Christ, Fahrenheit 451 and Zorba the Greek, the latter in the original Greek with no shortage of notes penciled in the margins. Marcus noted the botanicals in pots secured to the walls, with frightening Latin names on them warning curious alternative conscious seeking souls to not sample them on pain of death.

Wendy was impressed with the instruments with which that penalty could be enforced., Those devises included traditional buffalo knives (that really WERE around at the time when those beasts ruled the plains) along with several ray guns that looked like they belonged in either a Star Trek propmaster's truck, or to someone who really was connected to the fondness of the past as well as the expansiveness of the future.

CHAPTER 8

The Pioneer Cemetery was the final resting place for Palefaces who had departed their bodies since 1860. More than one historian from Toronto or paranormal investigator from Vancouver speculated that those souls who had died in the mountain town reincarnated into babies born there within a year or two. The pictures and profiles of the dead, while they were living, provided more evidence to support that wild, crazy and very marketable hypothesis. Such allowed still-have-to-keep-his-day-job documentary filmmaker Ivan to pay his rent five years ago when he had arrived in town with a high-end video camera, an ex-wife in back Russia who was still pissed off at him for not allowing her to steal EVERY rubble in his bank account, and a dream of setting up an innovative film production company with his new Canadian wife, Lori.

Marcus' connection to the Pioneer Cemetery was more relational. He could trace his roots back to the Jenkins expedition, a band of high-born adventurers, low-born prospectors and parent-less criminals from Ontario who got stranded on their way to find the Northwest river passage to the Pacific. They were low on supplies to make it home and lower on balls to report their failure to the Hudson Bay Company's head office. They were also poor enough in moral to have resorted to cannibalism before being rescued. According to the town psychic, Erica, who could predict everyone's future except her own (as she was working on her fourth defective marriage) Marcus' soul was the one who could break his ancestors' curse of never being able to get out of town.

Wendy's nearly toothless, wrinkled-face granny had told her that the land upon which Pioneer Cemetery was build had been a power spot, upon which there were at least three medicine wheels, all of them portholes to another dimension. None of the archeologists or neo-Teslian electromagnetic-detecting technogeeks Wendy helped fund could find anything to support that legend. After the failure of the tenth attempt to prove that the all-White Cemetery was built on Sacred Indian land, and therefore had to be given back to the Band, even Wendy gave up on believing the story that Granny said was as true as 'the fact that you are the best musical talent our tribe has ever produced.' Still, Wendy's music video and CD about Indian conduits to other dimensions being clogged up by greedy, insane, and ignorant White spirits bought her agents, distributors, and her heap big White wampum.

The trio of twenty-something, already burnt out cynics whose lives had been turned upside down AND inside out by visitation of something they could not explain as imagination anymore stood at the grave-site, looking at the name on the tombstone in front of them, thinking somehow with the same brain.

Clearance pushed aside a branch of Douglass fur that had fallen onto that stone (and apparently none other) during the storm that had gone through the previous night. "Lois Horowitz," Marcus said, reading the name on the stone.

"Who was Jewish, apparently," Wendy noted regarding the Mountain Woman whose last name was known to no one except her daughter, and perhaps son in law.

“Who said she knew all of us, better than we were able to understand ourselves,” Ivan added as Clarence checked on a large box of technical supplies in his hippie van that was giving way to sparks, unexpectedly. “A line Loonie Lois, or, no, Mrs. or Miss Horowitz said in the documentary I shot for the Young Professors.”

“That didn't wind up in the video I corrected the sound on,” Marcus commented. “Because you were using outdated equipment,” the high school drop out British Columbian informed the University-trained Russian.

“In a video that BOTH of you scored with music from MY album, without my permission,” Wendy barked at both of them.

“But accepted royalties for after it went viral, no doubt,” Marcus commented.

“Royalties that you don't need to pay the rent, like those of us driven by Passion instead of applause,” Ivan added.

Ivan, Marcus, and Wendy threw all manner of insults out, each accusing the others of being mercenary, talent-less, Soul-lazy, caught in their own semi-creative loop, out of touch with reality, out of touch with their Inner Core, and finally having horrible taste in fashion and hair styles.

“ENOUGH!” they all heard as insults about who each of the members of the trio degenerated into who their ancestors were racially. When they turned around, their eyes were shocked into nearly closing by a Light as bright as a cave dwellers who for the first time emerged from his shadow infested life when he, or she, saw the sun for the first time. The visitor who sneaked up behind Ivan, Marcus and Wendy was silhouetted so much by the sun that one could barely make out any features.

“Put on your shades if you have to, and don't turn away,” the visitor continued. “Or maybe I'll step into your shadows to give you a better look,” it continued while boldly striding into a position from which she could be seen clearly by even shadow-conditioned cave dwellers.

“Yes, it's me, Lois,” the visitor said. “With different hair than you're used to, different clothes, and a body that seems a lot more able to get around than the one I had few days ago,” the apparition continued as it became more real.

Marcus went pale when he saw Lois with a chin length, trimmed and stylish bob rather than the un-dyed waist-long knots, tangles and ingrained dirt which had been the trademark of the mountain woman's appearance for as long as anyone knew. Ivan pulled himself back, clenching on to the crucifix around his neck which had been in his family for generations going back to Czar Nicholas I, when he noted Lois clad in a clean, flattering business skirt-suit rather than the patched farmer overalls and oversized lumberjack shirts she had used to protect her body from the elements which she wore winter and summer. Wendy allowed her Mind to believe whatever the brain and

physical senses were feeding it, looking down at the apparently resurrected Mountain Woman's feet. "Nice shoes," she uttered.

"Bare feet can feel the ground better, and what the earth is begging to tell you," Lois smiled back as she wiggled her toes, which were connected to feet which did not shake, waver nor provide any excessive motions when laying down one footprint in front of the other. Footprints that she created on real ground, or so it seemed.

"I only thought dead people were barefoot," Ivan said as he ambled his way towards the footprints to see if they were real.

"And illusions, or holograms, can't catch things," Marcus commented, as he picked up a rock, preparing to throw it at the ghost in front of him, or the ghost created in his own imagination.

Wendy stopped the experiment by placing forearm in front of Marcus' throwing arm. The Rock fell on Marcus' toe. "That hurt!" he squeaked like a little girl.

"So did my daughter Gussyng me up like this in preparation for the funeral," Lois replied, stroking her bobbed hair. "It will grow back," she said. "But I would like to borrow your shoes, Wendy, for when I have to go back into town, or want to go back up the mountain."

"Ah...sure," Wendy said, gently taking off her designer fringed two hundred dollar moccasin. She placed them four feet in front of Lois's circle of footprints, according to her instructions.

"Thank you," she said to Wendy, in English, then Cree as she took the mocassins into her hands and put them on her luminescent blistered feet. "And that's a nice and necessary haircut," Lois continued.

Wendy pushed her trembling fingers through her three inch mop, missing the hair that had been attached to it.

"Change is good, you know," Lois replied with an assuring tone. "And some kind of change can't and shouldn't be recorded on film!" she blasted out at Ivan, having noticed him sneak the lens of his video camera out of his half-buttoned coat as he continued to record Lois' bare 'ghost' feet leaving visibly real footprints in the ground.

The camera battery went dead, followed by lump of rock solid bird dung from a branch above that landed, by coincident, on the delete button. "Who the hell are you to do that to me?" Ivan yelled up at the bird who seemed to be laughing at him. "And who, or what, the fuck are you?" he barked at Lois.

"Someone who will provide you all of you with what you really seek, a chance to become the Fire, Light and Warmth that transforms the world, but can never again be part of it,"

Lois said with a warm, caring paternal AND maternal smile. “Cochran will give you the details,” she provided by way of explanation. She then walked into the woods, leaving a trail of footprints in the soft ground. Footprints that were washed away by a bubbling brook upon Ivan, Marcus and Wendy's running up to them, slipping into the sand that had been converted into mud.

The trio looked around for Cochran, whose van was now gone. In its place were envelopes for all three misfits, one labeled 'Wacko Wendy', another 'Mental case Marcus', the third 'Invisibly Insane Ivan'. All were marked 'confidential', as well as 'sustaining if read alone, toxic if shared with anyone else'. Underneath all of the elegantly scrolled calligraphy lay a warning. “Use of recreational drugs prohibited, Madness is best enjoyed straight.”

CHAPTER 9

The assignments given to Wendy, Marcus and Ivan by a resurrected Lois via Cochran were all very different. But there was one thing that they shared in common right now. The worlds they had lived comfortably in now seemed small, irrelevant and transient.

As for Marcus, his Mission was to go into the city council meeting to finish the lecture Lois had started the night she had been taken away by her daughter and son in law, for her own good of course. He was provided with great notes by Lois and/or Cochran.

En route to the Thursday night gathering of the elected leaders of the mountain community, Marcus' large-sized mountain bike felt like a 14 hand Mongolian pony rather than the 17 hand two-wheeled thoroughbred he always envisioned for the beast that on more than one occasion tossed his body onto the ground on the right rather than the road to the left. The five miles between Pioneer Cemetery and the Post office appeared to his inner eye like five hundred yards. The full-sized Canadian banner blowing above the town seemed to be more like a hand-held parade flag. Wherever Marcus looked downward at the town, he saw two legged ants milling around assigned piled of dirt rather than humans who had carried their extra height over him his entire life as if they were giants. Those now-small people left their shops and entered their homes as the sun slowly set over the mountains. A day earlier, those shops seemed like formidable warehouses, the homes like mansions.

From the high points on the hills where he did his comings and going delivering repaired computer parts for the shop's special customer, Marcus could see the points where the mountain town that called itself a city started and where it ended. That widespread Interior BC 'metropolis' now seemed little more than a hamlet to him now. Even the mountains towering over it felt like molehills. The horizon beyond them seemed to be within arms length in every direction he dared to look, rather than being the various expressions of Infinity they had been when Marcus was a young man who had been

conditioned by his well-intentioned xenophobic upbringing to be an old man who would die there, maybe to be buried in Pioneer Cemetery himself.

Though Marcus' eyes only saw smallness everywhere he looked, something between his ears allowed him to envision something bigger, grander and more connected to the world. But focusing his inner focus to that hazy Vision would have to wait till the City Council meeting that night. He felt prepared for it, at least on the outside, his having put on his cleanest and least hole ridden tee shirt and the newest looking used black jeans in his closet for the occasion.

When Marcus turn at bat finally came, he stepped up to the plate with a chest full of pride and a whole lot to deliver to everyone in the ball park. Every idea and ideal in the new 'Gospel of Lois' was backed up at least three facts inserted into the margins of the script on which Cochran put Marcus as the author. The arguments for stopping logging on the upper slopes of the mountain were sound and prophetic. The reasoning for everyone still working at the mill, or the water treatment plant, and private businesses ranging from hardware stores to pizzerias the same pay, by law, as well as their bosses, was logical, legally brilliant and emotionally appealing to anyone with a social conscience. The importance of putting money allocated for building a roundabout advertizing the legendary heritage of the town into books about real history for the kids at the high school so they could become thinkers rather than followers was made as clear as the deep blue sky that enveloped the town for most days of the year. Unfortunately, the members of the city council were more conscious of social perception than conscientious. The audience in attendance were more bosses than workers, and Marcus' ability to read the speeches the way they were intended was hindered by two things.

First, there was Marcus' inability to put conviction into script provided to him, due to his fear of doing any kind of solo publish performance, musically or verbally. Second, the language of a third of the required speeches were in Atlantian (according to Cochran's description) inserted into the script because he claimed that they had magical powers to stir emotions. Still, Marcus persisted in reading, then singing, according to instructions, the words he with which he was entrusted. The mutterings of casual conversation and lingering jokes about Lois among the audience and the council members came to a dead halt, replaced by Silence which seemed to indicate to Marcus that he was being listened to. With someone else's message, true, and in someone else's language, but Marcus was being heard.

