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## PROLOGUE

The staff and patients at Utopian Memorial usually referred to their bosses and caretakers as Doctor, followed by their Surname. But as for the one in charge of this case, the one who took the most care for how it was going, he was known only as Doc Mikey, though the diploma on the wall of the office he called home said Doctor H. Michael Papadopolis. No one knew what the H stood for, and no one cared. He supposed that he deserved the revered title of Doc Mikey because he didn't drop the H. He had long ago forgotten what it stood for himself, as that was a past lifetime. Yes, he dared to face the abyss, and observed himself flying rather than falling. At least on a good day.

Those who go from trying to correct ailments of the human body, to being a practitioner who sought to correct afflictions of the human mind, to dedicating oneself to bringing spirit into the grand picture set themselves up for failure even with success stories they inherited from other crusaders in white lab coats who had more letters after their name than in them.

On this exceptionally warm late February Day, Doc Mikey took a break from his normal rounds to look at something very strange in the enclosed open aired garden. Yes, there was a patient there who fancied herself as being Catherine the Great on a good day, Krazy Katey on a not so good day. No one could get into her head, or mind. Not that anyone would want to with someone who had no visitors even asking about her beyond her in the last four months. She came from an 'established' family, whose reputation was well known and whose worth on the stock market of course was kept confidential, with of course the real reason for her madness. She had taken to trying to good things that seemed impossible and inappropriate to the world as it is. That pathological obsession was what drew Doc Mikey's attention to her above his other patients. In the meantime he was buzy with his own quagmire of 'mental aberrations' which he, so far anyway, had hid so well from his patients, the staff and himself.

"Krazy Katey is talking flowers out of the ground, or thinking she is," noted a nurse in a color-loud smock more suited for the retail check out at Pet Smart. On that new brand of garment which was now the uniform for middle tier caretakers, there were animals who looked more like demons than ambassadors of childhood dreams to life-weary adults. "Is this part of your new therapy, Doc Mikey?"

"For her, and the flowers," he replied, absorbed in both thought and dreams.

"Even though it's supposed to snow tomorrow," Nurse Andrea, according to her log-bearing nametag, said. "Even if she can get those buds to sprout bright red flowers

and beautifully yellow pedals, they'll die tomorrow.”

“Yes, but they will blossom today,” Doc Mikey replied, defying the Nurse and the world she represented with his determined eyes and a smile of joy kept between his cheeks.

“If you say so,” the comeback from Nurse Andrea with a roll of the eyebrows, and no doubt blabbering about what was came out of the eccentric old way before his time 30 year old Doc’s mouth, and what he was imagining in his head. “And too much introspection is dangerous for your health,” she continued, laying her hand gently on his arm. “According to the latest article in Psychological Theory and Practice.”

“Introspection is for Freuds’ ghost, and actors who think they need to find the Socrates inside of themselves so they can play The Greek Theatre convincingly,” Doc Mikey recalled having been said by the Hospital Director behind his back when he had left the room to take a piss. “And those who want to be inmates here rather than employees,” followed by chuckles from the New Age shrinks as well as the old fart psychiatrists in the Doctors’ lounge.

Maybe Doc Mikey did deserve to be ignored, ridiculed and ‘outcooled’ by every clique. *Punishment for a past lifetime on top somewhere when I fucked up lots of people on the bottom*, he attributed it to. *Or a curse that a resurrected Greek god decided to exert on me so said diety would justify his renewed existence in the universe of ‘the real’*. But there was one case of psychological experimentation outside of the lab or the clinic that had proven every ideal he ever held as both fact and truth. He knew the two patients in the self-administered study very, very well. Or so he thought, as he recalled how it all started. It was time to put it into print, the sense of urgency had never been greater for him or the two ‘n’ values.

## CHAPTER 1

Carla and Karen Steiner were both born as accidents, both with regard to the time Nature required their souls to enter the womb of their mother, Emily, as well as the matching genders and biology they came out as on their shared birthday. Emily and Frank Steiner had planned on having two sons and the same number of daughters, spaced a year apart, as was tradition for them in their ancestry. They were a sensible couple, who fit into the life in a small Canadian town which called itself the city of Hillside. The Saskatchewanian prairie ‘burg’ was named more for the rolling mounds of dirty around it which, truth be told, were artificially made from garbage that no other town wanted, and which Hillside accepted in the hope that the hill would become a small mountain that could be converted into a ski resort. Such was one of many failed experiments which the inhabitants of Hillside indulged in which they rationalized as ‘endeavors with unanticipated modest successes’ between themselves.

Such followed a tradition going back to the first White settlers, embittered

ex-Confederates who decided that perhaps Western Canada could become the New South. The heat and sunshine-loving Southerners actually believed the ads put into their newspapers saying that winter in the weather-protected valley was 'not any worse than Switzerland' figured out soon enough that such meant on the tops of the mountains there. Rumor had it that the ads was placed by one of the slaves the Confederates once owned. Taking over what was left of the abandoned barns, houses and meeting hall after the failed attempt to reproduce Alabama on the Canadian prairies were idealistic Ukrainian anarchists in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They intended on setting up a Democratic Socialist Paradise where everyone was equal. It worked until they were required to elect a Mayor, who as his first act to stimulate the economy, upped the prices for feed at his store, resulting in everyone highballing everyone else. Such practices lasted into the dirty thirties, resulting in depressed economies, making the town ripe for anyone who wanted to buy it.

Many experiments were attempted with regard to manufacturing in Hillside, but they all failed in flat piece of land that was stripped of its trees and its First Nations inhabitants within the first year of it being 'civilized'. True to the Old Medicine Woman's predictions, who said that demons were released from the earth the moment anyone made the land bleed with a plow, the only thing that grew in abundance in Hillside, even on years when there was sufficient rainfall, was wheat, and boredom. The former made the inhabitants who preferred symetrical rows of crops to naturally growing woodlands rich enough to be 'comfortable' in Hillside, but unable to move anywhere else And unwilling to consider that there was anywhere else. It was during one of the winter storms, when Emily and Frank Steiner ran out of cigarettes to intoxicate their lungs, and cheap beer to dull their already flat-lined senses, that Emily got pregnant.

Carla and Karen, who was supposed to be just single 'Carl', grew up learning what all girls needed to do in order to survive, and thrive. Three 'thou shalt's' were impregnated into the twin girls' developing brains no matter how their minds and spirits resisted such. One was sucking up to their God fearing, and self-serving, Christian parents to insure that they would get the food, shelter and approval for their existence. The other was to accept that 'God loves those obedient to their parents and elders', and failing that, 'The Good Lord condemns you to hell if you question anything said parents and elders say'. The third thou shalt was bolstering the egos of the excuses for 'manhood' presenting themselves as boyfriends in Hillside. Such entailed laughing at the 'young men's' jokes and demoralizing yourself so they could step on you to move up the social ladder so that you would have a husband to marry someday who would give you a better life than you could have at home, on the street or in a Nunnery.

Such was Carla and Karen's childhood, until they reached the age of 18. At that time, another winter storm hit Hillside. This time their mother Emily was in the car, on the way to Saskatoon for her third round of Chemo treatments for cancer that she could not pray away. She attributed that malady to having done something to offend God, never knowing exactly what it was of course. The second to last words Carla and Karen's mother spoke to her husband just before the crash on that balmy minus thirty afternoon were, 'please Lord, take me now instead of taking me later. And give my husband the

life he deserves.’ The last words from the twins’ father were. ‘I suppose I do deserve to die because I didn’t get me, or her, out of Hillside. And I did my best to keep my daughters from leaving too, because I was afraid to become a---.’ Such was the account of the sole survivor of the crash, Emilio, Hillside’s ‘go to’ wage-slave handiman who was hitching a ride to Saskatoon with the old before their time middle aged couple.

What Frank Steiner wanted to become was spoken and revealed to his already dead wife in the afterlife, according to the lawyer who read the wills of both parents to Carla and Karen after the funeral. “But the bottom line, of it, girls,” executor Ulrich Yannovik said to both girls after finishing the formalities at the office of the insurance company that doubled as his legal firm. “You both have inherited \$150,000, which comes out to \$43,000 each after paying off their debts and other fees,” he said. “Which your mother would have liked you to use as a down payment for a house here in town, maybe through my real estate contacts, Karen,” he said to one of the twins.

“I’m Carla,” the addressee of that ‘fatherly’ advice shot back at the surrogate uncle who lived to play hockey, got a hard on while watching curling and considered heaven as ‘settin’ on the porch on a warm summer’s night with a cold beer in his hand and an empty brain between his country-music lovin’ ears.

“I’m sorry, Carla,” the Church’s citizen of the year for five years running, and according to little shared rumor, the richest man in town, said apologetically. “It’s just that you two girls are two of a kind. Sort a like a Saskatchewan Like Patty Duke. You look alike, matching hair, matching clothes, matching smiles.”

“Because our father wanted us to, and maybe needed us to do.” Karen offered by way of explanation. “Got better bargains at the store with 2 fer one everything,” she said with a warm, sentimental tone, intending it to be such in any case.

“And you both sound alike,” Uncle Ulrich continued with an ‘all is well here in Hillside and who cares about the world outside of it’ smile.

“Because you’re listening with closed ears,” Carla thought but didn’t say, sending to her mouth. “An easy mistake to make, since both of us stayed close to home, because of Mom,” she said, with bitterness, regret and anger.

“And her illness,” Karen added, guilt permeating her voice.

“Yes, there is, or was, that,” Uncle Ulrich said, putting on the most convincing act of grief either of the two girls had observed, outdoing everyone at the funeral and the wake. He went on with legal mumbo jumbo that sounded more like hastily rambled Chinese than heartfelt English.

Though both girls seemed to be alike, according to what the town wanted and what their departed parents seemed to need, they couldn’t have been more different inside. At least

with regard to what they each were thinking about what to do with the \$43,000. Indeed, they didn't know who they were themselves, as no one in town except each other allowed them to be such. With the brain they seemed to share since birth, communicating thought from such through the 'body and eye language they developed over the last two decades, the twins mutually calculated what they could have done with 'nominal debts' their parents had incurred when alive. And what the 'clean living' Christian couple had taken from their beloved girls' 'doury' fund. Squandered on booze, smokes, happy pills and various recreational toys only the twins' parents knew about. Then there were the procedural fees that Uncle Ulrich extracted for himself and the funeral arrangements that he had said the girls shouldn't worry about. As he explained them in legal language that Carla and Karen knew was both mispronounced and insincere, he continued addressing them by the wrong names.

"So, are we done?" Carla said after the last 'should party of the first part shit and/or piss on party of the second part' passage was read. She wanted to get on with her life as she looked out the window at the Eastern or maybe Western horizon, her inner eye feeling what was beyond it. "I have a life to live."

"As do I," Karen added, a completely different plan brewing in her head, and mind. "And so do you, Mister Yannovick," she said with a smile, while bowing slightly, keeping her eyes from looking into 'Uncle Ulrichs,' for fear that he would see what she was really feeling behind them.

## CHAPTER 2

The stories about revolution say that when the fences come down, the prisoners all leave the cells in which they have been penned by their oppressors, embrace being liberated, and live fulfilling, expressive lives. And that when Cinderella was found by her prince, and given twenty times more drachmas than her step sisters and step mom stole from her trust fund, she lived happily ever after with her dream mate, never having to angst about money or feeling that she was lower than the crap she had to clean on her foster family's toilets. In reality, freedom and the tools to use it as you would like is more complicated. The entanglements around and within Karen and Carla's soul with regard to all of this was different as their biology was the same.

Carla always wanted to be a musician, but her upbringing restricted her to being a piano player. The tunes she was allowed and encouraged to play were 'safe'. Church hymns mostly, and on occasion something by JS Bach which had found its way into a revered cantata rather than an over the top celebratory cantina. Yet she yearned to play more, and, when no one was looking, or listening, she plugged her earphones into the electric piano and experimented with many forms of music. Some she was good at. Blues was something that she was particularly good at, not so much because the chords were more consistent, but because it allowed even aspiring pianists with short fingers and slow motor reflexes to be expressive. Blues led to jazz, which led to ragtime, which led

back to Bach, but in ways that would shock Johann Sebastian, according to the image Carla's mother and father, and religious congregation at church had anyway. Above all, Carla feared becoming the stoic, lifeless, boring, procedural and simplistic JS Bach and by the numbers morality Christian that her listeners envisioned in their limited, constrained and underutilized imaginations. Assisting Carla in this was her own Spirit when trying to tackle Beethoven's Appassionata, with less technique than her sister Karen, but a lot more fluidity, along with mistakes that she attempted to convert into variations.

As for Karen, she was just as 'gifted' at the piano, with regard to playing what the family and community expected of her and restricted her to. When converting noise notes into music on the ivories (or more accurately, the white plastics), Karen was assigned the job of being the 'structuralist'. Melodies always worked for her better than harmonies, and when harmonies became too dissonant, she felt uncomfortable. Yet, she liked dissonant more than Carla did. It was ironic, as Karen was better at improvisation than Carlata was, able to take any melody and turn it into a variety of genres that redefined and even combined two or three genres. Perhaps it was because of Karen's higher IQ scores, particularly with regard to linear reasoning, and clearly delineated morality. She was more comfortable studying mathematics and science than doing improvisations with her music, or painting, or even 'creative' writing. Though not born into the Catholic faith, Karen would be a Mother Superior's dream, as she was driven by guilt more than love. On more than one occasion she apologized for severe cold in winter, torrential rains in spring, droughts in summer, and for not being able to invent a weather machine that would fix all of it every fall. Her favorite season was autumn, all 2 weeks of it in Hillside. Such was when the leaves that bore that 'soft, non-offensive' green that was Saskatchewan's mascot color turned into bright, expressive hues that elicited wondrous emotions from all corners of the Soul to those whose eyes and heart were open to it. Karen heard that this wondrous season in the forest of the Great Canadian East lasted for months rather than a fortnight on the arbour-poor, wind-blown prairies. Karen had visited Quebec once for a three week French and music immersion course she was awarded. But then scurried back home a week into the course because her father said he was short handed at the General Store, and her mother was getting lonely at home and, most importantly, that the Doctors said that her mother would heal better after she busted her leg if BOTH of her daughters were home with her.