Marcus felt like a revolutionary, and even more--- a philosophical innovator. Just like Plato, he imagined, conveying the words of his murdered mentor Socrates to a city which would make his teacher, and himself, immortal. And loved. Indeed, Marcus felt not only Enlightened by the lecture he was assigned to give, but empowered by discovering that he believed in the message of that lecture as well as his ability to be an orator, in English or any other language. He looked up from the papers, and the images inside his head of being in ancient Athens, and saw the 21st century material plane faces of the audience, the speakers waiting to go to the podium afterwards, and the city council.

They were laughing at Marcus, in voice and gesture. Crystyl, dumbshit Barbie once-fuck buddy, and her new brain dead 'manfriend' Ken, gave Marcus the 'loser' signal with their hands, the most popular salutation of his generation. Marcus' mother shared with her fellow church ladies stories about how Marcus was better at tying his hair into knots than his shoelaces when growing up, and that he was now taking special courses on line in how to get his tongue tied whenever he had to use it in public, being the simplest lamb in the flock of the Lord that he was. Marcus' father mocked the Atlantian and English tunes he had sang, inserting lyrics of his own into them with his drunken buddies. The four Young Professors, who had always used Marcus in every gig they played as a drummer because he could keep up with them every night (and didn't even ask to get paid) mocked him with a song of their own. "YOU are garbage, YOU'RE a piece of shit, YOU should die," they drone-sang in unison, pointing to Marcus with synchopated greaser style and millennial pinache.

Marcus never felt so alone. Every life form on two legs in town was now mocking him. Even though he saw them clearly as small, and stupid, he was angry. Angrier than he ever was. Not at them, but at Lois. "Where the hell are you now, Lois?" he muttered to himself. "You give me all this insight, and courage to use it, then hang me out to dry after assigning me to do your laundry and---"

Marcus stopped talking after he heard his own words directed to Lois being echoed, and played back. He looked down at the microphone, and saw another sound-recording device next to it. A device he designed himself to pick up subtle nature sounds, which was now connected to the sound board, managed by the second of the four Young Professors.

Finally, Mayor Norman Lehmann, the dullest person in town who gravitated up to his position because everyone else would be bored to death by the job, banged his gavel several times. He then proclaimed with a monotone, baritone voice from his over-sized bubba belly, "People, we have to move on," the emotionless epitome of procedural lifelessness continued in the serious, no nonsense tone which was his trademark. He looked at Marcus, his former pupil for the three years of High School that Marcus endured, and declared between his OWN ridiculing chuckles, "You, Marcus, are something else. Something else indeed."

"What was that something else?" Marcus asked himself as he walked out of the room, feeling more like Jesus being laughed out of Parliament for preaching love and wisdom than a Messiah who was crucified. He was hit with the realization that the Heavenly Father his Christian mother kept trying to make Marcus believe in was NOT going to intervene and raise him from the dead, or the land of the soul-dead idiots and assholes.

Marcus unlocked his bike outside the Municipal Hall in the parking lot filled with motorized vehicle, then 'heard' from an Orb hiding in the woods, "Find the Buddha, kille the Buddha, then merge with the Beyond Buddha, eventually." It wasn't exactly what he wanted or needed to hear from Lois now, but at least it was something.

CHAPTER 10

Ivan sat on his thrice-reconstructed chair in front of the computer screen in the wall-less 'den' between the 10 by 12 foot 'living' room and the 3 by 5 foot kitchen of his, for this month anyway, paid for apartment. He felt comfortable somehow, hunched over within the space capsule through which he could go to all of those places in Mind and Soul that his body could never travel to again. As he uploaded all the cybertools needed for assessing old footage and seeing what he could do with any newly-obtained video, an image of the Old Country on his screen saver reminded him of his home in what had been the USSR. Such reminded him of what he had NOT accomplished in North America, a place where the brochures said anyone who worked hard could get rich. Clearly, by the looks of the outdated equipment he was still forced to work with, he wasn't. Some of this was due to circumstances behind his control. Some was due to his own moral and psychological miscalculations. The rest of it (perhaps the lion's share of what some would call fate after exhausting all other logical explanations) was due to his inherited ability to be self-destructive to himself. Or perhaps being a hard-working masochist who got further behind economically the more intensely and creatively he worked was due to something else.

It felt like an opportunity for a higher Purpose, being paid 'survival pay' by Cochran, who took orders from a ghost. Or so the freelance videographer and aspiring novelist whose skills were mostly self taught allowed himself to think now that he had a new client. A client who had left the land of the living, as well as the land of the sane, normal and comfortably well adjusted. A client who had taught Ivan that sane, normal, and comfortably well adjusted was another form of dying, which made one not only afflicted with, but a carrier for 'dull out virus', a malady of Soul and Mind which Lois had claimed again and again was at the root of North America's problems and shortcomings. A virus which turned those possessed by its 'molecular ethers' into being lifeless, procedural, psychologically simplistic and hoaky, as well as cruel, 'life' forms. According to what Lois had said, and what the heroes in the novels Ivan started to write but never finished, DOV was spread in many ways, including formulated pop music, though carefully orchestrated 'prescription' notes.

Weed and beer were another one of those things which Lois claimed set people up to become dulled out zombies. Unlike her deluded, happy and now comfortable 'Woodstockers', the old coot had been an advocate of Revolution rather than sex, drugs and rock and roll. So Lois had pontificated on more than one 'lecture for your own good' to the camera, or to any young visitor who Lois had lured into her kitchen with fresh baked NON-weed containing brownies. Ivan recalled Lois' rantings he had heard in person, and those that now popped up on archival footage which almost made it to the trash bin.

The current clip Ivan played again and agoon of loins had her saying, through static of the mic and over-riding BG noise of the woods, "The 'puppeteers above our non vigilant heads' implant into our psychies the idea that true happiness only happens when you

party hard with your buds and pump out the love juices with your fuck buddy afterwards.” More very raw footage of Lois, which the Young Professors never used in the mockumentary about her, had the old coot talking about the 'new Romans', who encouraged 'illegal' party-down activities for the peasants on the weekends, so they would be too tired and worn out on Monday morning to revolt against the Senate and the Emperor in DC. Of course this would be made possible with federally-arranged discounts on great dope, booze and condoms. However, the condoms would have holes in them so that the peasants would make babies that would tie down their time, and make them work harder at the factories to pay for their maintenance in later years.

Lois had medical theories as well, such as the feds and their capitalist moguls forcing doctors to prescribe to ALL of their patients new meds that lowered blood pressure, with 'occasional side effects' such as decreased energy, depression and diminished ability to sense everything around you. Medications that Lois' daughter insisted that her deluded hippie-dippie mom take due to the old coot's high blood pressure. That elevation in BP was, according to the small write up in the town newspaper on the obit page, the cause of Lois' death.

The overworked computer informed Ivan that it would take yet another half hour at least to download the raw and processed footage for 'Loony Lois', the mockumentary about expatriate New Yorker, turned visionary Mountain Woman Lois Horowitz which he shot for the Four Professors, without knowing what they would do with the final footage. The extra clips that Cochran somehow got, and which Ivan had almost deleted, apparently had some extra 'elements' in them that Ivan's computer had to understand, assess and process before incorporating them into his hard drive. It would take a long time to gather all the footage into accessible files. It pissed him off, but after a few loudly expressed expletives, Ivan realized it was Life, or God's, informing him about an important step he had to take before starting in on creating a documentary of Lois on Cochran's terms.

Ivan reached for the shelves of discs made by those with far more money, or talent, than he ever envisioned having, pulling out his favorites. He plugged them into the DVD drive on the still-not-pawned tv. He looked at clips of his favorite films, the ones that inspired him to become a filmmaker, Works, big W. Comedies and dramas from Americans like Scorcee, Russians like Eisenstein. And films from esoteric foreign directors whose works were too deep for Blockbusters to carry, even in Canada. Those films were always a source of inspiration and enjoyment. But now they did nothing for him. They seemed as lifeless and flat as the screen they played on. They were pixals rather than pictures. Data rather than drama. Clips of images that registered in the occipital visual cortex as data rather than images opened up your soul via the gut. “Maybe I'm just getting mechanical again,” Ivan muttered, having had short bouts of such before when doing more editing than shooting,

Ivan took out the big guns, in a discipline he envied and could never do. The Russian filmmaker and writer who was as untalented at playing music as Donald Trump was at conveying sincerity to a crowd of Bernie Sanders-supporting Greenies put on Beethoven,

Zappa and Shostikovitch. To his silent horror, the music sounded like notes. Like it all was from a time that had passed and been petrified.

Hopefully, new music from Wendy and Marcus, with possible accompaniment by Cochran, could bring back Ivan's ability to feel music rather than process the notes, he hoped, and prayed. It had to, for his own sake, and the sake of the new movie he was charged to make which would, according to Cochran anyway, transform the world. A movie that, to be practical, could bring in money to Ivan needed to keep his body alive, and recognition to assure his Soul that it was not time to put a bullet through his head. A movie inspired and driven, frame by frame, before it was even re-edited or shot, by Lois, whose presence loomed over Ivan like a raincloud over a parched desert, dripping life-promoting water sprinkle by sprinkle, on the cloud's terms.

“Why did Loony Lois decide to come back from the dead to haunt me”? Ivan asked as he felt her scalpel carve holes into his head, making her way around his cranium and electrifying everything in it. While still allowing him the pleasure of retaining the headache that started after he got off work at the electronics factory.

Ivan checked the download again, the computer informing him with friendly font and an obnoxiously pleasant voice built into the discount, partially-pirated program, “another hour, or maybe less”, or a “please stand by” appended by “Born to Be Wild” played in the dullest singers and musicians possible. “Maybe it's been inserted into the program by a master puppeteer in Washington, Moscow or Los Angeles whose job was to make the masses complain to their unseen masters by making their lives stress-less, easy and, above all else, mindlessly-happy, 'chilaxing' to such tunes, while lobotomies were being performed on their souls,” Ivan thought to himself in his native Russian. “They again are training us to chase after what we want, but not learn to identify and get what we need,” came to him, this time in a young woman's voice, in Russian.

While the computer took its several other moments to download the footage that Ivan would re-edit into what he initially intended it to be, he treated himself to another dose of misery. He looked at the room around him, noting the pictures of him and Lori, the wife who left him alone in the now lonely 'drywall hut' that at one time had been a palace of marital happiness, that he was unable to accept as bliss. “Better to know Love when you have it than after you lose it,” he said to himself as he recalled those 'golden times' when Lori was totally happy with him, but he was unable to be fully happy with her. “Maybe I'll write a novel about you, Lori, and us, and it will make a million dollars, and we can buy our way back into being together,” he said as he lost himself in the pictures of him and Lori at the park looking at the birds above, one of which shat on Ivan's head when he aimed his video camera at it. A video camera he took everywhere with him. Even when affection-starved Lori repeated blasted into Ivan's ear ---“Living is about experiencing life, not recording or describing it.”

Oh how Ivan yearned to hear Lori's voice again. Even if it was to scold him for leaving the toilet seat up, not washing the dishes completely, or writing on his pad at their nightstand on Sunday morning instead of snuggling up to her for another 'quicky'. Or to

tell him to get his ass out of the Democratic Socialist 'everyone gives according to their abilities and talks according to their needs' Paradise that he was living in between his ears. And oh how he wanted that warbling light coming through the window to stay outside, or go away. That light got brighter and brighter each time he put another curtain, blanket or coat over the window. Oh how he wished to hear Lori say anything to him, in person rather than as an email, or a registered letter from her brother, the family lawyer.

At that very moment, the door opened. Lori walked in, turned around, and stared at Ivan straight into his eyes, something she had not done for a long time. “There are some things outside I need your help with,” she said with an uneasy smile, pain and heartache imprinted into the aging lines that started to crack into her face. “If you're okay with it, that is,” she continued, pointing to her suitcases on the steps outside..