Hillside, Saskatchewan boasted about having TWO pianos in their church, with two identical players who provided the same notes. It made for good copy for the Evangelistic Gazette, and raked in a lot of contributions for the Church building fund. As for the poor box, 'God helps those who help themselves' was one way or another the topic of every sermon given by Pastor Edwin, whose surname that he used on checks was different than the one everyone in town called him when he was a 'Mister' during the week.

Everyone in Hillside had a clean house to live in, yet lived sterile lives within them. The tragedy of it all was that there were only three people in Hillside who knew the difference between clean and sterile. Carla, Karen and Emilo, a Latino handyman who was at the

bottom of the totem pole in Hillside, but who knew most everything about what and who was on top of him.

It was a cloudy Sunday afternoon, after one of Pastor Edwin's long, repetitive sermons about how one must be considerate of people's time. Then of course, he reminded his parishioners about the seven mortal sins, looking accusingly at everyone except into himself when describing the consequences of giving in to them. They were of course all 'thou shalt not's.'

"Pastor Edwin forgot the one biggest thou shalt nots," Emilio said to while sharing his homemade lunch of tortellas and beans with Carla and Karen on the tree stump outside the church, being sure that each of the girls at least try the hot sauce that was his special recipe.

"And what is that, Emilio?" Karen asked, smelling the spicy Mexican cuisine that would send every diner at the Rodeo Inn into a jug full of water, or out the door to the Burger King for 'real' Canadian food. "I thought that Pastor Edwin's presentation of what was sinful was comprehensive, clear and conceptually relevant," she noted.

"Yeah, avoiding all the 'thou shalt' naturally leads you to the 'thou shalt', right?" Carla added in the sarcastic tone that she, unlike her 'know how to please but not to serve' sister, adopted for those who would understand her real meaning. Carla took a large bite from the super hot tortilla, refusing to accept a glass of water from Emilio. "But what's your 'thou shalt not' for this 'beautiful' Sunday afternoon, Reverend Emilio in pathetically and painfully pleasant Hillside, Saskabush?" she pressed.

"Thou shalt not underutilize any opportunity to accomplish what your soul Calls you to!" Emilio replied. "The primal sin is to not follow your heart."

"Which requires you to be responsible," Karen interjected, still avoiding taking a small nibble from the tortilla, and finding it to her liking.

"And honest," Emilio said, turning to Karen, as he put more sauce on her lunch. "Tell me, Karen. You said you want to be a doctor. Or a researcher. Treat people's physical suffering."

"There isn't anything wrong with that," Karen replied. "And I'm good at biology, and science."

"True enough," Carla conceded, as she turned to her sister. "But, Karen. Tell me, Emilio and Whoever up there is listening. "Are you dedicating your life to biology and science because you WANT to, or because you think you HAVE to?"

Karen thought about the matter, preferring to ingest more now uncomfortable hot sauce into her mouth than to use that orifice to answer the question.

“Translation,” Carla said to Emilio. “My ‘fascinated beyond words with science and biology’ sister feels guilty about our mother dying from cancer.” Carla turned to Karen, blasting, “Which she didn’t cause!”

“Someone has to be responsible,” Karen shot into the face, and soul, of her clandestinely truant sister. “And practical, financially and otherwise.”

“And someone has to be Alive, big A,” Carla gently reminded her sister.

The two siblings had one of those verbal, and non-verbal, conversations between them in a language they never bothered to write down. Emilio translated the final conclusion of their emotionally-heated discourse.

“Each of you has to decide for yourself,” he said to both of them, anticipating that each would ask him for advice. “Then see what life decides.”

“And if we make the wrong decision?” Karen asked, more regarding Carla’s dream of making it as an artist rather than her own plan of being a medical biologist.

“Yeah, the safest decision usually is the wrong one,” Carla replied, slapping more hot sauce on her tortilla, not letting on that it was burning the back of her throat. “Nothing ventured, less than nothing gained.”

“And the wrongest decision is indecision,” Emilio replied, from a place both girls felt was deeper than anyplace he had ever spoken to them from. “And, yes, I speak from experience,” he continued, looking behind his eyes at a life riddled with the worse of human agonies, regret.

“If you need money, Emilio,” Karen said, pulling out her purse.

“You’ve helped us when we needed it, time for us to help you,” Carla added to the poorest man in Hillside who had always been the most generous, financially and otherwise, particularly to them. “Here,” she continued, with a fistful of cash in hand, extended outward. “We owe you something for making messes in school that you had to clean up as the janitor.”

“And laughing, mostly behind your back, at the jokes the class clowns made about you being a moldy oldy philosopher Mexican jumping bean with no backbone, who...” Karen confessed. She stopped herself from finishing the rest of the dig that still made her chuckle in the ‘dark’ portions of her soul, which she so often tried her best to never look at.

“Yes, you two do owe me something,” Emilio replied. “To take ALL of this money, and not waste a penny of it! The stage of life where there are no do-overs comes at you faster than you think.”



True to the Socratic Latino's profound words, his cell phone rang, heralding him to another cleaning job to do. With that, the most learned man in Hillside, who never related to anyone where he became so smart and how he was cursed with being so wise, got up and went to his bicycle. He peddled his way down the street and around the corner, leaving his two favorite surrogate children to the open canvas that was the rest of their lives...for better or worse

### CHAPTER 3

Carla's education in how to be an independent artist started in a music school where the faculty was independent of talent, and willingness to develop or encourage it in the students. Her first C in reward for doing A plus work came when Sir Ronald McMillian, a Glenn Gould Studio graduate from the Maritimes who spoke with an English accent when teaching. Sir Ronald slipped into a Newfy swagger speech when drunk in his office or at the student pub trying to impress attractive coeds with his tales about being Knighted by the Queen, or maybe the Prince of Wales, or on other occasions, the High Lord of Scotland.

The assignment on the present day was to write down the most important Beethoven quote old Ludwig put to paper, or voice. Failing that, something from a giant in the visual art world during the Renaissance would suffice. Carla wrote down 'a poor student doesn't excel his teacher' not recalling if it was a Beethoven maxim or a Michalangelo credo. She put that quote, or miss-quote, into music when each of the students was required to play something by Ludwig, followed by a hard earned, intensity-driven improvisation on it.

Everyone loved Carla's 'Creatures of Promethius' twisted and turned into something beyond pop culture which, if Ludwig were around, he would have joined in with on a violin, flute or kazoo. Everyone loved it except Sir Ronald, of course, who gave A's to everyone in the class who played Beethoven the way HE did, though a bit slower so as to not insult the professor. When it came time for the musical and oral exam every student had to pass in order to stay in the program, Carla did a quick run through on all of her notes about the Master Ludwig who was harder on himself than he would have been on any student. Finally, after seeing five of her classmates exit the audition room, who were better at playing the egos of the faculty than interpreting or composing anything on a keyboard, Carla was allowed entry. The door was opened by someone inside the audition room who disappeared once she got to the other side of it.

Inside the over-sized, scantily furnished chamber was a piano, a small lectern and an elevated table, on which there were name tags for each of the seven faculty members of the department. The only seat occupied by a body was the judge in the middle. "My fellow faculty members are taking a two minute break," Sir Ronald said in a deep baritone voice that reminded Carla of Pharaoh when addressing Moses with a common sense 'win win for everyone' petition to liberate the Hebrew people. "When they return, each of us will ask you three questions and give you two performance assignments. You will fail each of them."

“But what if their six votes are for me? And their votes aren’t for the rigid, stagnant, anti-life mediocrity YOU call excellence because you were never even good, according to the research I privately, and discretely did,” Carla asserted.

Sir Ronald leaned back in his chair, folded his grubby semen stained hands in his lap and proclaimed something in Russian. “Ti Panymayoo?” he asked Carla afterwards. “Verstehst du?” “Comprende?”

“Yes,” Carla replied. “It’s not who or what is being voted on, but who’s counting the ballots.” She went on to correct Sir Ronald’s Russian grammar, German pronunciation and Spanish accent, just as the rest of the faculty members came back into the room. Each of them took their seats, all of which were to his side, and lower in height than his own.

Carla never played better in her life. She could feel her soul elevated as she played Beethoven, Bach, Schumann and even Chopin with fire, liberation and joy. Never did she feel the ghosts of the Old Masters and the listeners in the room give her a thumbs up for giving Life, big L, to the music, and adding that special element that makes Music big M merge into Eternal Silence.

“Humor,” Sir Ronald proclaimed after she had finished the last of her rhythmic puns and musical jokes. “Inappropriate as well as lame, lacking craft, immature, boring, hoaky and lifeless.”

Indeed, Carla knew that Sir Ronald was identifying the pathologies in himself. As did at least one of the other faculty members.

“You’re doing it again, putting a mirror in front of people’s eyes,” Renata Panath, a Bavarian doctor who decided at an early age to become a musician then settled into being Fine Arts Professor to save her own Soul, and possibly others, from dying, reminded Carla with her eyes. “They don’t like that.”

“But they need that!” Carla felt her soul saying to Professor Renata’s.

Any more discourse between the old professor with long, unruly hippie hair and the young student who had recently dyed her naturally blonde mane in purple streaks, complimented by a partial head shave above her left ear was stopped by Sir Ronald was put on hold. Lord, Sir and Maestro Ronald declared that the next candidate was waiting to be examined. He thanked Carla for her time and efforts with a courtly bow and a tone that seemed caring, yet still superior.

It was all Carla could do to not give the finger to Sir Ronald for being who he was, and the rest of the faculty for letting him be who he was. She was disappointed in Professor Renata on the way out of the door, and the program. “It’s only money,” Carla told herself as she contemplated how much money she had paid over the last two years for

tuition. “I still have enough left to get a real education,” Carla considered as she noted through a reflection the hand signals Sir Ronald was giving to his subordinates regarding the final grade. “Or maybe I can build my own school, trick the Sir Ronald’s into feeling that I’m superior to them then make feel like shit. Or take a course in how to act like an asshole and get treated like a Saint,” was the plan that incubated in Carla now.

Though, she knew she couldn’t do it. And if Carla did master that trick, she would lose the ability to be a true Artist. The ghost of Ludwig von Beethoven, eating a hotdog on top of the piano and farting out a tenth symphony out of his ass, smiled an agreement to her on that.

## CHAPTER 4

Two years into her premed training, Karen was on far better terms with the faculty at the University of Saskatoon than her sister was at the Glen Gould Institute in Toronto. Karen always had a photographic memory, her mind a sponge that absorbed any new info anyone told her to absorb into it. Taking in data rather than understanding concepts was the stuff of getting good grades was the requirement to get into great, or at least affiliated, medical schools. Getting straight A’s in Hillside High School allowed Karen the ability to get well above average grades here. But such was not high enough now, as the cream of the cream were the only ones who rose to the top in the world outside of Hillside.

The atmosphere was tense in the hallway outside the Physiology office outside of the University of Saskatoon. Karen’s heart fell into her gullet as the TA posted the grades for the fourth semester for her the other Sophomores about to enter or change programs in their upcoming Junior year. The identity of who got the A’s, who got the F’s, and who was cast in between so that the distribution of grades would follow the bell shaped curve was coded of course. But no one could hide their reaction when they pushed their way up to see the grades. It was clearer than the space between carbon atoms in a benzene ring who were the winners who would go on to become docs, and who would be the losers who would become technicians, business school majors or, even more degrading, nurses.

Karen wondered why she did A level work yet got B level grades. “Maybe I didn’t try hard enough to learn the info,” she contemplated. “Or figured out how to read into the exam what the Prof really wanted me to answer,” she considered, until she saw the faces of the winners. Laura Gilbert and Mellissa DeMonde, whose grades in all of the lab courses Karen took with them were two grades higher than her own. “Yeah, maybe I should have shared WRONG data with them instead of giving them the right data, which I got the hard way and they probably embellished on better than I did,” Karen said to herself as Mellissa and Laura did high fives with each other, speculating on whether the salaries for McGill Med School grads were higher or lower than those who went to Harvard, Yale or ‘The Hopkins’.

“There are other options other than med school at Johns Hopkins or a Ph.D. program at

Yale,” Karen heard from a familiar voice behind her. One that was honest, sincere, and defeatist.

“Going back to Hillside to buy back the family store, so I could grow old and unnoticed there,” she said to the 20 year old blue-eyed, blonde-haired Norman Rockwell clone with a farmer’s tan and chiselled WASP chin.

“There are worse things for you, and me,” John Peterson continued, looking into Karen’s eyes, trying to crawl his way deeper.

It wasn’t the first time that John Peterson proposed to Karen. Indeed, their backgrounds were so similar. The Manitoban small town he grew up in when he was with his mother was a mirror image of Hillside, Saskatchewan. He knew how to adjust to a forty below freak week in winter that lasted a month or longer. He felt at home with flat land that went on forever and ever, mountains and even hills making him feel claustrophobic. And like all animals that Karen fell in love with instantly, from the cows on her uncle’s farm to the cats who found shelter in the workshed behind her parent’s place, the only thing that John asked for was compassion and consistency. Such was easy for Karen to give. And such worried her.

But what concerned Karen most was how she could turn a hard earned low B average into a Grade A academic career that would make her departed father proud, and stick it to Demon Disease and Cronie Cancer for using her mother’s pathology-infested body as a punching bag. As always, John had an answer.

“A new program,” he said regarding the brochure he handed Karen, bearing pictures of happy and confident students on the cover, and professionals in the hippest and coolest clothing she had ever seen. Indeed, the attendees and grads of this school would make Cool Queen Mellissa and Bitchin’ Baronness Laura seem like common dogs. Almost as common and ordinary, and therefore as unnoticed, as Carlata was now.

Carlata looked at the brochure again, taking note of the courses offered and pledges to the graduates. “So, how can a BS in Pharmacology or Pharmacy give me the opportunity to transform the medical world?”

“Because Doctors need drugs, researchers develop drugs, and someone has to be the bridge between bench and bedside,” John said, as if he was cast in a commercial for the new branch of the University.

“Is that what we are, bridges?”

“With the potential to connect many disciplines and worlds.”

“And perspectives, from both sides of the brain, and the soul within it?” Karen countered, thinking about her Artistic aspirations, which were still struggling to stay Alive. Between her ears emerged songs she had composed in her younger years that she

claimed at the time she would transform into something exportable in her older years. Fire emerged from the base of her spine, escalating into a volcanic eruption of unstoppable bliss as it penetrated into the base of her brain, then emanated into every very nameable lobe of the cerebral cortex, through pathways she studied so well in the dry anatomical textbooks. “Maybe I could still go to music school. Or be a composer. Or writer. Or....singer. Or a writer who composes books about musicians, singers and...!”

John’s rolling eyebrows threw a blanket over the fire that had just found its way back into Karen’s soul. The burning embers were quenched into dust when he showed Karen the balance sheet of what she had spent, and what she would need for her five year life plan, so she could achieve her ten year plan, and wind up twenty years later in a place of sustainability.

“We talked about this,” he reminded Karen. “And we both know what will happen if we lose realistic focus and become irresponsible.”

“Yes, we do,” Karen said in agreement, but for different reasons than ‘born to raise wheat and be parented by it’ John. “Yes, I will remain responsible, and realistically focused,” she pledged to herself, the departed souls of her mother and father, and finally to the Good Lord above, who she believed, despite all of Carla’s reasoning to contrary, rewarded restraint and obedience above all else.

## CHAPTER 5

After putting the remainder of her books, instruments and notes into her one bedroom apartment, and seeing the letter from the landlord saying that the digs that were so comfortable were now going to cost 20% more next month, it hit Carla. She put the answering machine on for the first message. It was from Karen, wishing Carla a happy birthday, apparently from a room where everyone else in Hillside was celebrating hers. Carla gave her sister a call back, but the only voice she got was an answering machine which sounded professional, pleasant and...comfortable.

“I’ll call her back later,” Carla said as she looked up at the picture of Uncle Ludwig von Beethoven above her coffee table, in whose eyes she always found inspiration, and no comfort as he was the only Uncle she ever knew who encouraged her to be better than rather than ok with herself. “I have to get back to the all these other messages first. From my friends at the Music Institute who no doubt want to keep connection with me after I was disconnected from the Institute. And word from Professor Renata, who no doubt is relating how my rejection from the fold is being appealed, and if it fails, how she and maybe even me will form our own Institute to stick it to Sir Ronald and his untalented, egotistical and cool to be cruel cronies.”

Carla prepared herself a cup of Starbuck’s coffee, sat herself down with an over-priced and under-flavored muffin. She listened to the first message, then the second, then the third, then the rest of the four messages from the world outside the comfort cave where

had entertained one male writer who taught her what big city sex was like, another penis bearing hip and cool painter who reminded her that the big boink was big deal, and a female cellist whose offered meal of alternative lifestyle intimacy was empty calories. Yes there was a lot of history regarding Carla's inability to connect to 'the scene' in that room. Reinforcing that were the callers who left the stream of messages that came in. Not one was from her fellow artists who applauded when she played with and for them. No professors, or even teaching assistants, or even Latino janitors who looked and seemed to be a lot like Emilio offered her congratulations for standing up for the Truth, or offers to help her, unofficially, now that she was booted from the Program.

Discouraged by the barrage of calls from administrators requesting that she pick up the rest of her stuff from the Institute, and the bill collectors reminding her that payments were due to be paid within the next month because she was no longer in school, Carla reached for the button to hear the last two messages on the machine with forceful bang. She missed the response button, sending the machine prematurely to its final reward in the recycle bin at the junkyard. The day prior to Sir Ronald's orchestrating her dismissal from the Institute, Carla would have chalked the expense of replacing the machine as another expense that would be made up when she herself was appointed a professor, performer or overpaid composer within the Musical Establishment, said positions being guaranteed by her graduating from the program with distinction. Now, she was facing the world differently, minus the lionesses share of her inheritance that she had paid for tuition and related expenses that would never be returned.

After checking that her cut fingers were still attached to the nerves in her wrist, Carla flexed them. She noted that they were able to hold a pen well enough, and work a computer keyboard, but probably not a piano keyboard for a day or two recalling similar accidents she had with fits of rage that only sensible sister Karen knew about. "At least I can still work with words, or maybe notes, in print," Carla said to the portrait of Onkle Ludwig bearing classically intense Beethovenian concentration in every muscle of the face. "And I don't fill in spaces with thoughts or lack of thoughts with 'like, ya know, totally, huh but' and the 'eh' that the French do so they can hold onto the talking stick instead of listening to others, or the instructive Silence within their own Souls," Carla observed herself saying to Ludwig. "Hey, that sounds....literary and Real," she continued, nearly slipping into putting in a 'like, ya know' in between realizations out of habit. "I write the libretto, you do the music?" Carla asked the ghost of the composer who always made her feel like it was not doing herself in to make herself a ghost as she wrapped up her hand with a gauze, noting the price-tag on the box, for the first time.

Ludwig answered a 'yes, da, ya and oui' in a voice that Carla could somehow hear with her inner ears, more deeply than ever.

"Now for the 'why' of it, Onkle Ludwig?" Carla asked, in a real voice to a portrait on the wall which, even in life, belonged to a man who could not hear spoken words or played notes during the most productive and Creative portion of his life. Yet, he could read anyone's eyes, according to one of the biographers Carla wished she could have been, or perhaps was. Carla voiced the rest of her obstacles to becoming a great writer,

stand up satirist, composer and musician, to one of the only Great musicians who was lucky enough to be popular in his lifetime. “So, here’s the problem, or as you would say, the ‘challenge’ list,” Carla said as she pulled up the list of ‘self observations’ she had taken to the Music Institute’s residence ‘life coach’, who perhaps didn’t keep what went on in his sessions confidential. Going to a shrink in the outside world with it would not only cost her \$80 an hour, but if she said the wrong thing, could wind her up in the loonie bin factory where state of the art drugs and old fashion confinement would force her into becoming a well adjusted, comfortable citizen who fit into the bell shaped curve. Or worse, to become what Carla feared her sister Karen was becoming, by her own choice, as well as by fiancée John’s well intended cajoling.

“Situation number one,” Carla said reading the first item on her list of complaints to which the life coach gave no or elusive answer to. “I can speak music and play words to individual people, couples or triplets of people, or animals, but never can relate to a crowd from the stage. Except of course that one person in the crowd who look at me with a condescending stare that makes me feel like the piece of untalented, worthless shit that maybe I really am. And even when I get applause from everyone else, it feels false, and uncomfortable.”

Ludwig’s lips seemed to break into a smile. With his eyes, he answered. “The price of doing Passion, next question.”

“Situation two,” Carla continued, wiping her newly spilt blood from the list. “Even when I’m playing in a band, and feel like I’m part of it, or my music is anyway, I don’t feel like the herd. And hate myself when I like, ya know, totally, try to be cool with trying to be part of the herd, ya know?”

Ludwig smiled widely at the joke. Carla heard a humorous passage from one of his late string quartets in her head, which added some more passages of her own to it.

“So, maybe I should put a ghetto-blaster into my ears, get a friend over at U of T Neuroscience Unit to insert electrodes into my ears so I won’t be discouraged by fuckheads who say I suck, or brain dead followers or kiss ass ‘fellow artists’ who want something from me who say I’m great, so I listen only to my OWN soul, and Voice, big V?” Carla asked, turning the words in her problem list into a possible solution.

“It worked for me,” Ludwig replied in a voice that seemed to feel like Alan Arbus in MASH, who played a psychiatrist with so much humanity according to fellow actor Alan Alda, yet whose role was never resurrected in any movie of film beyond that ‘like, so yesterday’ tv show.

“And I know that the Art I’m doing, whatever I’m doing is Good, according to the Absolute meaning of that word, if I...”

“Feel drained, exhausted and blissfully lost in a universe you can’t identify and no one else occupies, even me,” Ludwig seemed to reply. “Feeling the joy of discovery through

an endorphin that is reachable only through struggle, persistence and dedication. And can and will never be obtainable with any recreational drug or new state of the art pharmaceutical. Despite what your U or T Neuroscience friends and your sister's colleagues in the HARD sciences say, or promise."

"And the Truth, that everyone needs and wants. Why when you try to find a channel for Truth, do you become unpopular?" Carla inquired as she approached the picture of old Ludwig closer, her oculars seeing many ages and stages of growth in his eyes. "You were popular in your lifetime!"

"A fluke," he replied. "That I had nothing to do with. And as for what I was really trying to say, I never wrote for the masses."

"And you acted like an asshole, yet were treated like a saint, 'Maestro Ludwig?'"

"A trick one of my piano students told me about that I used when I needed extra money. Which I know, I probably overused. A defense mechanism against people born to political royalty and untalented, because they were lazy, descendants of JS Bach who thought they inherited their grandfather's heart, and soul, Carla."

"And what about the money issue?" Carla blasted at Ludwig, fearing what she would do now that she was cut off from the system that would keep her body and art funded. And determined to NOT go backwards to Hillside, where she could live a comfortable life on the money she still had left. As long as she used advisors OTHER than the 'Uncle' who was in charge of her parent's will, Carla would be able to have meatloaf on the table at 6 PM sharp every day for the rest of her life. Steak if she decided to marry any of the three prospects who still remained there, inheriting their father's 'meat and potatoe' industrial businesses. "Even writers and composers need to buy ink to make their mark."

"Or blood," Ludwig said, as if pointing to a new bleed in Carla's hand.

"But what about the hierarchy of needs? If an artist is worried about his empty stomach, he, or she, is limited. In time and energy."

"But blessed with a different perspective, Carla. Thinking back on it, the best music I ever composed, or played, was when I felt most broke in pocket, or was. And when I was alone, especially in bed."

"So there goes the chance to find my male mate muse, right?"

"The rules of this Game that invite us to play in it, as I've experienced it anyway. But don't tell the biographers that. They may think I was gay, when actually I was beyond gender. Which prevents us from having or wanting kids, but...the Work is our children."

"And the third brain that evolves between fellow loner Artists? I have experience this, many times."



“Yes, I know,” Ludwig replied, seeming to look behind his eyes at memories with musicians and other he hid from the historians, and his posthumous pupil Carla. “But such things are only possible after you do your OWN Om work. That’s a Buddhist joke, you know.”

“Yes, I do,” Carla replied, feeling the pains of being alone in the ‘real life’ universe of people more intensely than the envisioned sustenance of being connected to something...deeper, etherial, untouchable and un-cashable. “And in the end, what will happen, when I’m living in a box, busking for stale donuts on the street, trying to keep up the Good Fight against mediocrity, ignorance and cruelty?” Carla asked as the final question to it all.

“You won’t die of regret,” the Silent voice of the Old Master, or perhaps Carla herself, said. Or seemed to hypothesize.

## CHAPTER 6

Karen held the phone in her hand for what seemed like hours after patching in the fourth call to Carla to wish her a happy birthday, or more accurately, to receive such greeting from her. “Maybe I didn’t pay the phone bill,” Karen told herself as she noted, yet again, that no calls came in from Carla, despite the fact that Karen had left two messages with her. “Or someone hacked into my account so that all incoming calls are blocked,” she considered.

“Maybe your sister’s busy,” John tried to assure Karen as the party as he approached from behind, laying his extra large sized farmer hands on her small framed shoulders.

“Or too ‘cool’, or engrossed in her ‘art’ to have the common courtesy to call me, her ‘uncool’ sister back on OUR birthday, like she promised she would always do, at this same time every year of our life,” Karen grunted, her angry eyes staring at the phone. “And it was me who encouraged her to not give up being a writer, musician and actress, even though everyone in the family said I was better than she was. And it’s ME who visits our mother and father’s grave once a week, being sure that the flowers are still there. And it was me who had a special service said for both of them at Church on their birthdays. And it was ME, not Carla, who is keeping their general store in Hillside from being turned into a gym, Chinese take-out restaurant or weed selling head shop! And it’s me who is responsible to not move too far away from home.”

“And Carla who is terrified to come back home?” John offered Karen.

“She should get over it,” Karen grunted. “And, though it’s a ‘like so yesterday’ expression, step up to the plate and be responsible, and considerate.”

“Like you should be for our guests,” John reminded Karen, turning her attention to the people packed into the living room. Above the neck, they seemed to be down home, simple country folk. Below such, they were dressed in the most expensive fashion clothing importable to Saskatchewan. “They came here to celebrate your birthday. And my parents are paying for this party. That you don’t seem to be enjoying.”

“I would, maybe, if that piano player would stop making Bach sound like copy Beegees,” Karen noted regarding the hired entertainment. “I could do a better job with that, and the other songs she butchered, with three broken phalanges,” she said regarding her fingers.

“Which I’m sure you can, but shouldn’t,” John said, taking hold of her wrists with his firm left hand, stroking her palms gently with his right. “Time for my father’s sister Felecia to work, and you to, relax. And enjoy...this,” he said, as he looked at his watch.

Felecia broke out into a prelude of rapidly played notes which impressed everyone in the room with their speed, yet drove shivers up Karen’s spine, as she heard all the WRONG notes she was playing. Then, the 88s’ on the out of tune Grand Piano broke into Happy Birthday, accompanied by a chorus of people with smiling faces singing it. John’s mother brought in the custom made Bavarian Forest cake, overloaded with candles. The flare of the candles against the darkened room blinded Karen. When the cake reached her, John’s father, a towering 6 foot three man who was every inch a success story in the pocket. “Make a wish,” the dressed for beyond success perfectly proportioned silver haired gentleman said to his future daughter in law.

Karen looked back at the piano, and envisioned her behind it. And that piano being at Carnegie Hall in front of the Toronto Symphony. Or maybe a rock concert in San Francisco where some kind of cross genre event was being seen by the entire world. Or, as she cast the right people in the room, a private hospital room where the piano was playing a miracle cure into a cancer patient in the bed, her mother being that patient, her father being the only audience member.

“Come on, make a wish!” John requested.

“Which I’m looking at right now,” Karen said, gazing at John, going into that gear which allowed her to lie so convincingly to others, and then herself. Like the lie that he was fascinated with biology, and yearned above all things to become a doctor, or failing that, a researcher in a university who would find cures for diseases doctors could treat.