Ivan jumped out of his chair, eager to bring in the suitcases. He didn't care about who was in the truck that bolted off, or the women next to the driver who hugged him while doing so. All Ivan cared about was Lori, who now had returned to him. For good this time, he pondered as he lifted up the two heaviest suitcases with the strength of a lion.

“What are you working on?” Lori asked from a vulnerable and heartfelt voice Ivan had not heard in a long time, taking note of the stacks of coffee cups and wrappers of energy bars next to computer. She looked at the notes next to the monitor, very interested in what Ivan had written down in mixed Russian and illegible English. Then she smelled the coffee cups, wincing at how foul they were. “High octane projects need better fuel,” she said. She opened up one of her bags and pulled out mini-containers of Ivan's favorite brand of coffee. “Columbian Harvest Blend”, with the face of a real coffee bean picker on the label, which he never bought because it was the most expensive on the shelves. Lori put into the coffee maker, something she never did before, as she claimed that 'a woman who make coffee for his man is a slave, not a mate.' “Whatever you're working on, it looks more interesting than that wedding we shot together.” Lori said with a warm smile and open, vulnerable, heart. “If this one's not making you money, is it fun?” she said with eyes on the cluttered desk while preparing the first palatable cup of java Ivan had tasted or smelled in weeks.

Ivan didn't why Lois was interested in his non-money-making work, for the first time in years, and didn't care. He even didn't care about why her suitcases were three times the weight that they were normally as he worked his way towards the bedroom with them. But before bolting forward into the new Paradise that had come into his life, again, Ivan looked around the room, trying to see if 'Lois' was there. Having seen no ghosts, he moved closer to Lori, step by step, trying to avoid the 'walls' on his shins which had tripped him up when he tried to approach her the night she left.

“Anything wrong?” she inquired. “What or who are you looking at? Ghosts again?”

“They're giving me the night off,” Ivan said with a warm and accomplished smile. “And letting me, no US, live life on OUR terms,” he continued as he put Lori's two suitcases

into the bedroom, the entrance to such being free, clear and NOT being watched by any orbs around him, or images of Lois on the wall.

But Ivan did see something unexpected and important in the mirror as Lori came up behind him. She seemed different than before. Not because of the faded platinum hair she was now sporting on her normally brunette head. Or because she was clad in a blue dress layered with sparkly beads, a garment that Ivan offered to buy her but which she vehemently refused to accept, ridiculing him for his 'retro' taste in clothing, as well as life. Or because there was a 'cleaned and sober' glow in Lori's eyes, something Igor had not seen in a long time in her or, to be truthful, in himself as well. No, the woman whose various expressions of madness attracted and baffled him, and had disipated the dull out disease in him when they met, seemed...normal. Sane. Responsible. And lifeless, according to the standards of assessment that had been implanted into his Soul after she had left.

Before Ivan could determine if it was his eyes that were off or whether Lori was just having a bad aura day, the very real body whose image was in the mirror pulled Ivan around, hugged him, and gave him a kiss on the lips. A kiss that seemed...different than he had experienced from her, or any other earthling woman.

“I'm home now,” she said with gleeful and tired eyes.

“Welcome home,” Ivan replied, with a sorrowful and awakened oculars which he dared not let her see.

Lori unpacked her suitcases, starting with the one containing her intimates, humming to herself, ironically, 'Born To Be Wild', with a seductive tone. But under it was a dull, boring, lifeless essence. Indeed, she seemed like someone of a different species. Or maybe Ivan had become an alien himself. He helped her unpack, thinking that maybe feeling things in the real world would get him out of the one in his still aching head.

“So, what are you working on?” she asked.

“A new...eh....comedic satire,” Ivan said.

“With those videos of the town 'talent' show you have on your hard-drive?” she inquired.

Ivan felt his head being invaded again. No one except Cochran, Ivan, Wendy and Marcus were supposed to know that the movie about Lois was to include satirical digs at the townies who showed off their talents at the local variety show, impressing no one but themselves with their abilities. A show which featured the Four Professors as the highlight performers. “I saw your notes on them next to that other project you're doing, whatever it was, and heard that your filming it was another free-bee you offered the community here,” Lori continued, easing Ivan's mind as to how she knew about the video. “But...if you're going to make this thing comedic, or satirical, you have to leave your comfort zone. And stop trying to be, as you wrote in those half written, but well

written, novels of yours, 'wise like a serpent, but harmless as a dove.'”

“I know, ” Ivan replied. He felt hit between the eyes, the DOV inside of him exposed. “And Dull out virus infects those who hang around other victims of it too long, particularly when the ghost of your doctor father is saying 'above all do no harm' and the ghost of you social revolutionary mother commands you to 'make as big an impact in the world as you can,'” replied the Russian expatriate who never voiced a put-down joke at anybody, while absorbing so many himself. He continued flashback gazing on a lifetime that was underachieved, both in the eyes of the world, and himself.

“Dull out virus?” Lori asked as she held one of Ivan's favorite set of lingerie in her hand, a lace red teddy that always made his third leg sprout up at attention before Lori touched any part of his body, or groin. “What's dull out virus anyway?”

Ivan dared to open another level of his third eye and saw something frightening behind Lori's sparkling baby blue ocular portholes. She seemed to be both a victim and carrier of DOV. The colorful wild woman who had brought Ivan out of his academic, head-heavy monastic shell ten years ago now seemed now to be merely a reflex machine geared for passions which carnal only, and pleasures that were pleasant rather than sustaining. As Ivan painfully saw and felt it, Lori was of those souls who avoided challenge at all costs. After years of 'marriage', Ivan discovered that his almost-ex-wife was someone who never developed a taste or hunger for the endorphins underlying the 'joy of discovery'. He was also discovering that he was turning into something inside that he couldn't fathom either.

“You're going weird again, Ivan,” Lori commented, trying to find her way back into Ivan's heart, and maybe soul, while not understanding his Mind.

“I'm just...ya know...” Ivan replied, inflicted with the realization that maybe Lori never did understand his mind.

“Maybe if we work on this new movie you're making, together?” she asked with a warm, inviting smile and vulnerable heart.

It was an offer Ivan couldn't refuse, but had to. One, because Cochran's strict orders, via Lois' Will, forbade him to. Second, Ivan was overcome with the realization that this was a script, and video, that only he could write. One that could, and should, only be narrated by social-anxiety plagued Marcus. And scored by a pop artist who was being transformed into being a real one.

Ivan considered telling Lori that Wendy Sandstorm was assigned to do the music for the severely revised 'Loony Lois' project. It would mean that Lori could get her picture taken with her favorite pop music star, have drinks with her, and go partying into the wee hours of the night with the smash-hit First Nations celeb from the mountain town, along with celebs from Important places like Toronto, Vancouver and New York. But, something in Ivan said that this Passion was something he couldn't share with Lori,

particularly because that seductively now undressed vector of DOV wanted in on it.

“So, you'll tell me about what our next project is?” Lori asked Ivan, stroking his cheek, while unbuttoning his shirt.

“Much as I like to, I can't, or won't,” Ivan said to her in Russian with a wide smile, making it seem like “I want to jump your bones and get my soul lost in them.”

“I'll take that a 'yes',” Lori replied, nuzzling her body against Ivan's. She let him do those things to her that he always did to make her feel better, and those things that made him feel ecstatic. “And I can feel you smiling,” she said as she stroked his upturned lips. “You Russians never smile unless you mean it.”

“Yes, yes,” he replied in English, then Russian, till Lori closed her eyes, having been touched in the right areas, physically anyway. Ivan then felt his upturned lips turn downward again as he gave Lori great 'welcome home' sex. But he also felt, for the first time, that he could never be at home with her. And should never share his inner secrets with her. Especially if she asked him too. Not until she was ready, anyway.

CHAPTER 11

“An interesting re-edit of the viral video the four Young Professors used my music for, with regard to the images anyway,” Wendy noted as she leaned back on the chair in Cochrane's off-season rental cabin while looking at the rough first cut send over to his drop box. “The segments of the talent show featuring the Fab Fuck-any-over-for-a-laugh-or-dollar Four on stage makes me see it through different than the bubba belly beer drinking or weed-taking eyes that were actually there,” she continued throwing down another fistful of sugar-loaded chocolate-chip, Saskatoon berry 'Lady Lois' brand cookies down her throat, not caring if they put extra poundage on her thighs, hips or cheeks. “And the script,” she continued, thumbing through the thick libretto in on her lap for her songs written by Ivan (and edited by Cochran, of course) containing narration to be recorded and video images to be found or shot. “It's got...hmm.”

“Edge. I think,” Marcus noted, fixed on the beautiful-looking plants in Cochran's basement marked 'do not use on pain of death' in three languages. He pondered how they could deliver him to realms as weird, fluid and sensory-awakening as the four varieties of acid he had tried on his own, and the six he had been treated to 'accidentally' at drug parties with Krystyl and the Young Professors. “Yeah, edge,” he let slur out of his parched lips.

“We ARE talking about the script, aren't we?” Wendy inquired of Marcus, her maternal tone bringing him back to the plane of consciousness known as planet earth. “The script had edge, right?” the pop star sensation inquired, being new to what 'edge' really meant.

Marcus perused his own copy of the word-loaded template, fresh off the copier machine

whose home was in the adjacent room of their new client's basement. "Intelligence, depth, fire, humor and a luxury I never thought possible in Real music and film---warmth," he noted, while glancing over to that chamber which Cochran went in and out of, but never invited anyone into. A room that none of the flies and skeeters dared to enter, though they tried to penetrate the 'wall' a foot outside the entrance. A room that the obviously out of town Will Executor, Nerd, Musician and Buddha knows what else went in and out of to fetch whatever his two new clients wanted, or needed. Such included enough money to keep them focused on the assigned work, as well as enough cash to quit their day jobs for the rest of the month, if they wanted to. Still, Marcus could not resist the temptation to walk over the door and see if he could jimmy open the door with a worn out credit card.

"Breaking into your patron's private spaces is not only rude, but bad business," Wendy informed him, having observed the techno-fascinated geek from the mirrored surface of the computer. "It's also bad karma. Particularly when our host said he had to go out to mail a package to his daughter so it would arrive on her birthday, and his ex would not have any excuse to say he was a neglectful father."

"I was being investigative," Marcus replied. "That's what this script says we all should be, investigative," he asserted. Wendy watched Marcus reach deep into his pocket and pull out a credit card with a different name than his on it. He slid it into the slot of the door, easing it open, then feeling an electrical twinge in his hand. The card burst into flames, in synch with a flashing light from behind the door to Cochran's private workshop. "So, Cochran has a Teslian burglar alarm system," Marcus said as he tried to shake and blow the pain out of his fingertips.

"Here!" Wendy said with a warm smile, throwing Marcus a tube of unlabeled lotion from her purse. "My grandmother's secret recipe for touching the stove when its still hot, or being more concerned with igniting your cigarette than taking your thumb off the hot flick button on the lighter."

"A great message to put into a song," Marcus commented as he put the salve on his fingertips, feeling the burn turn into numb. "A sure hit, assuming you can make the words rhyme, repeat it ten times more than any thinking listener can stand it, put it into a melody where you oscillate between a third and a fifth with that 'millennial shrill', which was composed by Beethoven, then discarded by him. Then the marketers sell CDs along with complimentary implants to the buyers to ram into their scalp so their heads follow the bouncing ball on the karioki screen till what's left of their brains fall out of their heads, and---"

"---I know already!" Wendy blasted back at Marcus smart-assed but well deserved insulting grin. "I sung and wrote those song! I am guilty as charged! And to you, and everyone else, who I hooked into liking what I did, who I was, and---"

"---Who you aren't now," Marcus interjected as Wendy burst into tears of disgrace, humiliation then shame. He pulled off the bandana from around his neck, revealing to

Wendy for the first time the nakedness of his hairless chest and neck.