John took Karen’s small hands into bear-sized paws, then looked at the cake. Karen invited him to blow the candles out with her. In part it was because there were too many candles for her to blow out alone. But there was also that issue of responsibility, and being the ‘mastery in servitude’ girl that her parents, Pastor and everyone else in Hillside raised her to be. True to that virtue, and albatross, it was only right for John to make a wish and blow out the candles with her. Maybe his wish, once fulfilled, would compliment hers. She prayed that it his dreams would not contradict her aspirations,

which had now disintegrated into daydreams, and idealized fantasies.

After the cake was cut, it was gobbled up by the refined Canadian Prairie Elite. Each earned, inherited or stole a salary of six figures each, according to the best data Karen had available in the matter of hungry, cutlery lacking peasants. Karen could smell money in room, and felt herself to be part of it, particularly when John's father requested that she join him in the library.

"So, what did you want to talk about, Mister Peterson?" Karen asked him as she felt the door close her into a room lined with vintage and classic titled books which perhaps had been read, or perhaps were there for show.

"Dad, please, Karen," he said with a kind smile that Karen found herself trusting. "You are about to become part of our family."

"An undeserving member of the family," she replied. "Given my grades these last two semester."

"Which I know is not your fault," he replied as he sat behind a large desk, inviting Karen to take a seat in front of him.

"But is my responsibility, Dad," she replied, trying on that form of address to see how it fit. She laid her ass into the chair, finding it softer than it looked. "Like getting an MD somehow, or a Ph.D. in the biomedical sciences."

"Because of your fascination with medicine and biology, or because you are good at both of them?" Dad asked her, demanding an honest answer. "It is possible to be good at something but hate doing it."

"I want to do what's...right," Karen replied.

"As I want to help you do it, and have accepted taking on the responsibility of doing so, for you, my son and my grandchildren," he said as he took out a large envelope from his drawer.

"By encouraging my Professors to upgrade the marks on my transcripts?" Karen asked. "Or making a contribution to the medical school?"

"Too messy and complicated, for both of us," he smiled back. "But my Pharmaceutical Company needs someone with your talents. And not just as a lab tech or sales rep." He handed the envelope to Karen, motioning with a minimal motion of his hands for her to open it, as was the manner of all rich or powerful folk.

Upon opening the envelope, Karen found a letter of acceptance with imprinted letterhead bearing Latin calligraphy glowing with gold as brilliant as any that adorned a Roman Emperor. "I never applied to this Institute," Karen said.

“But you’ve been accepted to it,” Dad said. “A full scholarship, with a Ph.D. at the end of it, and a lab waiting for you, if you want it. With only one provision.”

“Which is what?” Karen asked, feeling more like she was being pitched a deal by the devil than a gift from a very rich future father in law.

“One thing, which does NOT include putting my, truth be told, untalented son’s name on your research papers if he doesn’t deserve it, which he probably won’t,” the reply.

“So, what do you want of me, Dad?” Karen asked, hoping that the answer didn’t involve ‘loving and obeying’ father as well as son in the same way. “Learn how to cook authentic Ukrainian perogies like John’s mother did when he was a kid, even though my Irish, English and German genes prevent me from knowing how to put spice into anything?” she replied, trying to avoid the issue at hand. “Teach your grandchildren to love Mozart and hate Motown?” she went on. “Conduct a thorough and convincing historical investigation of flat as a board Hillside to find out what or who is REALLY under the artificial mounds that the tourist books say are buffalo bones?” she continued, breaking into a subtle chuckle.

“We want you to become one of us,” Dad answered, without a microgram of humor coming out of his larynx. “Dedicated exclusively to the medical science and sustainability of the pharmaceutical industry, which are both interdependent on each other,” he continued with deadly seriousness. “And to try to learn how to make perogies, like a biochemistry experiment that you DO eat,” he continued with a warm chuckle.

The joke felt as lame and tame as what Ukrainian perogies tasted like when prepared using a Saskatchewan cookbook. But it was the only entree on the plate life seemed to be offering to Karen. Something familiar. Comfort food that seemed harmless and, the responsible choice to accept.

## CHAPTER 7

Carla didn’t know what kind of low budget movie to make that would change the world, but she did know what kind of film she would not gamble the remaining portion of her inheritance on. There would be no glorification of fucking, drinking, doping, manipulating others, cool to be cruel mentality, intentional illiteracy, rape, mutilating others, fun to be dumb or demonology. Unfortunately, most everyone who she could get to work on “Road for the Cave Rody” was into some form of the above. But the script was written such that even self-lobotomized B level model-turned-actor Crystline Starlove could sound like a genius when reading it. And when Mafioso wannabe Vin Giamanti, who failed at everything in school except learning how to make his uncool classmates feel like shit, read the lines Carla wrote for the heartfelt co-protagonist in the \$25,000 epic, the performance could convince St. Peter to invite him into Heaven at the

time of dying, rather than send him downstairs for ‘corrective education’. But the up and coming starlette and the has-been gangster character player who still had a ‘name’ with regard to the distributors who would take on the film, understood nothing about what the movie was really about. Only one other person seemed to, after it was all done. Peter Schrader, the technogeek edit and cameraman sat next to Carla in the projection booth at the Horizon Theatre, THE place in downtown Toronto where you got your film seen by the hip, cool and influential. As the final credits rolled onto the screen in the projection booth he turned to Carla.

“Everything’s technically sound. With a few technical mistakes, boss,” he said to Carla.

“Which you make look like new experimental visual expressions with your editing, Peter,” Carla replied.

“And you made possible by your original music, original script and very original story,” he replied, offering Carla beer with one hand, and a warm, congratulatory grin with the other.

“And that original story is?” Carla asked Peter, as he and the few thinking people in the Arts and outside of the Arts were her real demographic. Ignoring the fact that Peter was the handsomest man she ever dated, the most skilled artist she ever worked with, the hardest working person she paid on the film and the only Brit who spoke with an English accent that didn’t make her feel like a dumb-shit Colonial, she continued the inquiry. “Please, Peter. Tell me what the film was about.”

“Two mismatched losers who fall in love with each other and, together, stick it to the suits on top as well as the ex’s who made them feel like shit in the first place,” he said in a bold, deep baritone voice. “In a non-stop, heartfelt comedy that pulls on the heartstrings and makes you think whether the date you took to this film is the one you should go home with.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s one interpretation and application for it,” Carla replied. “But really,” she continued, pushing aside the beer and moving in closer to Peter’s torso, placing her hand on his shoulder. “Please, tell me what this film is really about. From your eyes.”

“A bitchin’, rockin’, like, boob and balls, alternative to alternative indy film that, like ya know...” he replied with a dumbshit American accent punctuated by burbs and belches, which was finally put to a close by Carla kissing, him on the lips.

“Come on, really. Tell me, I can take it...I think, know and...yeah, have to be able to take! What or who is the evil in this film that we all should, like, ya know, fight when we see it in others, and ourselves?”

“That’s obvious,” Peter replied, in his natural scholarly yet somehow kind voice. “The

most dangerous expression of evil in the world is lifelessness. Anything or anyone that makes us simplistic, lazy, boring, and procedural, ignorant and, therefore, cruel. And we should do anything we can to be, or more accurately, have what we DO have intelligence, depth, intensity, heart, complexity and, when we exert ourselves enough, Humor, which all combines into effective and enlightening Compassion.”

“And that’s what the audience down there just picked up?” Carla asked, moving forward to see what the reaction of the crowd was just as the credits were coming to a close. She had not seen, nor heard them, as Peter insisted that she watch the film in the projection booth with him and him alone. “Come on, I have to see who got what we are saying. See what it’s like to have a life-infusing conversation with people we BOTH pulled out of the cave of mediocrity and cruelty.”

Peter pulled Carla back from observing the audience.

“Come on, I have to see who came!” she said, pushing him away. “And to go on stage to thank them for coming, and for letting the film sink in at the end by hearing the silence, rather than applauding. Just like Wagner did for the Ring operas in Bayreuth”.

“Maybe we should celebrate this privately,” he said, pulling her away from the light switch and that window that would enable her to see the audience.

“I have to see who showed up!” Carla said, pushing Peter back against the wall. “If a tree falls in the forest, and it makes a sound...” The rest of the words in her mouth were halted by what the brilliant, hard working fledgling filmmaker saw below her, or what she didn’t see more accurately.

“If a tree falls in the forest, and it makes a sound, even though there’s no one to hear it now, someone will hear it later.”

“Through the internet, distributing it on OUR terms,” Carla grunted, after seeing that the crowd that entered the theatre had left, except for three people in the back row slumbering, and a couple in the darker side of the theatre finishing up their evening boink. “Why did those idiots not get what I was saying to them?”

“Closed ears, empty brains, blackened hearts, that we’ll get through with the next one,” Peter assured Carla. “Which I’ll help you get the money for.”

“At least you said ‘we’,” Carla contemplated regarding Peter, as she knew that without his support as fellow Martian among earthlings, and his skills technical skills with machinery that she would break by just looking at the wrong way, nothing beyond this first last ditch assault would not be possible. But there was someone else in the audience who she was looking for, and couldn’t find. “Are you sure you sent the invitation to her?” Carla asked feeling an even deeper and darker hole forming below her shaking feet, about to pull her into the abyss, or worse, a one way ticket back to a life of ‘comfy’ in Hillside, Saskatchewan..

“Of course,” Peter assured her with a firm laying of his hand on her shivering shoulder. “I sent your sister Karen an invitation for herself and a guest, with airline tickets.”

“That maybe we can cash in, because she didn’t use them?” Carla asked Peter, hoping for a ‘yes’ to that question, as her bankroll was nearly empty now.

“I’ll make some calls, and see what our options are,” he replied, with a subtext that seemed to be about far more than a contact at Westjet who could refund first class tickets. She found her heart imagining the best, her mind fearing the worst, her Soul knowing that Forward and Upward now was a mixture of good and bad, redeemable as long as she didn’t slip backwards into indifference.

## CHAPTER 8

“Are you sure this was all the mail I got this week?” Karen asked her new husband John when she came back home from the medical conference in New Orleans, putting down her briefcase at the front door of a house that by Hillside, Saskatchewan standards was a Mansion and thumbing through another thin stack of envelopes addressed to her. “I ordered some music magazines, and sent out letters to do free piano playing and teaching at schools and nursing homes. For free. All that’s here are ads wanting me to buy more subscriptions to medical journals, biomedical research newsletters and special offers for five star rooms at International Medical Conference to End Poverty-Related Diseases in Africa, to be held in Vegas.”

“Where maybe one of the speakers will cue you in on how to beat the house at the casinos, so you can fund your own research, which would make it more fun, interesting and honest,” John replied from the couch where he was engrossed in a hockey game, angrily stuffing his face with brightly colored ‘Whizbangers’ that smelled like cheese but was no doubt mostly plastic. “Did you have a good time in the Big Easy?” he asked Karen, his angry stare still held hostage by the game.

“Not as good as if you were there,” she replied, telling yet another half-truth to him as she sat next to him, flipped off her travel heels, then whipped off her jacket. She gazed at her nametag that was still attached to it, which allowed her access to the Medical Meeting at the Convention Hall. She struggled to take it off, but couldn’t dislodge it without ripping apart the garment. “Damn, I mean, darn it. This label’s never going to come off of this, my favorite coat, or me.”

“Did you wear it when you went out for dinner on Burbon Street, with your science buddies, where you discoursed about molecules while watching commoners shake their booty to the Brownian Motion of a Cajun band?” John inquired, doing his best to push his anger into satire, or comedy.

“Yes,” she replied, shamefully. “Where I listened to the kind of music, in a lot of places,

that I used to play.”

“And did anyone invite you to get on stage to join them?”

“Yes, but after trying to play a few bars of the music, all that came out was notes.”  
With jet lagged eyes and a brain made exhausted by under use, she reached for a fistfull of Whizbangers . “Which I started analyzing with respect to what portions of the medial geniculate body and inferior colliculus were being used to send information about them to my auditory cortex,” she continued with a sardonic chuckle. “Which I think is...here?” she continued, pointing to her head.

“That’s...a good one,” John said, finally smiling ‘hello, I’m glad you had a good time even though I wasn’t funded like you were’ at his wife, stroking her on the cheek.

“If it is, we’re both in trouble,” Karen replied, realizing just how deeply John was stuck in the abyss of Dull Out Disease, feeling both of her feet stuck into that muck as well. “But maybe if I can bring my piano from home here, or get one, I could---”

“---become more distracted from your duty as a scientist, your Mission to stop anyone else’s mother from dying of cancer,” he said while pulling Karen into an embrace. “And the joy of having a family, with children who’ll grow up happier than you or I ever were?” he continued.

John’s skin reeked of sweat, but it was honestly emitted. Born with a brain that was always inferior to his father’s in matters scientific, financial and romantic, John was a natural born servant. Yet he needed to feel like a king. Rightly or wrongly, the Good Lord brought Karen into his life, and him into hers. How else would she be admitted into one of the most prestigious private research institute Ph.D. program with a GPA that would barely qualify her for a job as a lower lab tech washing glassware? How else would she ever be in a position to use her brilliant scientific mind to effortlessly, and passionlessly, come up with data that a major Pharmaceutical Company would put to use in the world to creating new medicines and new jobs. And doing it all from the comfort of a life where the only thing she would have to forfeit was her Art, and of course associations with Artists, who were irresponsible people anyway. Who were all about themselves. Like Carla, who she found out through reading an ad in the Toronto Alternative Atlantian at Pearson airport, had premiered a movie without inviting her sister to be part of it. Nor even to have a seat at the Premier.

Carla was one of those artists who insulted, marginalized, then dejected Karen. Then an even more terrifying thought came to her mind. John voiced it as he hugged Karen in closer, providing her the only home she now felt useful in, the only realm to which she was invited. “When those artists get sick, it’s us scientists and doctors who have the power of life and death over them. Like responsible Christians, we’ll help those devil worshipping lost souls stay alive. And maybe suggest to them that they should serve others rather than express themselves. Make them do so if we have to, for their good, and the good of our children. There is mastery in servitude, after all, not in artistry.”



While John justified his claims with Biblical Scripture, Karen recalled his frustrations for not being as artistic as she was, or as 'cool' as Carla. Indeed, Karen was sharing this frustration, particularly as John got to the topic of children again. Lives who, he said, would carry on his and Karen's Mission where he, and her, fell short of the mark. Which led to a passionate embrace, turning off of the lights, and consummation of their wedding vows in ways Karen never imaged possible when at the altar.

## CHAPTER 9

Some years passed, measured by moves into cheaper digs from which increasing amounts of indy material came out. Carla's films, books and music became less marketable, but more real. Her inheritance money gone, she was doing more busking than playing at paying gigs. Getting her now NO budget films done Right was more important than getting them popular, and as long as even one stranger saw them somewhere, it conferred them with immortality and Worth. As for her novels, they were channeling out of her faster than any publisher could print, or even assess, them. Her new website, Promethian Press, was where they lived and where she directed anyone who wanted to know what she was doing, and how she was doing. "It's all there, what I am and the verbs I have been transformed into," she would say as her standard greeting to all who asked about her welfare.

Peter provided Carla with technical assistance when her projects required it, a hug when she was feeling lonely, very protected sex when he was feeling fatherly, and someone who got her jokes more than any other human still living on the planet. But there was one fan she still needed approval from to feel whole, and worthy. She dialed the number yet again, hoping to get that Soul on other end of the phone, which thankfully at her end while she waited for the cab dispatcher to find a vehicle she could drive that had brakes, tires with treads and a steering wheel that could make both left and right turns.

"John, can you tell Karen that I just want to see how she's doing?" Carla asked her brother in law for the fourth time that week from the dive. "She never answers when I call her. She never gets back to me on e mails. And the tapes, books and CD's I sent. Did you get them? And the last one. Revolutionary Blues. Did you or her connect to any of it?"

"Oh yes," John replied. "We read it cover to cover. And Karen read it little William, even with the assertive language in portions of it."

"And the part where the black musicians in Harlem and the Yaqui Indians decide to outdo the Whiteys by playing better Beethoven at Carnegie Hall than any Paleface, even Ludwig himself?"

"Loved it! Well done!" John replied.

Carla continued asking questions about the Western set in Mexico that had nothing to do with the book. John kept giving stock answers which indicated that if the book ever reached his mailbox, they found their way into the garbage disposal before being seen by him. Or Karen. Unable to endure any more lies and insults cloaked in mellow, cheery Christian smiles, Carla hung up the phone, then noticed that her calling card had run out of minutes, again. Thankfully she didn't have to deal with John again. She pondered the thought that her supposed-to-be-beloved brother in law, who routinely got the mail every day, was holding back mail from his wife. Or was Karen throwing away everything Carla was, or had, sent her? That frightening idea found its way into fact, somehow, as hard as the linoleum below her feet and the pot hole-infested concrete streets Carla was waiting to break down another cab on.

She looked at her phone to see if anyone else called, noting the picture of her roommate, who always volunteered to sleep in the bathtub so she could stretch out on the only bed in the colorfully claustrophobic luke warm water flat they were renting above a Chinese restaurant and Sicilian-owned mortuary that provided leftovers for them, as long as they didn't ask too many questions about what kind of meat was in them.

Just last night, yet again, Peter had assured Carla that one day Karen would open up to her, yet he was not opening up very much to Carla either of late. Maybe he was seeing someone else on the side, which was alright, as Carla was smart enough to know that the hardest way to keep a man was hold on to him too tightly. Indeed, she didn't tell Peter the intricacies of the conversations she had with Beethoven's ghost, though she did put down every detail in 'fictional' accounts of such in several films and all too often in her books. Peter suspected that her private relationship with an the imagined ghost of Beethoven was a replacement for her former belief in Jesus, suggesting that his appearance as the blonde, bearded, blue eyed manifestation of Him was the reason why she had the hots for him but felt uncomfortable in bed with him.

But matters of body took precedent over those of mind, or spirit. Carla's underfed stomach was grumbling, and would not take 'we're dieting for a highly paying movie gig or record contract' as an answer anymore. She reached into her pocket and found 5 bucks in change. It could buy half a ream of paper, some ink or a discount thumb drive on which to write another hit song that could get to the top of the charts, or manifesto about the world as it should be that would be read by scholars after she was gone, or perhaps by the 'egg heads' in the company. That collection of mostly dark skinned but also many pale-faced cabbies had worked very hard to get graduate degrees in Astrophysics, Biochemistry, Philosophy, Literature, Medical degrees not recognized by the Canadian Medical Association and/or Ancient Languages.

Those degrees had made them less qualified to figure out how to pick up the highest paying customers on the street, and made them even worse at convincing passengers that the shortest distance between A and B was a series of circles which would up the meter. But there was one thing some of the eggheads at the cab company were better at than the working class stiff. 'Beowolf', as the egghead called it, would deflect attention from himself and back onto you, weakening you by making you see a part of yourself you felt

worst about. If you gave him a dollar, he'd give you a quarter worth of payback, and was getting stingier each week.

“What the fuck did I ever do to you?” Carla grunted at the vending machine after emptying her pockets, pressing the button corresponding to what seemed to be a not-too-stale sandwich, and getting nothing in return except the sound of change going into Beowolf's belly. “And stop looking at me like that!” said as her eyes were held hostage by the reflection of her frustrated, tired and prematurely aging face in the mirrored glass.

“I'm hungry here! I paid my dues. I have a right to get what I want!”

“Only after you stop wanting it,” she heard from turboned man behind her. “If I may?” former Professor Omar Patal, Ph.D. in physics and linguistics, and fellow H.B.A.R.P. (human being, aspiring Renaissance person) said to her gently, requesting that she move aside, and be on the lookout for the manager of the company, who put Beowolf in the garage in the first place. Rumor had it that he paid half of his mortgage with what Beowolf and his relatives all over town had stolen from unsuspecting buyers. “A wise Martian communicates with mechanical earthlings by knowing what makes those earthling want, and giving it to them,” the Sikh said as he manoeuvred his hands to the soft spots on the machine, tapping, shaking and compressing them until Beowolf coughed up not only one sandwich, but two of them.

Carla offered the second sandwich to Omar, but he passed on it. “You are hungrier than I am. You have the burden, and pleasure, of living longer than I will,” the man with a gray beard that had turned white very fast said by way of explanation.

Carla tried to formulate the words that would cajole her ‘East Indian Beethoven’ to elaborate, but before she could, the dispatcher called him away to get his cab. Carla was called away to hers within the next thirty seconds.

At the end of the shift, Carla returned to the garage, having ducked three Cops after running red lights and avoiding two of the most infamous potholes just outside of the city limits, conveniently located near two new repair shops advertising the quickest service in town. Omar didn't make it back to the garage that night. There were conflicting explanations provided by everyone Carla asked as to how and why his body was found dead in his cab while parked on an isolated peer on the lake, in a neighborhood which was considered dangerous by some, colorful by others, and ‘creatively expansive’ by underground dumpster divers who lived on doing their own art more than anything that they put in their stomachs. Lingered in her thoughts were that she would get what she wanted only after she stopped wanting it. And what she wanted, and needed, to do, or experience, before she was found dead by her fellow Martian eggheads, or estranged earthlings.

“I hear what you're thinking,” Carla heard from the ‘Too-tall Cowboy’ Willie, a short Toronto born and raised fiddler who was never West of Winterpeg, yet always wore a Stetson and fringed buckskin jacket. “Most of what's in here is legal now. And it's on

me this time. It might help, ease the pain,” he continued as he placed a bag of weed into Carla’s hands, insisting that she smell it. “And the guilt,” he continued, turning away from Carla’s weather-beaten face which was framed by her prematurely graying, yet still wildly worn, hair. He seemed to be lost in his own guilt ridden soul regarding all the times he did what he could to stick it to dark skinned immigrant drivers who invaded his Vision of an All-White Canada, and got nothing back from Omar except words of wisdom and kind wishes for his own future. “And it might open you up to ways that you, and maybe me, can make a living with our music, aye?”

“I don’t think so,” Carla said back to Willie, gently putting the bag of elixer that could have numbed her pain back into his shaking hands. Easing into an ‘I’ll get by because I have to fulfill Spirit’s Purpose for me’ smile that had finally been tested in real life, she gave the bag back to the beloved cheapskate cabbie who was infamous for never giving away anything unless there was something in it for him. “Creative madness is best enjoyed and expressed when straight.”

“Straight as in not gay, yeah, sure,” Willie conceded. “But don’t you need a break from the trying to climb a mountain with a busted left leg? Padding across the ocean in a rubber dingy with a broken oar? Giving your Mind-Soul a break from watching over your brain and keeping it on the job trying to be Enlightened 24/7? Just letting lose to experience the ‘f’ word people who take their Spirituality too seriously never have? Letting yourself just be...happy?”

“Bliss is better,” Carla replied, the upper lips inside her mouth breaking into a wider smile than the skin on her pale, winter-chapped face. Sure, it would have been better if Cowboy Willie agreed the ideas he quoted from her self-published books, and thrice aired on alternative radio songs. But at least Willie had sort of considered them, tempting Carla to be evangelistic by proposing.... “And that kind of bliss is---“

“---not sharable with someone who knows the real value of this,” Willie interjected, waving his weed. “And this,” he continued with a shit eating grin, through rotted teeth and booze-tinged breath, pointing to his crotch. “Ask your ‘comrade in creative collaboration’ Peter, he’ll tell you to, first hand,” he continued, channeling that warning from a place as deep as Omar ever came from, or Onkle Ludwig von, who Carla could still feel, and hear with her inner ear, but never see. At least not with her earthly oculars.

## CHAPTER 10

Karen finished her lecture at 4 pm, then gazed at the clock from behind the podium as the room emptied out. “What did I just do for the last hour and a half, or day?” she said to herself while gathering her notes. “Teaching, I suppose,” she told herself as a two keener students wished her a good weekend, one addressing her as Doctor Steiner, the other as Professor. “In truth, I’m neither one, until I pass my thesis defense, and as for being a Professor, my official title is Instructor, as is what the hell I’m doing here. Instructing,” that voice in her head that argued with itself continued while she gave them

a professional smile and some kind of standard greeting wishing them a good weekend that she didn't really feel, but deep down, hopefully meant. Such was expected, as Carla was now a professional, clad in the most elegant and state-of-the-art fashions buyable, complimented by weekly visits to the beauty salons paid for by her father in law, and appreciated by her Barbie-worshipping husband.

Such was expected of fledgling faculty members at the University of Saskatoon who were given lab space and teaching positions because they brought in grant money from big time pharmaceutical companies. And who could come up with 'elegant' scientific hypothesis and methods to prove them that seemed effortless. In truth, understanding the physiology and pathology of the human body, and figuring out the nuts and bolts about what made it tick came very easily to 'Professor-Doctor' Karen. Such would, she still hoped, pay off in that she could save some other daughter from losing her mother to cancer, and her father to neurological diseases which he acquired when being around too many toxins at work, or got due to bad genetics that manifested themselves when behind the wheel of a car. But still, Carlata wanted to understand the workings of the human soul. That was the problem, as she was now about comprehending more than feeling, assessing more than being. But, such was what one had to do when trying to integrate into the world as it is, and accepting the inevitable and perhaps Divinely assigned limitations it gave to you. And making compromises, in the give and take which was the business of trying to move the world as it is closer to the world as it should be.

Like accepting that in order to stay in operation, Pharmaceutical Companies had to make enough money to keep their own and their satellite labs funded, and that the key brilliant minds who coordinated them worked better if they got paid six figure salaries for doing one sixth of the work the lucky employees under them were privileged to do. And accepting that most scientists outside of the commercial health care system had large egos that were addicted to constant adoration and affirmation, attainable by dubbing a structure of the body or a phenomenon of nature made possible by the Creator with their own name. Or tearing apart a research paper sent to them by the editor of scientific journal for review so that they themselves could repeat the experiment and publish it themselves. Or by fabricating or mathematically altering raw data so it would fit their working hypothesis, which had been done by still-icon and role model Gregor Mendel so he could come up with his perfect model of genetics, which worked, truth be told, worked out that way only 85% or so of the time. But in the world as it is, rather than as the one championed by idealistic and spoiled brat artists, the first Company to patent office was the one who got to sell and market a drug. And the first scientist to be published was the one who got credit for any discovery. Such was required to build Medical Empires, of which Karen was now junior royalty on her way up very fast.

On the drive home, Karen spotted Mellissa Demond and Laura Gilbert, the two keeners who ass-kissed their way into getting the A's in pre-med university that Karen was entitled to because of her hard earned intrinsic brilliance, in front of City Hospital. They were eagerly taking notes from a very British Chief Resident outside the entrance to the facility. The two 'Gray's Anatomy' and 'House' wannabes were clad in white coats, on their way to becoming doctors at the University of Saskatoon Med School. They still

carried themselves off as they deserved to be at McGill or Yale, but underneath the hip-cool bravado, they looked genuinely tired. And as for the fashion wear under their lab coats, and their hair, it was now Karen out-shined them by every standard of beauty. In a few months, it would be Karen who would be at the lectern grading them on how well they memorized the medical fairy tales associated with the latest pharmaceutical drugs out there, given validity by the old term of 'mechanisms of action', the newer, hip and cool one being 'pharmacodynamics'. And after 'Doctors Mellissa and Laura' graduated from med school, their worth as physicians, and people, would be measured according to how effectively the inert morsels of legalized pharmaceuticals they prescribed made life-sized human bodies do what the holders of them needed and wanted.

Yes, it made Karen feel empowered, that she had such power over people now. But did she really have power over disease? Her fresh from the factory luxury sedan, necessary for public image and professional effectiveness, of course, was held up being held up at the stoplight Whyte Way at the intersection of Main, due to a caravan of old pick-ups transporting hay to cattle outside of town so that home grown Canadian beef could be sold in the store. Or traded with New Zealand so that down under meat could be sold at the groceries in Saskatchewan, providing jobs of course for the various inspectors and transport companies. Such was a small price to pay for accidental importation of disease and prices for plain hamburger for hungry and broke families rising up to the cost of steak.