“I don't want your pity,” Wendy screamed back at him. “Or your chivalry, you—” she continued, looking at Marcus as he quickly tried to cover up the tat that was on his chest. Taking note of what Marcus was so quick at covering up, she burst into laughter.

“Yes, it does say “sweetcakes, sugar boy,” Marcus confessed. “I went into the tattoo shop and asked for something Viking. 'Invisible' or something like it, in Old Norse. Then I passed out when I saw the first needle go into me. But it wasn't 'cause I was scared.”

“It was because you were paranoid?” Wendy replied, placing her right palm under her chin like the fucked up 'shrinks' hired by 'Uncle Sol' hired to be her 'artistic advisers'. “Because you were---”

“---Stoned out of my gorde, on some dope that my friends gave me,” Marcus confessed.

“Those same friends who paid the tattooist to put that fag tag on your obviously heterosexual body,” she intuited.

“Yeah,” Marcus related, staring into his a painful past.

“Friends who were known then as the Young Professors,” she continued, going on a hunch from a place in her soul that this 'Lois' trip had opened up.

The shame, anger and fear in Marcus' eyes as he nodded 'yes' while staring into past memories in his head proved Wendy right.

“The Young Professors who today are.---”

“---The real movers and shakers in this town,” Marcus replied, staring Wendy straight into her 'therapist' face. “Along with their minions and fans who could do a lot worse to you, Ivan and even Cochran here,” he warned. “And probably did to Lois.”

The enormity of the task at hand hit Wendy like a ton of bricks dropped by an army of therapist upon an open heart. She instantly recalled what her bush Injun Grandmother said when Wendy offered to put that old woman's legends and proverbs into song. “Give ignorant people the truth too soon, and they will crucify you. If Jesus was smart enough to be an Indian, he would have know that.”

Wendy recalled the answer she gave her Wicka-Christian-Bhuddist granny at the time. “If Jesus didn't get crucified then, what he preached wouldn't be known today.”

“Exactly,” Granny had replied, proudly congratulating her granddaughter with an assuring hand on her shoulder, through a mouth full of more gum than teeth, courtesy of White and Red Police officers, and others. Others who Wendy now had a hunch were related to the Young Professors, or possibly the Young Professors themselves.

She looked around the basement, taking note of what was in Cochran's 'library', a collection of old edition books piled on to of each other on shelves and every other surface not taken up by equipment of botanicals. Never had she seen so many esoteric books about Jesus, volumes on Herbal Pharmacology, and novels by 19th century writers who knew more about the 21st century than any contemporary publishers and most modern authors. Somehow she sensed that the connection between them would be the film, and books, that she, Marcus and Ivan would write themselves. The last of their creative Works, so she sensed, feeling death around the room. Or a plane to which she and her two male co-workers would be transported permanently, very, very soon. Perhaps due to something strange in the air that smelled 'toxic', or at the hands of the Young Professors.

CHAPTER 11

There were many things about the Young Professors which they all had in common. Blake Jackson, Karl Ulrich, Peter Holms and Lance McDougal were all born with silver spoons in their mouth. They were trained by their social climbing parental units to use those mouths to get whatever they wanted, something that sometimes backfired on their, relatively speaking, well-intentioned mothers, fathers and other surrogate upbringers. Everything to the Young Professors came easily, from top grades for mediocre work in High School, to getting laid by top of the line babes who were either moved away when they got pregnant with one of the Foursome's babies, or had the 'accident' taken care of in Vancouver. Within the last year, four of the Young Professors all had graduated from UBC in Vancouver, and decided to come home to 'give back' to the community from which they came deep in the Interior of the Province.

Few dared to question how or why they graduated from four year programs within less than three years, and no one even thought about seeing their diplomas. But they came back 'home' with money. And agendas to continue to work their fathers, and mothers, started, often bailing their parents out of debt they had unexpectedly incurred in the process.

A story was going around that the Fab Four had secretly bankrupted their own parents, then invested the pilfered money into sales of illegal drugs and very real human slaves, then subsequently returned home as rescuers of their families and communities. Detailed accounts of such was delivered from Loony Lois' mouth to selected visitors to her mountain cabin on land that she had defended with a pack of half wild dogs, mickey-moused electrical wiring, patches of poison ivy buried under thick grass, and if that failed, the business end of 'antique' weapons with barrels as large as any modern rifle or shotgun, appended by two crossbows. That most prosecutable tale about the Young Professors was quickly dis-proven in the arena of popular opinion when the Young Professors built an extra wing to the hospital, an additional floor for the library, and a new strip mall that hired every high school kid in town who needed spending money to stick around and start a family. Or start up cash to get out and start some kind

of life elsewhere.

There wasn't anything that the Fab Four couldn't do. They were known as great athletes, exceptional performers under the sheets, smooth but not crude businessmen, superb golfers and crowd-gathering musicians. Individually and collectively they owned and made money on abundant real estate deals as well. As a sideline, they were multinational music video makers who now provided every kid within two hundred miles who thought he could be the next Bruce Springsteen or Garth Brooks the glitziest video possible along with state of the art sound recording. As a cherry on top of the plastic ice cream, the Young Professors provided special arrangements with unnamed out-of-town distributors who somehow wound up giving said non-talented wannabees just enough sales to encourage them to make more videos in the quest for the big score.

When you entered one of the offices owned by Blake, Karl, Peter or Lance, you always got the idea that they thought with one mind, and never got into any arguments with each other. Such was the case, but only because the pecking order they imposed on others below them was within them as well. Marcus, when he was asked to be their drummer, an honor he couldn't refuse, saw first hand that there was indeed a pecking order among the Fab Four, which worked for the group.

Marcus glanced at the latest Real Estate poster of the Fab Four they had put up on all entrances to town from the vantage point of the clunker car loaned out to him by his boss at the computer store to make delivery of computers and parts therein easier than carting them on the trailer behind his bike. The Mercury Sabre guaranteed to be road perfect, and given to Marcus as a gift for staying on as an employee, developed two flats, an oil leak, and a short in the electrical system, for the first time in its 14 year life. While waiting in the pouring rain for a tow from a company no doubt owned by one or all of the quartet, Marcus looked up at photoshopped likenesses of Young Professors on the billboard and addressed their smiling faces.

“Yeah, Blake, you paid me and my buddy Russ Newman off so you could copy our papers and pass car shop class, so your father, who owned every repair shop in town, wouldn't give you a licking at report card time,” Marcus said to the photo medium-nosed member of the 'team', who had the shiniest teeth under a touched up handlebar mustache. “You wouldn't have the brains to do this.”

Marcus heard a hissing under the hood, then did another calculation regarding how much it would cost to fix it, along with of course what he would have to say to any Cop who came along first asking to see his unpaid for driver's license. Such led him to Karl. “Herr Young Professor Urlich,” Marcus barked out in a German accent, complimented by clicking of his heels to the second mug on the poster. Urlich had a blonde blue eyes WASP face with slicked back blond hair and chiseled upturned chin straight out of a Norman Rockwell catalog or KKK recruiting poster that could color coordinated so well with the SS uniform. A uniform that Lois had claimed was in under glass in his grandfather's house, which Urlich claimed was bought as a replica from China when he wore it when playing the lead in the local play adaptation of “Boys From Brazil”, and

numerous music videos. “If you fucked up my car, and life, I'm not blaming you of course. You were trained to follow orders, right?” Marcus shot up at Ulrich, demanding some kind of answer.

The image of Young Professor Ulrich of course didn't answer, leading Marcus to converse with the dude, or rather dud, next to him. Peter Holms was a mathematics whiz who was fantastic with figures, rumored to able to memorize the numbers on any credit card after one glance, and able to calculate multiplication and division in his head without a calculator, and faster than anyone else could punch the numbers into the calculator. He was a natural at calculus too, particularly when he applied it to stock market reports or projected return on any local investment. Peter always wore hats when performing, but did take them off for photos and business meetings. Marcus and perhaps Lois were the only ones who ever saw Peter without the hairpiece covering his enlarging spot of bald. During one rehearsal when a hat-less Peter got wild and crazy with the guitar, that rug got loose, then caught in a broken guitar spring. It took half an hour to untangle the hairpiece from the balding 18 year old from the guitar. All the while, Peter hid in the can, faining a stomach bug, while waiting for special deliver of a new hairpiece. Such was specially ordered by Lance, who led the laugh-fest against Peter, encouraging each one of his band members to join him in cue-ball jokes. All participated except drummer Marcus, who found himself feeling pity for the lead guitarist who had always blamed his less-than-stellar performance on bad background beats and cymbals that clashed with his rythm.

After Peter's follicular secret was covered with a new hairpiece via an overpaid courier, Marcus was rewarded with insults from Peter about his nose, drumming, affinity for music that was out of style, along with the body odor from his hard working body acquired while drumming, saying that 'really cool musicians don't have to sweat'. Others in the band joined in with 'real success is effortless' insults thrown at Marcus, first led, then encouraged, by Lance.

“Yeah, you Lance,” Marcus said to the final face in the mural. A face that was not as Aryan-chiseled as Ulrich's. Not as smiley as Blake's. Not as smart as 'cueball Pete'. But he excelled in one quality above the other four undeclared rulers of the town. “You are a clever bastard, and maybe because you are so clever, and not wise, that makes you a bastard. But because being a bastard, shithead and asshole comes without being wise, or having the smarts to know what goes around comes around, even in your own circle, your days are numbered,” Marcus continued. As to the exact days for that number, that was another matter, but he was certain it would be soon.

In keeping with the script about his life playing in Marcus' head, the tow truck finally came by. The driver hitched the disabled Mercury 20th century Sable to his millennial issue Ford. Marcus took out his wallet and pulled out whatever cash was buried in it. The driver motioned for him to keep his money. While holding the money up, grateful that it was still his, Marcus heard another car pull up to his left. A familiar looking police officer emerged from it, rushing up to Marcus, putting himself in front of the cash still in Marcus' hand. “Hmm...Bribing a police officer,” schoolmate turned cop Russ,

now Russell Newman, commented, stepping into 'frame'. Before Marcus could see what was going on, a shiny black car driven by another Cop pulled in from behind the bush. A sunglassesed man sun-glassed man in a business hip cool millennial business suit complimented by a vintage fedora emerged from the back seat and snapped pictures of Marcus attempting to bribe his good buddy Officer Russ with his top end camera.

After four or five well posed shots, Marcus gave the unrecognizable businessman with the camera the finger. The businessman responded with a laugh that sounded painfully familiar. He took off his fedora, bid 'good day' to Marcus in a terribly fake English accent, then crawled back into the car. He slapped a scantily clad, sad eyed, woman with dog collar around her neck across her face. Then he pointed to his groin, instructing her to do her duty while he unzipped his pants. Bending downward, she opened his pant zipper and did her assigned job. While Master Lance had his eyes closed, sighing out 'hmms' of blissful delight, the young woman whose youth was being stolen gave Marcus a 'please help me any way you can' glance.

“Mind if you tell me what's going on, Russ,” Marcus said to the Uniformed Officer next to him as he was handcuffed by his former school chum and favorite weed-smoking bud.

“I do and it's my sister, or her kid, who'll be in the back seat of that car, Marcus,” Officer Russ gave Marcus by way of explanation, and warning.

CHAPTER 12

The illumination was more fog than light, the smells from the kitchen more odor than aroma. But the food was exceptionally good when it hit the palate for Ivan, Lori and their host, Yannis Diamantis, the owner of the Olympia Dining Emporium.

“So, you like the mousaka, the spanakopita, the shihkabob and the pilafi?” the old Greek restaurateur asked the young Russian videographer and his wife, more concerned with the answer from the latter than the former.

“It was great,” Lori said with a happy grin, as she did to every client she and her hubby was trying to get something from. “Really, really great!” she continued with upturned lips, showing off her pearly white teeth while Yannis' stare intermittently slipped six inches south to the cleavage Lori seemed to be showing off with the new cross-your-heart blouse she got on her latest walkabout.