Karen glanced over to the research files she was bringing home for the weekend. Within them were some drugs she helped create, and some she was testing for others. What would be done with the data would of course depend on others up the ladder. Such was part of the process. As was 'putting your best foot forward' with the data, holding back outlier results that didn't make sense and which now were allowed to be thrown out. Sometimes with the justification of the University statistician, and sometimes when John's Dad got hold of it. It was all part of a multi-personed system that was the world. Besides, there were no new discoverers in medicine anymore. No Ramon y Cajal's working from a mountain cabin in the Mountains of his Native Spain pumping out innovative light microscopic images of the nervous system along with predictions on how the system worked when someone came up with an electron microscope. No Louis Pasteurs who by his own intuition and with tools from his garden shed proved the existence of a whole class of species that can't be seen with the naked eye, but which could kill macroscopic creatures with eyes, ears, limbs and hearts. And Tesla, whose inventions were way ahead of his time, died broke and unrecognized in his own time. And, as Karen believed, if a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, it didn't fall at all.

After three waitings in line of traffic for the light to change, Karen finally broke out of the traffic jam in the town that called itself a city, as well as the gridlock between her ears, and was on her way back home. Once there, she had the entire weekend off. Such was a curse and a blessing.

Karen was greeted at the door by Juanita, a well paid and underappreciated housekeeper who shh'ed her. "Little Jamie is playing Bach today," the housekeeper said with pride.

“With a Mexican flair,” Karen noted, quietly, as she heard her pre-school old daughter extend her hands to the piano at the corner of the living room. “With cadenzas like the songs you sang to her,” she continued, thankful that her daughter was not playing the Appassionata, the Soul-awakening, heart-opening Opus of Beethoven which Karen forbade anyone to perform or play in her presence.

“Jamie loves music, just like her mother loves science,” Juanita said by way of explanation as she took Karen’s coat, no doubt aware of the agony brewing in the heart under it. And at Karen’s anger for becoming too good at something that was toxic to her soul that materialized into emptiness, instead of being able to. “Mister Peterson says he’ll be late for dinner. And for you to start without him,” Juanita continued, hiding the reason for John’s delay behind her kind, and gracious, eyes.

“He didn’t say where he went?” Karen inquired, trying to keep the music from the Appassionata that she had played so well as a child, and her technically-challenged sister Carla had played so expressively.

“Working late, I suppose,” the reply, without eye contact.

“At the bar working on his drunk, male bonding with his washed out, has been but never were hockey players and born with a silver straw in their mouths business tycoons, God help and curse them,” Karen thought, but did not say. Such would put Juanita in the middle of brewing disputes between her and John, which would no doubt make her quit, even though according to the terms of her work VISA, she was deportable within 48 hours of being unemployed.. Besides, Jamie needed a mother who loved her, and Karen was not it. Karen was reminded of that when she heard her daughter, no doubt a protegee in the Arts, continue to play Bach better than Karen ever did, at least since going to biology school and becoming engaged to John. And almost as good as the CD’s Carla had sent to her, which Juanita rescued from the dumpster ‘accidentally’ to play for Karen, and Jamie.

“I can’t help it,” Karen said to Jamie in a whisper while the daughter she had to please God was serving Him with music in a Way she never could do anymore. “It’s the Salieri complex,” she whispered into the air as she approached the bar in the kitchen, still thankfully unnoticed by her daughter. “If I keep my distance from you, I won’t kill you like the procedural dulled out Salieri killed the vitality enriched carrier of Life Mozart in Amadeus. A film I’ll have Juanita show you one day,” she continued as she opened a bottle of scotch, the sound of the bottle opening bringing relief to her ears. She grabbed for one of the mugs John bought at the latest fund raising picnic at the church, bearing pleasantly-script reading ‘A toast to my Friend, Jesus’. “So in the meantime, staying in synch with John, wherever he’s drunk himself into. KNOWING you understand why,” she said, toasting with a super sized sip the Son of God who she still believed in, somehow. “And for me being able to stand being around him, and me a little better,” she continued pulling out a small baggie of powder from her purse, mixing it into the bitter tasting brew. “A little sweetener. Better living through chemistry, which I’m

testing for scientific purposes, right?” Karen both asked and asserted to the only man she still loved, of wanted to.

Ignoring the voice of that Mentor inside of her, and hoping that one day she might be able to play the kind of music coming from the living room, that day being maybe in this lifetime, or perhaps a next one, Karen began her ‘chillaxing’ routine for a weekend of socially-approved chuckles and romantic superficially experienced affections, hoping that either her own end would come on Sunday night, or that some kind of biological miracle would happen. Even if it was a Vision inside of her head that she knew was not real, or sustainable. An escape from a ‘real life’ existence where more was said than not said between her and John, and where even the thought of being Resurrected into being Alive was too much pain to endure. And, of course, contraindicated given her professional duties and demeanor.

## CHAPTER 11

“So, the rest of the story goes, Carla’s books became hits, her songs round their way to the top of the charts, and her and Peter opened up a distribution company that revolutionized the world. And Karen finally found a wonder drug that would cure dull out disease, after testing it on herself that weekend, and found that it also cured cancer which had been incubating in her daughter, right?” Nurse Andrea asked Doc Mikey while looking over his shoulder as he completed the last entry in a medical profile which was long enough to be a textbook. “I saw the movie,” she commented. “And I know that the way people deal with issues on screen is not how they deal with them in real life.”

“Which is absolutely true and appropriately stated,” Doc Mikey replied as he saved the document, then wrote ‘Chapter’ as the next entry. He lingered in Silence staring at the empty page. “You came in here to ask me something, so ask it,” he barked out.

“You asked me to come here to your office,” Andrea replied. “Ordered me to, actually. After somehow I got accepted into a job at this place with almost no experience. And a resume I made up.”

“With things you want to do someday, Andrea.”

“Yeah,” she replied.

“So, you didn’t lie in your application, you time traveled into the past, relating what will happen in the future,” Doc Mikey replied with a warm smile, and atypical chuckle.

“If you believe that, then maybe you should be at the other side of the treatment desk, Doc,” she replied.

“Maybe I am, or both of us are!” With that, Doc Mikey turned back to his keyboard and



wrote, motioning for his guest to lock the door behind her, and then sit down next to him.

## CHAPTER 12

In her head, Carla knew that living for noble Cause was the best security of all, as that Cause, or the 'what goes around comes around' rule, would take care of you. She intuited that anyone who lived for just one other person rather than the world was doomed to be disappointed. She reasoned that the marriage vow, which pledged that you would be the same person forever in the service of the humanoid next to you, was impossible to keep, as both you and your beloved would change, and that if either of you didn't, you were useless, individually and collectively. She had affirmed that the only real security in life was the ongoing endeavor to use as much of your freedom as you could, as creatively as you could.

Somehow, application of those formulas resulted in Carla consenting to proposing marriage to Peter. He eagerly accepted, insisting on celebrating it with his best stash of weed and a bottle of 65 year old French brandy he had inherited from his father that had been saving for the day that he 'made it' in the Arts like his granddad did in the UK. "What say we have a family?" he said to Carla after three glasses of vino, and two joints which were equally shared. "I always wanted to be a father."

"And I always wanted to be a mother," Carla answered, feeling light headed but still knowing the location of all of her limbs, as well as a very rotating earth below them. "With the right father, of course."

An agreement was made between the eyes of the two gypsy scholars, signed with their hearts, sealed with thinking minds that no doubt were far more worthy of breeding than the idiots who popped out morons. Indeed, as Carla finally saw, and felt, it, a son or daughter to pass on whatever she had between the ears and the third brain that had developed between Peter and herself was a service to future generations, and themselves. Something that included, but went beyond, someone to entrust hers and Peter's Art to when they were called back to Om Planet by the Grim Reaper and his Starship.

Such was theory, but as for application, Peter made an exit left with no forwarding address when Carla came back from the bathroom a week later with a positive result on her home pregnancy test. A complication and challenge, she said to the perhaps thinking and feeling lump of flesh in her womb that did have a beating heart, but nothing resembling a brain yet. "Many options," Carla said to herself as she felt cool air in the apartment going cold, then hearing the heater go off. "Including getting some food into my belly so I can think straight instead of reading Peter's 'good luck with the rest of your lives' e mail he sent me, and you," she continued, talking to what she felt was inside her belly, or maybe just imagined. "Let's see, Miss Embryo, or Mister Fetus," she continued as she opened the door to the refrigerator. "We have outdated milk which we'll pretend is authentic homemade Greek yogurt, dumpster deluxe cheese whiz, and week old bread hard like rock so you become strong like tractor, da?" Carla mused in a Russian accent,

having always admired the defiant persistence of that culture, and identifying with its romantic masochism. Then, a discovery happened. “Horosho, mouya rebenok, which I know, IF we decide you want to come into this world, you will correct me for my bad plocho accent! Half a tomato! And a pack of real bologna! Made from...”

Carla read the chemicals on the label to the live she imagined inside her belly, no so much because she was being maternal, but that she was feeling alone, for the first time in her life. It scared her, along with the other fears that overcame her when she finally prepared the sandwich and bit into it. The idea that she didn't know where her next meal may come from materialized before she got this one into her hungry belly. Peter was never great with money. But compared to Carla, whose sense of mathematics and accounting was confined to metaphysical concepts of infinity merged with the ever-present everything of zero, aka 'nothing', Peter was a financial genius. The four hundred and thirty bucks he left in an envelope for Carla and 'the child who is better off with any other father than me' was most likely the bottom of his barrel.

True, Carla still had a job as a Cabbie, and was learning how to collect money from working stiff customers with hard luck stories rather than paying for the last half of their rides out of her own pocket on those days when she couldn't adjust the meter. Maybe those stories were real, and maybe they weren't. But now, Carla was a hard luck reality, in need of supplemental money, with another mouth to feed, as she was stuck with a child that Peter thought he needed, and she never really wanted.

Having finished her meal, Carla looked out into the night, imagining the stars shining brightly behind the neon lights of the city that conferred an invisible grayness to the sky. While seeing with her third eye the stars beyond the polluted ozone layer, and trying to come up with a song that would link the agony of life as it is with the ecstasy of what it could be, she felt a rumbling in her stomach. Or was it her uterus? It felt like uncertainty. But one thing was certain, for the first time in her consciousness. Money was needed for her to move on with her life as a mother, or to liberate herself from that Calling. Back in Saskatchewan, if you wanted spending money you asked your Uncle, offered to do work for the Church, put an ad on the community bulletin board, or opened up the help wanted section in the Hillside Herald. Here where the Real world, you explored your options in cyberspace.

The first look at Craig's List and the like was for the ideal choices. Singer, musician, novelist, director, writer and/or chronically-overly self observing actor gigs were all but absent, and smelled like they were either defective, taken already or paid lower than collecting bottles off movie sets and taking them to the recycling depot. Next was forming a religious Cult or Revolutionary Movement, but Carla knew that most of her followers would be imaginary, and they would vote her out. As for curing the world's physical ills, Carla barely passed High School Biology, in part because she chose to live life rather than study it, though maybe she could sing cancer away if given a chance to do so at Toronto General, just before of course she would be wheeled off to the psych ward.

The next step: Those who can't do teach. Most of those required some kind of

certification. Those degrees which focused more on how to make friendly font for an overhead than being engaging to your students or engrossed into the subject at hand.

The next step: Pleasing rather than serving gigs. Giving the people what they want, the hell with what they need. But waiting tables, even at restaurants where the rich and famous dined, rather than ate, would yield not much more than breadcrumbs. Yet even the fast food joints required experience, and references. Perhaps because most people applying for dishwasher jobs needed special courses to inform them that the proper way to clean china and cutlery caked with food is not with your tongue, ass or urine.

Finally, Carla considered the kind of pleasing she never imagined in Hillside. She looked at ads for strippers, thinking to herself, 'it's the horny customer's fantasy, not mine'. Then she looked into ads for models in Japan, or escorts in Canada, both jobs paying top dollar for the same tasks. Reason entered her imaginations, when she considered what would happen if she wound up with the wrong customer, or was invited to enter the sex slave trade with an offer she was not allowed to refuse. And if social services ever found out about it, Peter's child would never know his real father, or mother.

Still, Carla searched the personal ads, looking for some kind of 'personal' work where she could be useful to someone in need rather than want. Finally, she found one. "Independent Self-Liberated Wife in loveless marriage seeks temporary girlfriend for hanger-on husband so we both can move on with our lives." The ad promised "big bucks for a small amount of demonstrated kindness, or role play". The premise sounded like an empty calorie B movie plot Carla never got around to writing, or a tv pilot she could shoot on the cheap to sell to Mall Brats and Yuppoid Kens and Barbies. But something made Carla circle the ad, and send an e mail back to the potential employer. Most particularly because she recognized who said wife was by the name, 'skcuefilym'. Such was the backwards code Carla had used all the time to communicate with her now estranged sister.

Clearly 'my life sucks', the letters inverted, signified that Karen was not doing so well, despite the smiley faces on her, John and little Jamie on the generic Christmas cards that Carla received once a year, on some years anyway. Logical reason said that the right way to deal with this was to directly confront Karen like in the old days when they were both marooned by birth in Hillside, which now seemed more like good than bad days, and that the Steiner sisters were not the first ones to use backwards code as a mode of clandestine communication. But the feel in Carla's gut and the smell of the Path ahead of her said that the most effective way to get from point A to B was a circuitous curve, and spiral. The real or imagined life inside of belly seemed to agree, as she reached for her Russian dictionary with one hand, then rummaged through the third hand wardrobe closet that she kept recycling for her films and music videos.

## CHAPTER 13

“Natasha Dmitrovitch?” Karen of the visitor at the front door of her house at the appointed hour. Juanita usually did such chores, but she was been sent out on a wild goose chase around town to fetch the makings of a Bavarian chocolate coconut cake for John’s birthday. “You look... familiar,” Karen noted with a slur in her voice upon looking at the black haired, black clad and black booted Russian domestic version of a dominatrix.

“That is because, perhaps, you recognized me from picture I sended, yes?” the guest said. “ Or perhaps you have interest in me in ways husband and family not have to know about?” she continued with a seductive upturn of her rosy red lips.