Ivan watched from a distance across the table from his fellow dinner, fully aware of what Yannis was doing. But he was not sure of what Lori was up to. Usually Ivan could tell if Lori was lying, but this time, his radar couldn't pick up anything. He knew that Lori hated Greek food, especially the selections Yannis had chosen for her. Yet the way she went on complimenting the food to an old man who needed a young woman's compliments to make himself worthy of drawing breath seemed convincing. Indeed, Ivan considered that maybe Lori really did enjoy Greek cuisine. Ivan found himself

questioning whether Lori really liked his grandmother's Russian recipes which he had prepared for special nights when she was working late, or was bummed out at home because she couldn't get any work.

But whatever she was, Lori had become a shrewd businesswoman. No one was better at wooing a client into coughing up a check for a video Ivan had just finished editing than her. She was even a smarter business woman than Yannis was a business man, as she excused herself to go to 'the young maiden's room' with a smile that milked everything from the nectar of sexy, without spilling a drop of slutty. Then again, as she turned around, Ivan took note of her pale face and fragrant ass which revealed that Lori did indeed have to convert the garlic, basil and oregano infested Greek delicacies into watery manure or and stew-like vomit, as quickly as possible.

“A lovely young woman,” Yannis commented while seeing Lori wiggle her ass towards the restroom. “But, still a young woman,” he chuckled, perhaps thinking that Lori was a goddess who needed to be taken care of a powerful mortal, or maybe thinking that she was paying for her false compliments about the food with a hefty dose of the runs and the barfs. Ivan couldn't tell. All he was sure of was that Yannis quickly motioned for a waitress to bring him a special bottle of oozo from behind the bar. “With the young women gone, we experienced men drink, smoke and talk, yes?” the Old Greek continued to his young Russian guest.

“Malista,” Ivan replied with a compliant grin and a noticable yet not overbearing bow of his head, having learned ten new words in Greek prior to the meeting. And recalling stories about how Mozart would have to say 'yes, Emperor, your Excellency' every time the young Maestro was in need of payment from his patron to pay for his rent, food or latest losses at the gambling table.

“Malista?” Yannis replied gruffly with an affirmative nod of the head, leaning forward as the waitress put a bottle of oozo on the table along with two hefty shot glasses. “Between us men, who speak honestly to each, we say 'yes' as 'ne'. You are not my servant after all and I am not your master, ne?” he continued, pouring out two drinks, Yannis insisting that Ivan pick up the more filled one and join him.

Ivan drank the oozo, then a second shot, then finally declined the third. Ivan replied his explanation for such in Russian. Quickly answering his inquisitive host's unspoken request, he continued, in English, “It is a Russian expression from 1833 when the Czar's special minister, and most favorite writer, made a deal with the Siberian tribesmen which made Siberia part of Mother Russia. “We conduct business half sober, before we become fully drunk.” Ivan repeated the 19th century Russian credo several times in his beloved native Slavic tongue.

Yannis repeated the Russian expression as clearly as he could with a half-plastered tongue, Ivan helping him to get it pronounced more clearly each time, and louder. All the while, Ivan declined to tell him that the credo did not have anything to do with 1833, nor Siberian cheiftans, and that it meant “I am an idiot who deserves to get myself fucked by

everyone who I called losers”.

Ivan didn't know what came over him to devise such a joke. He enjoyed the laugh, until he heard then saw two middle-aged Russians come into the restaurant, glancing over the menu, the husband wanting to stay, the wife noting how overpriced it was. Ivan quickly requested Yannis to say the next portion of the 1833 credo in Russian, in words that meant actually 'this is the greatest food in town, honestly.' The husband pointed his lady to the 'Russian speaking diner'. The wife agreed to enter the establishment. The couple took the table at the far end of the room.

“So,” Ivan said to a big-smiled, possibly more drunk than sober Yannis. “To the business of the video I, and my wife, did for your daughter's wedding. Did you like it?”

Yannis sat back on his chair, stroked his thick, gray mustache, and considered the question as if he was Socrates, considering what to tell his student Plato what he thought of his first draft of *The Republic*.

The seconds felt like years to Ivan. Not only because he really DID care what idiots cared about the work he made for scholars, but because his ability to pay the rent and keep Lori from running away with another suppositively rich ex boyfriend, or going back home to live with her well off and pathologically responsible parents, depended on getting paid for the Diamantis wedding video.

Finally Yannis answered, gazing up the sky as if a priest addressing the gods while letting the words lay onto the ears of the mortals several steps below him. “Ivan, the video of my daughter's wedding was insightful, dramatically comedic, comedically dramatic, moving to the soul, stimulating to the mind, and warming to the heart,” he declared.

“So, it all worked!” Ivan allowed to come out of his mouth, the ever-present doubts about his abilities as an Artist dispelled.

“Maybe for Enlightened souls,” the old Greek replied. “But my daughter is a moron, and her husband is an idiot. They like their entertainment simple, stupid and happy. They don't want to think,” he related, after which he gulped down more oozo, disallowing Ivan a clear view of his eyes to see what the real meaning behind his words really was.

“I can re-edit it,” Ivan offered.

“Yes, maybe you can, but you shouldn't, God help and bless you,” Yannis replied, taking out a wad of cash from his pocket and sneaking it under Ivan's plate. “It's half of what we agreed to. Eight hundred dollars. Which is a thousand more than my wife, daughter or son in law will ever pay you. And if anyone asks, I didn't give you any of it, 'ne'?”

“Ne,” Ivan replied, heartbroken, angered and touched, all at the same time. As those emotions were competing for his consciousness, Yannis leaned in towards him.

“I tell you a secret about how to be successful in a world full of idiots and morons,” Yannis said. “Always give the people what they want, the hell with what they need.”

“Doesn't that make you an asshole?” the poor going on busted line Russian asked the rich Greek, pocketing the money discretely under the table.

“Collateral damage, a forgivable sin,” Yannis replied with upturned lips. “So I hope anyway,” he continued clenching on to the crucifix around his neck with one hand, assuring his young student with laying of hand on his shoulder.

With that, Yannis got up and greeted two groups of customers at the door, making them all feel like family to their faces. Two steps after the customers were taken by the hostess to their table, the Old Greek muttered curses and insults at the uni-lingual, neuvo-rich WASP Canadians who carried themselves like they were the kings and queens of England. Ivan seemed drawn to want to understand what made Yannis live the lies that were his life, as well as those who he, perhaps out of necessity, enjoyed deceiving. But such would have to wait.

A call came into Ivan's cell from a number he didn't recognize. Upon picking it up, he heard Marcus' voice, in a tone he had never heard.

“Hey, Ivan. I'm in a jam here, man, and need some wompum fast,” Marcus said in the rythm of a 1969 hippie who got stranded in Woodstock long after the music stopped playing and couldn't find his way out of Yasger's Farm.

“What happened?” Ivan inquired of the quarter-Indian, White drummer, expecting to hear on the Rez and off it. Another story about a friend stealing your weed, or about a body that needed it to make it through the night. Indeed, on more than one occasion Ivan's vodka, or the money to buy such, was stolen from his car by buds who called him at the bar needing a ride back home before their wives got home. Ivan also knew what it was like to have a body that worked better, or at least less neurotically, with ethanol fuel than hot cocoa or Sprite.

But as Ivan listened, Marcus told him the full story about who had him arrested for bribing a policeman. And who was setting him up for bigger offenses. And what would happen to him if he continued doing 'experimental videos' about dead Mountain women. Still, Marcus said that he was dedicated to the task at hand because, as he said, “I gotta, like, ya know, do something Real and Revolutionary before I, like, die, man.”

As Marcus went on, Ivan knew that he could put what his Comrade in Arms (and now handcuffs) was ranting on about more poetically, starting with omitting the 'like', 'ya knows', and 'mans'. And continuing with profound and hopefully dark-humor-infused phrases which were now coming into his rapidly moving mind, which raced along faster than he ever recalled it doing so. But for the car to get out of the starting gate, Marcus needed one thing. Actually eight hundred things.

“I'll get the bail money to you in an hour,” Ivan pledged, knowing fully from the Old Country what happens to people who are put into jail for challenging the system rather than merely stealing from it. He hung up the phone, just as Lori emerged from the can.

“Now that the shit and barf is out of me, did 'Yannis the Grease' pay us?” she inquired.

“He mailed a check, to my bank,” Ivan replied, hiding his eyes as well as the cash in his hand from his wife. “It will take a few more days to clear,” he said by way of explanation. “Actually, he paid us a little extra,” Ivan added, calculating in his head what he would demand from Cochran as an advance, and what he would NOT do if he didn't get it.

“And that extra money is going to...” Lori said, acquiring the ability to understand Ivan's mind at the worst moment possible. She sat herself down. “That Mountain Woman video we're doing!” she exclaimed with glee. “Something we can do together, put both our energy and names on it, for everyone to know it was US who did it!”

“On that project, there are some new developments, administrative issues with the client,” Ivan said, hiding his eyes from his once and maybe still beloved.

“A client who you never named,” Lori shot back, folding her arms. “For a project you don't want me on,” she surmised. “Because you, your new girlfriend Wendy Sandstorm and your new stoner drinking buddy Marcus want to shut me out,” she spat out with her mouth, accompanied by an accusational extended index finger pushed into his face. “Because you think I'm inferior, untalented, expendable, boring, or what?”

“I'll bring you in at the right time, Lori,” Ivan replied after a long pause, his stare still turned away from his soon-to-be-ex-wife who he now loved more than when they were solidly married. “When I can!” he continued, looking straight into her disbelieving and tearful face. One group of uniformed cops came in and sat at the table to his left, then three suits with crew-cuts settled themselves on the table to his right. “There's some things I have to do, alone,” he whispered to her. “For us.”

“Us' being you, that Indian bitch, and that stoner computer geek and...” she replied, appended by picking up a glass of water and throwing it into Ivan's face.

The spectacle evoked more interest than condemnation from his fellow dinners. “Domestic argument,” Ivan declared to the crowd by way of explanation with an 'all is well' grin that one had to always give clients, particularly when you're late in delivery or over-budget with the project. “Nothing important to any of you,” he assured the uniformed cops to his right, and the plain clothes 'whoever' they were to his left.

CHAPTER 13

The basement at Clarence Cochran's mountain cabin became more of a home to Wendy

Sandstorm than anywhere she could recall. She always said with regard to travel that 'home is where the work is', an over-used expression that she over-employed in one of her big hits. It was something that when said to coworkers she needed to convert into colleagues, made them feel at home as well. But now it was about 'Om is where the Art' is. After seeing Ivan's rough cut of 'Mountain Lioness', one thought penetrated into her tired, exhausted and disrupted mind.

“This is too good for any of my music,” she informed Ivan as the self-trained videographer tricked the computer to once again play the defective footage the way HE wanted it displayed. “No, it's too good for any of my music,” Wendy repeated, believing it even more deeply, and painfully.

“But it fits OUR music,” Marcus suggested. He inserted a disc into the ten year old hard drive containing the compositions he and Wendy had worked on together for the last non-stop 26 hours. The outdated computer rebelled at first with two 'gulps', then a loud buzz. But after Marcus communicated with it in an 'ancient and kindergarten' language it understood, accompanied by bangs and slaps in the right places, the old workhorse kept up with the race at hand.

Wendy was shocked at how good she sounded with Marcus' instrumentals in the background. And how authentic the lyrics Ivan wrote sounded through her voice. And how they fit perfectly with the video. Still, she sat back, ran her sweat-soaked and now blistered fingers through the short mop that was once her three foot long mane and said, “It's not fair, guys.”

“That Lois convinced you to chop off your hair, and use your fingers to cut firewood outside and work the guitar with clenched fists when inside?” Ivan inquired.

“That doesn't make any sense,” Marcus replied before Wendy, previously the role model for effortless success, had a chance to respond to the passions and pain of artistic struggle that was now her life. “Lois' spirit is in our head. And the holograms we've seen of her are also in our head. Feeling and hearing her could be a trick from those extra-terrestrials she kept talking to in the sky, or a magician here on planet earth who---”

“---still, it's nor fair,” Wendy interjected, as Ivan played the first video cut with music mixed into it. “It's not fair at all.”

“That Ivan can write it, Marcus can play it, but only you can sing it, Wendy?” Cochran interjected as he wheel-barreled in another load of firewood, placing the driest pieces of the bunch into the wood burning stove. “And narrate it,” he declared.

Wendy never considered herself any kind of narrator, journalist or even teacher.

“It's easy, and hard,” Cochran explained, anticipating Wendy's unstated but still in-process-of-being-formulated question. “Informative, dramatic and comedic narration

lets you feel the music and the message. And speak it in the language of the river, which brings sky to earth, and the inhabitants on the earth to and beyond the stars," he continued with a warm, understated smile.

"That sounds like something Lois would say when she was looniest," Wendy noted as she stacked the rest of the firewood by the wall of the cabin, feeling a cold wind trying to penetrate the non-insulated walls. "Come to think of it," she said as her palm abruptly met yet another splinter, "I think she did say that."

"But no one recorded it," Ivan replied. "At least I didn't," he continued, his eyes downward in shame. "The Young Professors wanted me to save batteries that day."

"What else did Lois say that didn't get recorded, and should be?" Wendy inquired of Cochran.

"Those implants in your head give you the words, and the subtext," Cochran mused as he busied himself with another piece of machinery upon which was inscribed a language bearing characters that Wendy didn't recognize.

Wendy scratched her head, thinking that maybe she could feel something metallic in the small lumps that had emerged on her head where such devices might have been implanted. It made no sense to do so, but she did have more than her share of bug bites on her scalp than normal. Maybe it was because her lodgings now were far more rustic than they had been when she was popular. Or maybe because the isolated cabin that, so far anyway, no one in the valley could find, was secretly owned by some kind of small vermin that dined on human flesh, and maybe brains. Indeed, she recalled one of those wild lines that Lois said in Ivan's raw footage. "Cockroaches, no-see-ems, and tiny leeches are far more intelligent than we give them credit for." But that, as well as other pre-recorded wild lines from Lois were too garbled to be discernable by someone hearing them for the first time. They most certainly could never be converted into sounds and images with broadcast quality in a world where the technical clarity of speech was valued by listeners more than what was said.

"What else did Lois say that we need to preserve?" Wendy self-observed herself asking Cochran.

Cochran proudly retrieved from what looked like a space capsule for chimps two hand-fuls of reel to reel tapes.

"I know what those are!" Marcus declared.

"Yeah, but can you play them back on anything in THIS century?" Cochran challenged. "Particularly after they were..." Cochran turned abruptly silent, then depressed, then angry.

Wendy could not tell if the fixer of all things mechanical and emotional was enraged at

others, or himself. By the blank stare in his eyes, it seemed to be the latter. His pulling away from Wendy when she tried to comfort him confirmed it.

“It's okay,” Marcus said. “We all fucked up.”

“We did things to Lois when we should have done more FOR her,” Ivan confessed.

“And took the time out to actually meet her face to face to see if the video the Young Professors made of her was real,” Wendy noted, feeling to be the least guilty of the trio which now included Cochran.

“There's someone else I have to tell you about, who was far more vicious to Lois,” Cochran confessed to the team he assembled. He stood up, shuffled to the window stared at the stars, becoming lost in the blackness of it the night. “Lois sat down one night at her table, and recorded everything she ever knew, or thought she did. She fed the technician who she hired to record her four plates of stew, three apple pies, and a gallon of black coffee spiked with ginseng to keep him awake, and alert. The session lasted all night, then all the next day, then into the next night.”

Cochran inhaled as deeply as he could, blew out a sigh of pain as well as regret, then continued to speak with a parched dry tone to every one of his words, the effort to do so increasing with every succeeding breath. “The hours flew as fast and as quietly as eagles, soaring up past the clouds, then back down to earth. It was like that wooden table was the center of the universe. A medicine wheel that was a porthole, allowing heaven and earth to share the best elements of what each did, and could do. Those words were so strong, and so bright, that the Light coming in set fire to the brain of anyone who dared to keep their eyes open,” Cochran stated with affirmation. “Finally, when Lois finished, she was exhausted. She went to bed, lay the money she owed the technician on the table, and insisted that he take it. He didn't.” The brightness in Cochran's eyes gave way to tears running down his pale face. Tears that flowed down faster than he could wipe them off. “Instead, that technician....” The rest of Cochran's words were held hostage in his throat.

“...He demagnetized the tapes? Erased them?” Ivan surmised, somehow.

“For Lois' own good,” Marcus added, keeping his distance so Cochran could work out his own grief and shame.

“But he remembered every word in those tapes,” Wendy said as she approached Cochran, gently allowing him to seek comfort in his arms. He wept like a baby who perhaps had cried into Mama Lois' arms as well.

At that moment, Wendy 'got it'. Following the lead in the ethers, or perhaps the implant in her head, she consoled Cochran with words that were her own. But in a voice which was very much like that of Lois.

Cochran replied to Wendy as if she was Lois. And maybe the 20 year old pop star who had sabotaged her own career in exchange for a shot at being an Enlightened Soul in a world that burnt, ignored or ridiculed such, really had become Lois. “You'll write it down, Clarence,” she assured Cochran, addressing him by his first name for the first time. “You write it, and I say it, and if I say it wrong....well....you do whatever you or your ET friends need to so I say the words right.”

After absorbing what Wendy said, meant and had become, Cochran pulled himself out of his grief, held both of Wendy's blistered and splinter containing hands, and said 'thank you.' With that, he retrieved three large legal pads from the only functional drawer of the wooden desk on the cabin and five pens. He grabbed hold of a lantern and sat in a corner of the room, writing, facing the wall and rocking as he put words to paper with a feverish pace. Sometimes he seemed pensive. Sometimes his face showed sorrow. Sometimes he laughed. But he was Alive, seeming to be a man who finally found both his Purpose and Humanity.

Wendy, Marcus and Ivan watched it all. The man who was maybe magician, maybe mind-manipulator, or maybe ET himself who only appeared to be programmed or specially-drugged earthlings, seemed to be more of a love-seeking child lost without his Mama than an independent grown up genius who could determine the movements of the universe. “So, what do we do with him?” Wendy asked Ivan and Marcus.

“That depends on what Cochran, or whatever his real name is, does to us,” Marcus replied, championing pragmatism.

“Or what THEY do to ALL of us,” Ivan added, turning his colleagues' attention to a train of cars coming up the mountain road that no one knew about, or was supposed to anyway.

“Cops, followed by a black Mercedes,” Marcus said, taking Lois' spy glass to his eye as the vehicles worked their way through a meadow illuminated by the solar-powered motion-detector light. “Licence plate on the Mercedes...TOP-LA...”

Before Marcus could say 'W', Cochran had fled the room, taking several of the plants, two of the Jesus books, and the latest edition of Herbal Pharmacology. He locked himself into the next room, then made a run for the woods, disappearing into the blackness of the night.

Meanwhile, bright lights from the road beamed into the cabin window from two police vehicles, followed by the black Mercedes. Marcus grabbed hold of what looked like a ray gun to defend himself. Wendy grasped the handle of a buffalo knife, saying to herself 'it's a good day to die', in Cree, and MEANING it this time. Ivan said a quick prayer in his native language, then resolved himself to whatever fate would happen, as his ancestors had done so many times when confronted with quota-requiring Commisars, blood-thirsty Mongols or invading Nazis.

After arriving, displaying their badges, attitudes, and warrant, the uniformed Cops looked around the room. They took pictures with their cameras without any sense of anger or even interest. Their bosses were two civilians, a middle aged man and woman who were dressed more for a corporate office party in Calgary than a ride in the woods in a small BC town. "So, it's just you three here?" the chisled faced male boss asked Ivan, thinking him to be the leader, due to his calm demeanor.

"Yes," Ivan replied.

"And there is no one else here?" the civilian inspector continued, looking at Marcus.

"No...just us doing a Star Wars skit," Marcus smiled, putting down the futuristic pistol which, he had discovered upon closer examination, was only effective at shooting water at thirsty plants.

"And you must know who we are," the female boss stated, looking straight into Wendy's face. "Because I know who you are, Wendy."

"I thought no one would recognize me like this," Wendy replied, running her dirt-stained fingers through her disheveled mop of chopped hair. "No one in town did anyway all day today, with this new makeover." .

"Which you're doing for a 'movie'?" the woman said, looking at the equipment. "About my mother maybe? A mother who died the night I took her into a nursing home, for her own good," she continued, a tear coming down her left cheek. "Who died from a 'stroke', so a new doctor at the facility said anyway." Her grief abruptly gave way to anger. "A doctor who I will find, and prosecute to the full extent of the law! Along with anyone who knows him, or about him! These Officers will see to that."

The uniformed officers nodded a firm and subservient 'yes' to their non-uniformed boss's claim. Then they took some more pictures inside, sending some of their group outside. The non-uniformed man introduced himself as the woman's husband, and Lois' grief-stricken son in law. Both of them accepted Ivan's story about coming up to the cabin to get some nighttime footage of wildlife. They seemed to accept Marcus' claim that it was a great place to jam without the distractions down below, after which he picked up a guitar and playing a variation on a theme of Wendy's old pop tunes. Both visitors were entertained when Wendy picked up another ax to give the tune rhythm, then added her old voice to the tune.

"That sounds like you but, it doesn't," the woman commented once the tune was over, with a cold, stone face. Scared and suspicious of something she could apparently not identify within herself.

"Every artist has to experiment with what she does and what she is if she's gonna keep people interested in her music," Wendy smiled back.

“Only if she wants to lose fans, and wind up playing concerts to under-filled rooms in church basements or the loony bin,” the man mused.

“There is that,” Wendy replied, trying to not let on that his attempt to be colorful was a painful account of what really did happen to artists who decided that being Real was more important than being popular.

With that, the uniformed visitors to the cabin gathered their equipment and went on their way. The non-uniformed intruders followed, not saying a word. After they had driven out of hearing and seeing range, Wendy was the first to speak. It was a thought she had been incubating in her head ever since the visitors had finished doing their 'routine' rounds on the mountain.

“Maybe Cochran's already ahead of what we're thinking, according to what ISN'T here now,” Wendy proposed said as she perused the cabin 'library'. “He ran away from here with The Last Temptation of Christ and the Passover Plot.”

“Books about Jesus surviving crucifixion, after being drugged with mandrake,” Ivan noted, the pieces inside his head coming together, confirming the identity of the missing plant by thumbing through one of the books. “An herb that, with a few other tricks, simulates death. Particularly to daughters who are afraid of looking at their mother when she's dying, and docs who---”

“---made Lois' first night in the nursing home her last” Marcus offered, noticing a hospital ID on the floor amidst the rubble Cochran created on his exit. “Then reversed the coma with...” Marcus grabbed hold of the medical textbook from Ivan, frantically trying to find what pharmacological truck 'Doctor Cochran' had up his sleeve to revive Lois.

“How he did it doesn't matter,” Wendy proposed.

“Or IF he did it,” Ivan proposed. “The video of Lois' ghost my camera saw had very fuzzy edges to it. Like the ghosts I filmed for Russian Television when I was back in the Old Country with an infrared lens, in the dark.”

“Or the actors who were made to look like ghosts with special equipment that fucked up your footage,” Marcus suggested. “With the magic of film, and the enchantment of music, you can make people believe anything.”

“Like that Lois resurrected from the dead?” Ivan suggested. “Or that she's not dead at all. And could be roaming around the woods, in a real body, right now,” he continued, looking into the dark at objects that, to Marcus and Wendy anyway, were not there.

“There's one problem with that theory,” Wendy offered. “The undertaker who cut her hair, gave her a bath, and dressed her up like her daughter's mother rather than the Mama of the Mountain would have noticed if she was still alive.”