Yes, Karen was desperate enough for love and still buzzed enough from the vodka and take home pharmaceuticals to consider being Natasha’s Boris, or perhaps Boris. But as everything had to be done in order so that life would not fall into more disorder and desperation, first things first. “Please to come in, Natasha,” Karen said, waving to the Emma Johnson across the street, octogenarian ‘sugar lending’ and ‘milk burrowing’ retiree who was always looking out her window and listening to the police band radio in her kitchen so she wouldn’t miss out an any event she could gossip about. Such was part of the Karen’s plan, of course. As was what Natasha’s role was to be in all of this after being auditioned on line, and getting a whiff of her perfume.

“I see that you dressed for the occasion, visually and olfactory wise,” Karen noted.

“Please to tell to me what ‘olfactory-wise’ means?” Natasha replied, taking out her pocket dictionary to discern its meaning.

“Your perfume!” Karen noted with a gleefully expressed smile on her old before its time face that had been made to look young by the most expensive artificial means available. “According to the profile I sent you of my hopefully soon to be ex-husband, you smell exactly like his fantasy woman. And your clothes, and D cup breasts...a perfect fit for him. Along with the way you pretend to want to be smart, and subservient. And caring.”

“As expression goes,” Natasha noted, putting away the dictionary. “Sincerity...If you can fake that. Yes?”

“Yes, very yes indeed,” Karen replied, knowing that no geek in the artificial intelligence branch of the Pharmaceutical Company could not have constructed a better ‘catch’ for John. A catch that would arouse his romantic feelings, which he would be caught at one day, requiring him to divorce Karen, leaving her with a pile money, continued position in his father’s pharmaceutical empire, and a life where she would have to be around her daughter Jamie as much or as little as she wanted to. And there was something else which made Natasha a prime candidate. “You said that you’re pregnant. Two weeks.”

“Yes,” the reply, with down-turned eyes. “Accident with boyfriend that perhaps I take care of.”

“Or maybe you won’t?” Karen continued, retrieving an envelope from her purse. “For an this extra bonus, you become pregnant with my husband’s baby.”

“But the paternity test?”

“Will show that it’s his, since I have influential friends in high places.” She handed Natasha the check. “For you, and however you want to feed or handle the situation regarding your pregnant uterus,” Karen said with professional detachment which she now realized was cold, and sterile. A situation that perhaps would be changed once she got John out of her life, or herself out of his. “But for now, your car broke down in front of my house, and you came in for help. Da, Comradski?”

“Da,” Natasha replied.

“And I had an emergency call from the lab and had to get back to work, da?” Carlata continued, after which she spritzed her throat with mouthwash, put on her business blazer and picked up her briefcase.

“Da.”

“And you sing Happy Birthday to John po Ruskie, eat chocolate cake with him, and give him the best birthday of his life, da?”

“While baby monitor camera still on, by accident? On couch or bedroom?”

“Bedroom. OURS. The lighting’s better,” Karen replied, feeling the darkness of her life, and possibility that there could be a way out of it. With that, Karen left the mansion she had forfeited her soul to live in, wishing she was in Carla’s place. Living in a dump as an expressive artist, living a fulfilled life rather than enduring a comfortable existence.

## CHAPTER 14

Carla waited in Karen’s house, alone, trying to stay in character as Natasha. It was easier than she thought, and was even fun. It got interesting when Juanita came home, using the back entrance, having brought a pre-made birthday cake for John. While in the kitchen, thinking she wasn’t being heard, Juanita cursed Karen for having sent her all over town looking for ingredients that were not to be found, and delivered insults to John for being so particular about what he ate when most people in the world she came from went to bed hungry at night, or woke up dead as a result of not eating enough the previous days. She then got a call from what sounded like Jamie’s day care asking for another volunteer to look after the protégée who was more interested in the piano at the facility than anyone listening to it. Ten minutes later, John arrived, coming through the front door with briefcase in hand and anticipation in his downtrodden yet wanting to be upbeat voice. “Hello. I’m here. Everyone, wherever you are. On just another day, like any

other day. I'm home."

He looked everywhere and found no one hiding out, waiting to say 'surprise'. Then he noticed a birthday card on his chair. From her still hidden corner, Carla watched him open the card, finding that it was from his insurance company, and not his wife. Besides the card was a note. "Figures, Karen. You're busy with work while I get busy with..." he said to himself as loosened his tie, then held it in place like a noose. "Something that will let you collect on my life insurance policy," he said to their wedding picture of the happy couple tastefully displayed on the coffee table next to the fireplace. "But only if they don't see the rope burns. But in the meantime," he continued, whipping off the tie and throwing it angrily at the picture. "Happy birthday to me," he sang to himself while going to the bar directly adjacent to the stand holding up the Bible that had been in his family for two centuries, and pouring himself a stiff drink. By the time he got to the second to last chorus, he was singing a duet, accompanied by the words in Russian, harmony provided by 'Natasha'. She brought in a birthday cake, lit up with candles. She laid it on the table in front of him. "Is now time to make wish," Carla beckoned him with a Slavic voice that was both classy and seductive.

"Who are you?" he inquired of Carla, both fascinated by her beauty and terrified of her presence.

"Owner of car outside, that broke down. A woman on way out door, says I can wait her for tow truck," she replied.

John looked outside the window to verify the story. He seemed satisfied with the explanation, then gazed down at his birthday cake. His eyes were tired, old and worn out, and the soul behind them was lonely. It didn't match the profile Karen provided for him as a self-centered, possessive, womanizing, domineering weasel with a Napoleon complex. And to be accurate, Karen didn't match the construct Carla had made of her. Something unexpected had happened to Carla's sister and brother in law. And the person paying the price for it was no doubt the 5 year old child whose pasty smile in the family photos seemed strained and sorrowful. For the sake of that child, and the sister Carla once knew, she was determined to find out the truth about what and who John really was. Knowing that the best truth serum for a macho man was the comfort of a loving, non-judgmental woman who could make him trust her like he once confided in his nurturing mother, Natasha went to work.

"Here, I cut cake, and we both eat it, yes, birthday man?" she unsheathed an antique dagger bearing the family crest from the mantle and cut two slices. "One peice for me," she said while putting the first piece on one of the plates she had brought out. "And one for you?" she offered, asking if it was more appropriate or her to place the cake on her plate, or between her two breasts.

"And one piece to stick up the ass of the woman you saw leaving or work, again," John asked. He turned to the wedding picture again, his nearly tearing eyes filling with rage. "Who probably sabotaged any surprise party, or brought to party to the tavern after work,

with the friends you have, Doctor Professor Karen, because you married into MY family! Without me, you're nothing!" He took in a deep breath, and started to remove the wedding ring from his finger. "And without you...I'm...."

"Not nothing!" 'Natasha' insisted, pushing the wedding band back onto his finger. "You talk with your wife, you share what is in your heart, you work things out, yes?"

"For every one thing we talk about there are ten we don't," he related. "When I talk, she doesn't listen"

"I listen," Natasha offered. "To anything you want to talk about."

"Why should you do that?" he asked.

"Because fate makes my car break down here, and nowhere else. And is your birthday today, and God makes sure that you have at least one guest to cut cake with. And Jesus said, between lines, that whatever happens on earth, is willed by Heaven, yes?" Carla continued with more "God talk", choreographed with seductive movements of her hands, legs and fingers, being sure to not touch John.

At the end of it all, John kept his hands to himself, but as for the wedding ring, he took it off, placing it in an ash tray, then covering it up with a linen cloth. "Now you?" he asked Carla, who noticed that she had retained her wedding ring given to her by Peter.

"I don't know...I think that---."

"---Freedom is scary, I know," John said, looking into Carla's eyes and soul like he was a virgin terrified of forfeiting his virginity because Jesus, Mary and the ordinance wielding Father up in the sky was still looking down at him. "But, when God gives us gifts, it's a sin to not appreciate them, right?"

"Yes, I suppose so," Carla said, feeling more like Natasha than herself. Her feelings ruling her head, so much so that she forgot who Peter was.

John extended his fingers to Carla's hand and slipped the ring off her finger.

"But your wife. The nice lady who let me into this house---"

"---who left me a note, saying she'll be at work all night! Who has her own bedroom."

"And who is bad medicine for you like man who gave me that was for me?" Carla said.

"Maybe we're good medicine for each other," John said, finding possibilities in Carla's eyes. "You being woman who, looks familiar, whose name I don't know."

"Natasha," Carla said, relieved that she wasn't recognized. "Yours?"

“John,” he replied. “Just plain John. Who....”

“Wants to have cake in another room?” Carla suggested, as Natasha.

“Another dimension,” John confessed.

“A kind dimension?”

“Da,” the affirmative reply which Carla felt and knew she could trust.

With that, Carla allowed John to escort her into the bedroom, after which he closed the door behind him. Back on script that was still following the original storyline, but with complications in subtext and plot that were set in motion towards a truthful and redeeming conclusion, for everyone. Somehow Carla felt that if Karen was the one who should be set up for blackmail, not John. It was not the first time Carla had mistaken an idiot for a manipulator, a martyr for an asshole, a sister for someone worth protecting. But, John did deserve some gift of love for his birthday. And in the end, he was probably better off without Karen, perhaps.

En route to the bedroom where John said he wanted to ‘give something valuable’ back to Natasha for her kind words on an otherwise horrible day, it wasn’t what Carla saw but what she didn’t see around every corner and in the bookcases lining the house. The impressionist prints she sent to Karen were absent from the wall. None of Carla’s CDs were among the many music recordings, DVDs of her films absent from everywhere. And as for books, every author in the English language seemed to be displayed on the shelves, except for Carla and the very expensive books by authors Carla knew Karen needed to read. ‘Maybe it’s because I write Martian Atlantian and don’t even know it,’ Carla said to herself by way of explanation for her own works not being around. But there was something else that disturbed Carla. She saw her reflection in countless numbers of pictures from Karen’s past, none of those photographs showing her with her sister.

“Seems that someone has exiled me from their life,” Carla said to herself, in Russian, feeling it vital to give voice to, while still carrying the tray of birthday cake and cutlery .

“A condition we both share,” John replied in that highly expressive Slavic tongue, at the archway to the bedroom tongue.

Carla felt herself ‘found out’ more intensely than any of the fictional characters in her plays, films and short stories.

“Yes, people underestimate me,” the presumably dumb sheep of the aristocratic WASP family continued as he turned around, blocking Carla’s exit down the hallway. He picked up the knife from the tray, fondling its edge with a confident snicker that seemed to come from a soul that was as sincerely vulnerable as it was demonically possessed.



“Yes, so many people underestimate me. My father, the docs and postdocs at the Institute who are supposed to be for me, my wife and ...hmm...”

Carla was waiting for John to say “you, ‘Natasha’, who speaks Russian as authentically as Rocky or Bullwinkle,” followed by “I’m up to Karen’s scheme, and yours.” But what would come after that? “And after I rip that black wig off your head, I promise that the crew cut I’ll give up will be an inch above rather than below the scalp.” Or, even more deadly to Carla’s core, “I forgive you, as does Jesus, and if we pray together, the Lord will give us a solution.”

“What do you want me to do with this....cake?” Carla asked John, as Natasha, at a lost to find anything else to say.

“Share it with me? If you want to? Unless you have somewhere else you have to be tonight?” John said, in offensively non-offensive Saskatchewanian English. He put the knife back on the tray, then stepped aside, allowing Carla a choice of entering the bedroom, or exiting the house. “Your choice no one else’s? And maybe you give me lessons in Russian, so I know more than a few phrases? So I can be smart as well as sounding smart?”

Carla could come up with many reasons for John’s stating three commands in the inquisitive tense. But underneath it all, he seemed like a Forest Gump Saskatchewan bred kid was too dumb to be mean, and who never learned how to be effectively hurtful. Such was not what Karen seemed to be. The brief visit with Karen telegraphed to Carla that she had turned her smarts into being clever rather than wise. That she graduated from being Doctor Anne of Green Gables who was dedicated to making all of Jesus’ children free of disease, in His name, to The Real Housewives of Rasputinburg, produced by Machevellian Entertainment. Feeling the silent count of five as the timetable to make her decision, Carla leap-frogged ahead to one of the forks in the road at ‘three’. She walked into the bedroom, feeling an attraction to John that was kinder, and stronger, than she had for any other man, even Peter, as far as she could recall anyway. Then she stopped, as if being blown by another wind between her ears. When she turned around, John was in front of her, all six foot three of him. He pushed the door behind him closed, but then stopped before the latch took it hostage. He hesitated, then re-opened the door. His phone rang. He looked at the call display, pensively wondering if he should answer it.

“You can the close door,” Carla said, forgetting that Russians don’t say ‘the’ or ‘a’. “Perhaps we can have private conversation?” she continued, as she scouted the room for the locations of the cameras and microphones, finding them in exactly the positions that Carlata said they would be. “But....maybe in Garden? Or in library? Or in...”

Just as Carla was about to suggest the most probably camera-less kitchen, laundry area, or bathroom (where she would put a radio on to block any voice recordings like the low budget spies do), John was gone. She put the cake down on a table next to the closet and peaked at the hallway. “John?” she asked, in desperation. “Important that we at

least talk. For both our sakes, yes?”

Carla walked all over the house, looking for John. She got no answer as to his whereabouts. A door to what looked like a basement was open. John’s voice could be heard behind it, his voice presumably on a business call as he sounded very official. Carla tiptoed down the stairs, recalling that she shared her sister’s fear of being underground. According to the past lifetime regression psychics and mental cases who learned how to get degrees as psycho-therapists, it had something to do with Carla and her sister being trapped underground at an early age. It was a phobia that still plagued Carla, who made every excuse possible to take the bus or her two doggedly painful feet rather than the subway to get from A to B. Somehow, Carla’s terror of walking down into underground spaces had de-escalated into self-observed anxiety. Somehow she found a way to take one step downward into the ‘corridor to the underworld’ after the other. Somehow on the last step, when her feet hit solid floor at the bottom, thinking that she was finally over all of that nonsense, Carla slipped on the floor, having not been used to walking on slippery surfaces with Natasha heels.