“Or Larry Lehman, the town coroner, was paid off to not say that she wasn't dead,” Marcus added. “Just before he put up a 'for sale' sign on the window and fucked off to somewhere, without any forwarding address. While in the meantime, Lois is---”

“---A ghost! Lois is a ghost now,” Ivan interjected. “More real than anything in this realm, and more powerful than anything in the reality we live in,” he continued, shuttering in terror with every motion in the woods outside. Hearing sounds that apparently only he could hear, or feel, inside after the ghost penetrated through the wall. He crossed himself, delivering prayers to every corner of the room in Russian and English. “In the name of Jesus, return to God,” he said again and again.

“While we do her work here,” Wendy said. She picked up a sheet of paper upon which Cochran had written the keynote dialog Lois had delivered on her 29 hour 'communication with the Core of the Universe' marathon. After reading the words, then feeling them, she put voice to them. It was a voice that sounded identical to Lois, but was, in this realm anyway, still Wendy's.

“They'll do a voice match with the computer to see if it is Lois, or Wendy trying to sound like Lois,” Marcus commented to Ivan after recording the first segment of Wendy's narration in speech, then song, while Wendy rehydrated herself with cold mountain water and made in China honey.

“But before that, they'll feel what Lois meant by those words, and Wendy's dedication to keeping them eternal,” Ivan shot back. “Besides, everyone knows Lois couldn't carry a tune.”

“They will now,” Ivan replied. “Like they believed the narration of twelve dedicated Jewish publicists about Jesus. And, even if Jesus never existed, the world needed him to have lived. So what he said, or the people who invented him needed the world to know.”

“I thought you were a Christian,” Marcus pointed out to Ivan.

“I don't know what I am anymore,” Ivan confessed, relating the realizations coming into his head and perhaps expanding pragmatic consciousness. “But I DO know that we have to use whatever footage we have to keep Lois' words Alive.”

CHAPTER 14

Marcus wasn't sure how safe Wendy's 'secret hideout' really was. After all, it was Marcus who got roughed up by the Cops who were on the Young Professors' payroll. He was the one who felt the slam of the door behind him after he was escorted into the cell, without his shoes, belt or any electronic devices to reach anyone on the other side of the wall. Still, he agreed to move shop to wherever the sheltered Indian pop star wanted

to go. Ivan agreed as well. And as it was two against one, majority ruled. Not that Marcus was unaware of what majority rule meant. Majority rule got Hitler elected Chancellor of Germany. And got the Young Professors into every position of power available in town.

While packing up the computer equipment, it was Marcus who found the legal pad upon which Cochran had written what he remembered from Lois' 'discourse with God' during the 29 hour marathon he recorded due to his interest in her, then erased for her protection. Or perhaps his. In any case, that legal pad, a 'good luck' card and a key to the back room which he always kept locked, or tactfully guarded, was all Professor Cochran left the students he, or someone, had selected for Independent Studies at Lioness Lois University. Marcus wondered what the graduation prize would be.

Ivan gathered together the computers, recording devices, and lights that he knew was needed to continue constructing the video that would show the world who Lois really was. Meanwhile, Marcus rummaged through the electrical toys that seemed to have no other purpose than to make the new owners of such wonder what they were actually for. All of them were in some way or another hybrids of 20th century pre-microsoft technology and something from a futuristic time, or planet.

How Marcus yearned to do a film about Cochran, who seemed to be more of a mystery than Lois ever was. But, such would have to wait. There were transportation issues at hand, since Cochran had taken his down the mountain, leaving a vehicle from a previous century in the unpaved 'driveway' as the only way out.

“Lois' hippie mobile,” Wendy commented regarding the surplus assets mini-bus plastered with philosophical mottos, credos and enthusiastic suggestions the crazy Mountain Lioness came up ever since she declared herself independent from 'life-death down below' at the re-discovered age of 40. “Without the keys anywhere in sight,” she noted, searching through every nook and cranny of the only vehicle left in town that had NO computer under the hood.

“No problem,” Marcus said, after which he hot-wired the engine into a gruff yet compliant 'purr' in as many seconds as he could hum the first five notes of the newest song he wrote for Wendy to give voice to.

“I know a lot of people who would pay big money for what you just did,” Wendy said. “Knew them anyway,” she continued, reflecting on the affliction of conscience that had infected her once-popular soul.

Marcus looked at Wendy and saw someone else. Someone other than the pop star who every girl wanted to be, and every guy wanted to be with. Someone who he wanted to be with, and now felt worthy of being with, finally. But only after SHE said it was ok. And the ghost of Lois of course, who seemed to take over her eyes, which sparked in the moonlight, sending out hues that had no description in any color wheel, or verbal descriptor in any color correction program that Marcus had ever used.

“The answer to your question is...yes,” Wendy said to Marcus, answering his unstated question, in her own 19 year old voice, and an Ancient smile. “When the time is right,” she continued, in Lois' voice. A voice so authentic that Ivan froze dead in his tracks as he brought out the first box of computers.

“It's ok, it's me!” she assured Ivan. “Unless you fuck up, and need me to scare the shit out of your wife, if she decides to come to the hideout that I KNOW no paleface in this town, or paid off Injun on the Rez, knows about,” she continued, as Lois.

“She's kidding,” Marcus said to the very pale faced Russian who seemed sure he saw a ghost. Marcus took the box of computer equipment from Ivan's shaking hands, assured that his Russian friend would be too scared to even consider trying to get in bed with the 'new' Wendy. A new Wendy who Marcus found himself falling in love with, no matter how many women or ghosts were inhabiting her body, or mind.

CHAPTER 15

Wendy's getaway cabin lacked a definable road for entry, walls on the inside to delineate which 'room' you were in, and privacy for anyone wanting to take a shit in the crapper. But it was not without character. The table in the 'living room' was a large oak slab with etchings from writers with plain first names or colorful nicknames, carved into the wood as far back as the middle of the last century. Each of the inhabitants or users of that generator-powered establishment with no mailing address seemed to have left something behind relating to their craft, calling or criminal activity.

While setting up his recording and editing equipment, Ivan thought to himself how interesting it would be to do a documentary of this place, the narrator being the walls. They were lined with bottles containing illegal moonshine, packets with remnants of 'oregano' which would never be served at the cafe downtown advertising 'all the food you can eat', rifles with notches on the wooden stock that had tinges of blood inside them, and faded photos of faces with happy smiles and tortured eyes.

While Marcus did the heavy lifting, and Wendy resurrected the electrical wiring, Ivan looked up at the ceiling, feeling orbs circling around. “Okay, my tired eyes see you, but my still-clear mind says you aren't there,” he said to 'them' in Russian. “I will share my mind with you, but not my vodka!” he asserted, taking a flask out of his pocket, then indulging in a hefty sip bordering on being a gulp. He looked back up at the ceiling and noticed that he was alone again, proving to himself yet again that for a Russian, vodka clears rather than clouds the mind.

But maybe there were other reasons for the orbs taking an exit stage left. Bright lights shone into Ivan's face, from the window. “ET's?” he thought to himself, until the starship revealed itself to be a '98 Honda with three and a half working headlights, and a motor that clunked a burst of 'loud' every sixth beat. “How did my wife Lori know we

were here?" he screeched out.

"Because you called her?" Marcus replied as the car slowed down to a halt.

"I hope," Wendy added. She sneaked a vintage revolver into her pocket, slapping double-barreled hideaway gun into Marcus' palm, and throwing Ivan an accusing stare. She opened the latch to the door, then hid against the wall behind it.

"I didn't tell her where we were, really!" Ivan claimed. "Ask her!" he asserted as Lori entered the unlocked door, carrying a large cardboard box in her arms.

"Ask me what?" Lori asked Ivan.

"Why you found us here," Wendy asked, pointing her gun at Lori's head while she instructed Marcus to take the box from the uninvited visitor and examine what was under the hard metal plate covering it. "And why you brought us--"

"---Pepperoni, pineapple and meat lovers," Lori informed Wendy as the once-pop star smelled the pizzas in the box. "My contribution to the Cause," Lori continued, as Wendy ran her fingers through her hair. "Including trying to see what Ivan, MY not yet ex-husband, is up to," Lori spat at Wendy, then Marcus, after which she approached Ivan with open arms, seeming to want and need a hug of caring, and affection.

"Who else knows where we are, Lori?" Ivan asked, embracing her with firm arms and a cautious heart.

"And how did you find us?" Marcus added.

"With the GPS microchip my lawyer's private investigator said I should keep on the man who I am not ready to let go of yet," Lori replied. She pulled a small bead from Ivan's scalp. "It survives shampooing, bashing your head against the wall, and---"

"---Did anyone follow you?" Wendy interjected.

"No," Lori delivered to Ivan's disbelieving face, with something she rarely exported in his presence---the truth. "At least I don't think so," she admitted to Ivan's new 'family'. "No, I'm sure I wasn't followed."

Wendy put down her revolver, exchanging it for a long barreled Henry rifle. She aimed it out each window, trying to follow any motion in the woods with its infra-red detector sites. Marcus hooked up the electrical surveillance system left by the previous occupiers of the hide out, and some how connected it to the equipment he had taken from Cochran's mountain 'laboratory' to detect anyone who was following, or lingering outside. Ivan looked for the truth of Lori's claim of not being followed in her eyes.

"She's telling the truth," Ivan assured his colleagues.

“As affirmed by my own eyes, for now,” Wendy said, having checked every access to the cabin from the access route below.

“And Clarence Cochran's,” Marcus added. “For now.”

“‘For now’ is all we have,” Ivan said, stroking the tears from Lori's face, finding the face or courage underneath it.

“We're ALL in this together, right,” Lori informed Ivan. “Whatever ‘this’ is.”

“Something we have to do fast, and without any more uninvited guests,” Wendy informed Ivan, closing the door, then locking it. “You said there was a deadline for all of this, right?”

“Your contact at PBS can get this on the air next week if we get it done tomorrow? And CBC here in Canada? Displacing all previously scheduled programming?” Marcus asked Wendy, like a child asking the nearest adult when Santa will be coming down the chimney.

“Which I still think is impossible, in any broadcast world I'm familiar with,” now ex-pop star Wendy threw into the mix. “Norman MacDougal has other bosses now. Bosses who he just got last week. The Jim Peterson at the head of it all.”

“Formerly Dimitri Petrovitch,” Ivan smiled, having heard a connection that connected many scattered dots as to why he recruited as one of Lois' 'disciples'. He picked up four mismatched plates from the rotted out cupboard, placing a slice of pizza on each of them. “Who still owes my father in the Old Country, for things my father never told me he did for them. Favors that he willed to me if I wanted to, or dared to, or needed, to collect on them.”

“And if our unscheduled nationally-aired movie doesn't make money for these investors?” Marcus asked.

“They can film our execution after this documentary we're doing gets aired,” Wendy said as she lifted up her plate, smelling the meat on the topping. “Or make us disappear in the middle of the night to re-appear on a meat lover's pizza from Papa Guidos.”

“I wanted to be immortalized as meat filler in Chow Mein,” Marcus mused as he picked up the slice of Pepperoni, after which he bit into it and found it very much to his liking. “Eat of my body, I hear whoever this was saying to me from the beyond,” he continued with a wide smile and reddened lips.

Ivan self-observed himself smiling. Then he heard Lori laughing. She picked up her slice, slurping in the overfilled toppings past her lips. Lips that seemed to Ivan to be more beautiful than ever. As the time clock in his head said in an ugly yet life-asserting tone,

in his slain father's voice: "This could be your last supper. Make it meaningful."

CHAPTER 16

"Lois the Lioness" was an unexpected replacement for the reruns of the procedural Cop and Lawyer shows, and the Olympics features absolutely no Americans or Canadians even getting close to getting bronze metals. But as all programmers know, mainstream viewers will watch anything on screen, as it beats looking at each other in the living room or themselves in the mirror in the privacy of the can.

The feedback e-boxes of every station broadcasting the film filled up with misspelled sentences lacking any capital letters filled with distain for the 'self important' eggheads who turned their favorite First Nations star into a revolutionary radical. There were also some terse, literary poetic statements of thanks for making television meaningful again. At least according to Cochran, who had found his way to Wendy's hideaway cabin an hour before the coast to coast airing of 'Lois the Lioness'.

"You really stuck it to the Young Professors, in this town, and in a thousand other towns like it," Cochran said while filling his belly with badly needed food, after having showered off a week's worth of grunge accumulated while hiding in the woods, in locations he said had to still remain private. "For mutual good of course," he explained with a satiated belly and a satisfied mind. "So, I have some ideas as to what we can do next," he said as he leaned back on the three and half-legged chair which was the sturdiest in the cabin, daring it to behave like a rocker.

"Us getting back to our lives would be a good idea," Wendy suggested as she toweled off her wet hair after a badly needed shampoo, not recognizing herself in the mirror.

"And making babies of our own instead of trying to educated childlike minds of grown ups," Ivan added, gently patting the belly of his smiling wife Lori.

"And these new ideas, are they yours or Lois'?" Marcus asked Cochran from the corner of the room, while still absorbing the copy of The Last Temptation of Christ left behind from Cochran's library. "And as for our old lives, I can't go back to mine."

"We know, Marcus," Cochran smiled back. "By the way you watched, without any emotion, the replay of the broadcast. The reviewers who said you were brilliant, bold and ballsy. And the ones who said you were either an asshole or an idiot. We saw you being detached from praise or blame."

"It comes with being tired," Marcus commented with an indifferent sigh as he turned the page of Nikos Kazantzakis' most dangerous, and insightful book. "And who is 'we'? The orbs floating who bunk out on the ceiling at night when I'm trying to see through the roof up to the stars? You and Wendy, who don't see eye to eye on anything? You and

Ivan whose stare never left the monitor screen?”

“Me and Cochran,” Marcus heard, in a voice he had heard again and again while editing the documentary-drama-satire.

“You can stop imitating Lois' voice now, Wendy,” Marcus delivered from the side of his mouth, his eyes focused on visualizing Katzanzakis' words coming to life between his ears. “I'm trying to decipher the Inner Truth about the Jesus gospel, story or myth, here.”

“Then maybe you should be reading the other Jesus book again. The Passover Plot, maybe?” came into Marcus' ears again, with the tone of a school teacher, Priestess and Philosopher-Queen.

Marcus replied to the Ancient Voice with an upwardly pointed third finger.

“Honoring the reverent Essence with honest irreverency! The highest praise to the Divine Essence!” Lois' proclaimed, after which she let out an unbridled belly laugh. Then appending it with Cochran's copy of The Passover Plot, dumped onto the book in Marcus' hands.

As Marcus saw then, the wrinkled hands seemed to glow in the dark. “If you're Wendy, interesting mix of latex and florescent dye.” He felt lightheaded, then...weird. “If you're a cartoon character in my head, the mushrooms in that ommlette I ate for lunch will wear off,” he continued, surprised that he was a lot braver about enduring bad acid trips than any other he had taken, or been sent on. “If you're an orb, or some kind of ET---”

“----Read it!” the voice said, pointing Marcus' eyes to a paragraph lightly highlighted with pencil. “It will explain everything.”

Marcus tried to move his head up towards the owner of the hand. The other hand, or something, slapped him on the head.

Knowing that there hell hath no fury greater than a pissed off ex-pop Injun star, an imaginary demoness with PMS, or an ET who hasn't been laid in a hundred or two light years, Marcus obeyed.

His eyes read the passage where Jesus talks to Judas about using mandrake root to lower his heart rate and diminish his breaths to where they can't be seen or heard. Then she directed Marcus to another page talking about Jewish actor would masquerade as a Roman Soldier and put a fake spear into the Messiah's body to make it look like it penetrated the heart. Then the passage describing paying off the guards at the 'sealed' tomb who would let the midwife in to give Jesus the antidote enabling him to walk out of the easily opened doors. Then, the conversation Jesus had with Judas to not hold back the truth from most of the other disciples because they were bad actors, as well as not advanced enough in the mind to understand that sometimes a white lie about resurrection can result in a

Liberating Truth that would save humanity.

Marcus absorbed the passages, and their application to his present era, and available materials. “The pharmacological cocktails in Cochran's books, added to mandrake, with a touch of tetrotoxin,” he surmised. “Combined 'Doctor Clarence' coming into the nursing home where Lois 'died' just before her daughter came in. A daughter was squeamish about seeing dead bodies, with a lawyer hubby who feared them,” he continued. “But the real antidote that woke you up to be resurrected, in the real flesh, Lois was,” he said, looking upward.

“You, and your comrades here,” Lois smiled back into Marcus' tired yet awakening eyes, from a body that was real, and a smile which was trustable, warm and appreciative. “With the help of a few drugs that, well, you didn't have to know about,” she continued. “But I'm sure were one or two days away from figuring out, from your own Aboriginal culture,” she said to Wendy. “I am sorry to not be a ghost, because angels are more magical, but real people are always more effective,” Lois said to Ivan as he clenched onto the cross around his neck, and his wife Lori desperately held onto his big, strong arms, hoping he could protect her from the apparition which was very, very real. “So, how do I look?” Lois asked, turning to Marcus. “Honestly.”

“Well, the shoes don't fit your feet,” he said regarding the size 12 Combat boots on the size 7 feet which she had covered in moccasins, shit-kicker cowboy boots or, when the ground was more mud than dirt, Salvation Army 'vintage' rubber gollashes. “The green on white on brown suit just isn't your color,” he commented regarding the macho paramilitary camafloge trousers and coat around her still feminine 70 year old limbs. “And the hair, or lack of it,” he commented regarding the buzz cut that now replaced her long mane of white hair that had never seen a bottle of dye while she was alive.

“My GenX daughter requested of the undertaker that I look like Harriott Nelson, with that bobbed and proper 50s' look,” Lois commented as she strode around the room with shaky feet, looking at the printouts of the reviews of “Lois the Lioness' strewn around the room. She stumbled every third step, nearly stumbling, but refused help from anyone who offered it. Particularly from Cochran, to whom she turned her hunched over back.

“What do you want us to do, Lois?” Cochran asked.

“What we discussed, originally, Clarence” Lois informed her assistant. “What we always intended,” she asserted, turning up from a painful bend into a straight and upward posture worthy of a Queen Elizabeth, Maggy Thatcher and Marie Curie at their prime.

“But after all they did for you,” Cochran pleaded with his sovereign mistress and friend.

“And what they did TO me,” she blasted back. “In the pre-quel to this film.” She looked accusingly at Ivan, Wendy then Marcus, saying everything with her eyes.

“I didn't know what the Young Professors would do with the footage!” Marcus replied

regarding the video they had put together that discredited and ridiculed everything Lois did and was. "I didn't know what they intended to do!"

"But you should have," Lois shot into Marcus' oculars. "You all should have known better," she continued, admonishing Ivan, then Wendy.

"What about me?" Lori said. "I didn't even know what Ivan was doing with the Young Professors."

"And you didn't have the mental capacity to figure it out, my dear," Lois said, after which she gently stroked Lori's shaking cheek. "You, I can forgive."

"And us?" Marcus interjected. "Wendy, who can never go back to being a pop star, or her people back home on the Rez. Ivan, who now owes more favors to the Russian and Chinese mob for getting the real movie about you aired than he can ever make in royalties for it. And me, who...who..."

"...Whose eyes are opened to the way the world really is, and whose hands, and mind, are not strong enough to fix it?" Lois said, after which she shot an ambiguous smile at Marcus which he saw with a frightening perspective.

"Is that a reward or punishment?" Marcus inquired.

"A consequence," Lois replied after a long, tense silence.

"What about the death threats from the Young Professors, the Authorities on their payroll, and the Corporations your speculations revealed as facts, which will shut them own if any of us live long enough to prove them as facts?" Ivan challenged.

"As you can see, there are a lot of people who want to kill us," Wendy said, gathering several print outs verifying such.

"And can," Marcus asserted as Lois perused them.

Lois answered in Cree, with a big, wide smile as she opened the door and stared into at the Big Open..

"I know, 'The Greatness of a person is measured by the number of his enemies'," Wendy translating the Old Sagess' with an angry eyeroll. "It makes for blockbuster copy in screenplay, and I used a loose translation of it in a song once that went platinum."

"You'll have to write it again, for an audience that THINKS about the words this time, and make it about more than being popular on the school playground or dance-floor," the resurrected Lois replied, after which she turned to her three inspired, terrified and angered 'disciples'. "And I think you, Ivan, and Marcus are up to that. You'll have to be, in any case."

“Before or after we get done in by, banished from the world as we once knew it, or killed?” Marcus boldly inquired. Or at least he hoped it was boldly.

“The pain, inconvenience and difficulty of being dead is overrated,” Lois smiled, after which she hobbled past the cabin door. Reluctantly she accepted Cochran's help she mounted a horse whose saddle was loaded with supplies. He handed her a lead line to a mule loaded with enough supplies to build a yurt and sufficient high tech defensive or possibly offensive weaponry to prevent any 21st century Cossacks from taking over it. She took the lead line with a firm hand, after which Cochran gently kissed it.

“You're too young for me,” she said to him fondly. “But I appreciate the offer,” she said.

“And I'd appreciate some technical explanations,” Marcus interjected as he stepped in front of the horses with his two once young and now very old between the ears compadres.

“Or confirmation,” Ivan said, looking at two of Cochran's 'plant waterers' that looked more like ray guns aimed at each of the four directions around Lois, small lights on them turning on and off with an ominous buzz to them. “These irrigation pistols maybe can double as devises to spit out electric fields that create walls to keep Russian filmmakers from entering the bedroom when their wives are packing their bags?”

“That night when you, Ivan, kept tripping over yourself when I thought you were drunk?” Lori asked as she approached her re-found husband, then tried to sneak around to Lois' left. She hit a brick wall in thin air, falling back into the arms of a loving, and terrified Ivan, who this time did NOT hold onto the crucifix around his neck.

“I know what you're thinking, Ivan,” Lois said from atop her mount, tightening the girth. “If ghosts aren't real, angels can't be either, and by inference, God is an illusion of the mind or mistaking scientific phenomena as miracles. Which is in the realm of logical possibilities, if you choose to be merely logical.”

Ivan considered it all, in ways that he never wanted to, but needed to.

“And my hearing, and feeling, voices in my head that felt other worldly?” Wendy challenged. “White Noise, Silence or some kind of subliminal music that came into my head at the Powwow through those ear-buds, and the walls of my hotel room, Cochran?” she continued, staring accusingly at the mortal behind the miracles.

“Musical and other formulated sounds that affect human behavior, simulating wonderment,” he related without apology.

“Formulas that should never surpass wonderment,” Marcus asserted. “Music, words, sounds, and montras that affect human behavior were found, composed, written and channeled through Souls who were connected to Spirit, not material world reductionist

logic,” he continued. “As long as me, Ivan and Wendy have anything to say about it, music, films and even books are going to be about wonderment and spirit rather than formulas and pixels!”

“Final lesson learned, and most important mission stated,” Lois said with a smile in her eyes that said 'it is accomplished' as loud as thunder, and as un-capturable.

With that, Lois rode down a narrow mountain trail leading to dense woods that seemed impenetrable to anything on four wheels. As Marcus saw, and felt, it, the trees seemed to open up for her entry through them, then close behind her as if to say 'in your time, which will not come yet for a long time, God bless and help you.' It was the first time that Marcus felt the voice of “God”, feeling instantly that he could not shut his ears to that Spirit beyond spirits, whatever It was. Just as he couldn't shut his heart after Lois had opened it. By the way Ivan and Wendy looked at each other, then Lois, they had been inflicted with the same affliction, and Blessing.

END