John rushed over to help her, asking her if she was alright. “Da, spacebar,” she replied. “Continue with call, please,” she said, in English. “I am alright.”

John continued with his business call, most of it in some sort of ‘code’. Carla’s ears were tuned into what he was really trying to talk about. But it was what she saw that made draw Carla’s attention.

“Karen’s sister’s shit,” John replied after ending the call. “Her books, films, CDs, and other manifestations of evil that have no place in Carla’s life, or mine, or our daughter’s,” he said by way of explanation regarding at box that contained everything Carla had sent to her sister after the wedding. “I’m waiting for the right time to burn all of these,” he continued, in a dispassionate tone that reeked of ‘procedural Saskatchewan’. “Pastor said that he’ll let me know when the time is right. And when Karen will be up to lighting the match herself. It doesn’t make any sense to me, but Pastor has the Lord’s ear, and I’m only his humble servant. A servant who, Pastor says, I must stay with and serve, even though I do not understand her mind or heart.”

It made no sense to Carla, but then again, Pastors who claimed to have the Almighty’s ear and parishioners who believed them was part of her past back in Hillside. Given the fact that everything in Carla’s world was being turned upside several times over today, she even considered the idea that Peter was the Pastor. Extended thinking went into considering that Peter and John were minions working for some entity that had separating Carlata and Carla as one of their master plans to take over the Universe. And that the life inside Carla was a demon seed, destined to take over the world and devitalize it with more lobotomizing ‘magic’ than disco, country music and MTV reality shows combined.

Before more plotlines that Carla would be terrified to put into print came into her head, John excused himself to deal with another call. He talked in code again, as if he was maneuvering a secret deal couched with medical lingo John figured Natasha could not

understand. To the best of Carla's perceptions and deductions, it was about discrediting an independent researcher who came up an effective cures for cancer and neurologically-based depression so that John's branch of his Dad's pharmaceutical company could make a killing selling more placebos, which would buy John himself more time to come up with better cures himself. But whatever was afoot, Carla had to get Karen away from John, even if she had turned into a John herself. As such, she had to, as she had written in her own intellectually-intense worse-seller Faustian Western, *Revolutionary Blues*, 'use the fire of hell in the service of heaven'.

Carla stroked John's shaking arm, then his tight fist, then his sweat-soaked cheeks. "Come, you bring phone to bedroom," she whispered to him, back to the original script as Natasha. "I listen to your heart, while you talk business, yes?"

Carla never felt closer to Karen, and more determined to save her from John, even if she was a smarter, meaner version of him. Maybe Karen was still in the woman who hired Carla as Natasha. And maybe that Karen could bring Carla back to the best parts of what she used to be so that she could become not only someone who could save the world as an artist, but someone who would be worthy of being a mother, a Calling that she knew nothing about.

## CHAPTER 15

When it came to matters medical, and scientific, Karen always figured that the ends justified the means. One of those means was to forfeit her own life as an expressive artist so that she could become an effective scientist. Such hit her as the sixth drink was delivered to her at the bar where a lounge singer swooned out the most melodic and heartfelt version of 'Seems Like Old Times' Karen had ever heard.

"Reminds me of an ex-girlfriend, I recall from my jovial past while sewing wild oats," the man next to her said with fondness.

"Reminds me of someone else, Dad," Karen said, gazing her drink, wondering if it would numb the pain of what she had become, and the irresponsible arts-fartsy sister who had most probably become what Karen wanted to be.

"Professor Doctor Karen," her esteemed, professionally respected and commercially feared father in law replied. "Please, call me Horatio. Just Horatio."

"If you call me Karen. Just Karen?" she asked, and begged. "Karen, A.H.B.A. R.P."

"Ahbarb?" Horatio asked.

"Almost human being aspiring Renaissance person," Karen replied, lifting her drink to her lips, having assessed both her attempts cure diseases and transform herself as a failed experiment.

“Who I promise to back in any investigation she wants to do, scientifically or otherwise,” Horatio said, gently placing his hand upon Karen’s just before she was about to seek comfort from Doctor Johnny Walker Red. “You, more than ANYone else, have my full support.”

“If I provide you with my affection, Horatio?” Karen asked.

Dear Old Dad placed his other hand on Karen’s arm. “My wife is gone. Your husband John is dead to you, and a disappointment to me. You’re very good at your work. And I’m the greatest supporter of your work.”

“My work from which side of the brain? The left side or the right?” Karen asked, feeling close enough to suicide this time that she found the kind of courage that booze and dope could not access. “What if I want to be more than a scientist? Or stop being a scientist?”

“Something that....I think now, may be doable,” the old man replied to the not yet aged woman, withdrawing both of his hands from Karen’s. “What do you want me to be?”

“I don’t know,” Karen asked, feeling like she had been dropped from a parachute she had gotten used to. “I don’t know what I want to be anymore.”

“Well, maybe I do,” Horatio replied, with what felt like a kind heart. He got up from the table, extending an open hand and Soul to Karen.

“Can I make a phone call first to see if...well...to see if I’m free tonight, and the rest of my life?”

“Of course,” Horatio replied. He laid down a hotel key on the table. “Whatever you find out, my door is always open, Karen. H.B.A.R.P.”

With that, Horatio left Karen to feel the waters, and determine how she wanted to negotiate the turbulent seas that could pull her under into the Davy Jones’ locker, or deliver her to a land beyond the horizon that she still could feel in the deepest recesses of her sloshed, underused and over-medicated imagination.

Karen waited for the lounge singer to finish she could think with her higher brain instead her jealous and probably dysfunctional limbic lobes, or ovaries. At the appointed hour, called Natasha to see how things were going.

“I fucked his brains out. Am about to find out even more about what he really thinks about you, and your sister,” the reply from Natasha. “Almost have reason why he doesn’t want to leave you. One more poke away from giving him another theology to believe in so he begs for a divorce. Very soon, you will be free to live your own life again. Must go now....Jackass idiot just got out of shower.”

Karen was happy to find out that all was going as she had planned back at the home front. She was curious about why Natasha mentioned Carla, though.

## CHAPTER 16

Upon hanging up on Karen, while waiting in bed for another round of kinky expressions of affections to be followed by hot and heavy recordable pillow talk, Carla pondered the issue of Pastor. Could Natasha, or some other fantasy Dominatrix Nun John lusted after most, could be called into play so that Pastor could be removed from the pulpit, or if warranted, the realm of those living on the free side of penitentiary bars? Such duties involved not only catching John in bed with Carla as Natasha, revealing his various plots to contain and discredit Karen, but also to make God fearing John risk the fires of hell by making him leave Karen for a temptress in black from the underworld. Or, perhaps John could be made to renounce his vows to Karen and loyalty to Pastor by making Natasha seem like God's favorite angel. Such seemed to be working, but required one more leap, or faking, of faith.

"We share bodies, we share minds, but for us to continue, we must share faiths, yes?" Natasha said to John after another roll in the hay which, to tell the truth, she enjoyed as much as endured, perhaps because John liked it best, being the one on the bottom, the subservient 'woman' in the relationship. "Clock says it is Sunday now. We shower, then go to Church today? I sit in back of room, so no one knows we together, yes?"

"NO! Natasha!" John insisted, after-which he kissed Carla on the lips, his own breaking into a warm, and kind smile afterwards. "We go in together, and pray together. Pastor always has something important to tell me. That he tells everyone. And could tell to you, too."

"Like how to do good things in world that says they are impossible or inappropriate?" Carla continued. "But...I did not bring Church clothes. Maybe I borrow some from your wife, before she comes home."

"You come as you are," he said. "Pastor always speaks more clearly to you when you do. And the wife says she'll be at the lab all day today. The wife texted me, and said there is a ground breaking experiment at the lab that she had to tend to. She's missing out on a great sermon, fantastic music, and a Sunday with my daughter. She asked Juanita, again, to take care of little Jamie for the day, making the little girl play the piano for patients in hospitals and nursing homes, instead of for the Lord at Church. Serves the wife right for working on the Sabbath."

Carla noted a few things of relevance. First, the shirt that John slipped on was neither white nor red, but a very 'yin' hue in between, and that he had shaved his arms and legs during his last shower, and the way he watered the plants in his room it seemed that he was their loving mother more than their owner. Second, Karen was now being described

as ‘the wife’ instead of by her name, or even a personal pronoun, indicating that either John was going ‘white bread farmer Saskatchewan’ on Carla, or that indeed he had distanced Karen between his ears in preparation for leaving her in body. Third...Carla was developing feelings for John, and not all of them based in pity.

Carla had not been inside a Church since she left Hillside. It wasn’t that she stopped believing in God, but that the presence of the Divine Essence beyond gender and personification was present for her in the woods, or on the streets, than inside. Still, that ‘if two or more of you are gathered in my name, I’ll show up to honor that request’ dynamic did have some presence in the New Life Church. From her position next to John in the front portion of the pews, she heard simple lyrics played with simple melodies on simple instruments from the stage. She smelled Old Spice on the clean shaven, well- muscled men around her. With her inner nostrils, she smelled ‘estrous’ on the wide-hipped women surrounded by children clad outfits that matched their siblings more than they differed. An overhead posted the lyrics to a modern tune that seem to make serving the Lord more fun than work, clearly written for those with simple mentation rather than inquisitive Minds who craved Truth rather than emotional comfort. For Carla, it was painful hearing off tune, lazily played, procedurally ‘calm’ music composed using pop tune formulations to dull rather than activate the Mind, or Spirit. For John, it was heaven on earth, as his gentle holding of Natasha’s hand led to a strong, inescapable ‘I love you, I need you, we belong to each other’ grip that strangled Carla’s thin and now painful fingers. “No wonder Karen gave up playing piano,” she told herself, recalling that her sister’s fingers seemed to be arthritic nubs rather than phalanges that could turn notes into music. “And the way John bear shows his affections by strong hugs, he’d crush the breath and life out of any opera singer as well, and not even know it. Which is why the Creator allowed man to invent bullet proof metal vests that smart women would always wear under their Victoria Secret nighties.”

The reading from the Bible afterwards from the head of ceremonies was from a short, balding man with a friendly down home smile, clad in a blue sports jacket and pressed grey trousers, the uniform of overpaid, under-worked Deans at Universities whose brochures tried to sell ‘independent thinking and expansive reasoning’ for the students who would go broke paying for tuition. It was the ‘love is more powerful than anything else’ speech from the book of Paul, a man who never met Jesus in person but whose books were included in the Bible as if he did. Then it was the ‘it’s easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than a rich man to get into heaven’, followed by of course passing the collection plate. It wasn’t anything new to Carla, seeing hard working folks having their money extracted by men of the cloth who lived better than any of they did. Money poured onto the collection basket. When it got to John, he emptied his pocket of cash, followed by one of his credit cards, then, finally, his wedding ring. “Now you, Natasha,” he said to Carla in one of the well accented phrases in Russian he had learned, and no doubt rehearsed many times.

Carla started by emptying her purse, then putting in a her maxed out credit card, followed by her wedding ring, an imitation gold hunk of metal which Peter got from a dollar store.

It was useless to her now, and, besides, if Peter came back to renew his Connection to Carla and step up to the plate to take care of the womb in her belly that he had so much wanted to father, she could buy another one. Either it would be with money extracted from Karen for liberating her from John, from John for doing whatever she was about to do to him, or from Pastor after whatever schemes behind his lovingly paternalistic eyes would be exposed. At the very least, it would make a great book based in reality that Carla could write as a book, and sell as a movie.

Following the ceremony, and the obligatory 'greet the stranger next to you who is now your friend' custom that never worked to seasoned parishioners, as they always sat next to people they liked or could stomach, John invited Carla to meet Pastor at the picnic behind the Church.

There was one thing that penetrated most everything at the picnic. "Mayonnaise," Carla noted, as Natasha of course, regarding the white, innocuous and 'safe' filler in most everything on the table.

"White, pure, and doesn't clash with anything or anyone," John said with a happy and fulfilled smile as he stuffed another egg salad finger sandwich into his pie hold. "The Lord's food!"

"Which I hated in Saskatchewan, and hate even now," Carla thought, but didn't say. "Makes me want and need to barf."

"Here, have some more potato salad," John said as he dumped another spoonful of the spice-less fare onto her plate, right next to the uneaten macaroni salad, and tuna fish balls. A clean cut young gentlemen with a full head of hair, a GREY sports coat and BLUE trouser, motioned to John to come discuss some things with him, leading him into a trailer. "I have to discuss some Church business. I'll be right back. Enjoy the bounty of the Lord in the meantime!" he said regarding the food.

Oh how Carla needed Rex now more than ever, the dog who she could sneak food to under the table when she was a girl so as to not anger her parents at home, or offend guests at Church Socials when she was out. For reasons she could not comprehend, the Lord delivered on her promise. A German Shepherd with a friendly face and deep, brown eyes that seemed more human than canine wandered over to her, placing a ball down on the ground in front of her feet. "Okay, but I throw this ball, you come back and eat this food, right? And to make the ball more interesting..." she continued, while discretely placing some of the mayonnaise infested flavorless lunch into the half eaten softball.

The dog seemed to bark 'yes'. Carla through the ball, and it was retrieved, several times, the canine with both exercise and a lunch he didn't seem to mind eating. No one seemed to notice her. Or maybe Carla was being marginalized as not being part of the home tribe. Such was something Carla had gotten used to, being a Martian Artist among Earthling non-Artists, or asshole Earthling 'artists' most everywhere she had experienced

during her tours of duty on the planet. Finally, just as Carla was about to discretely dispose of the last of the macaroni salad into neuvo-Rex's mouth, she heard a very human voice behind her.

"So, Pastor seems to like my macaroni salad," she said, in a voice that sounded much like an older aged, and life embittered Karen.

"Is very good, and I took second helping for dog here," Carla said to the coiffed, frumpy woman with the constipated look on her lily white face who thankfully, was not Karen. "I am sure Pastor likes your macaroni salad."

"I see that he does," the woman who reminded Carla more of her mother than her old before her time sister continued, pointing to the dog as the canine dropped the ball in front of her, sat at attention and waited for it to be thrown. "Go get it, Pastor!" the old woman exclaimed as a young one, after which she threw the ball as far as she could with her arthritic arm.

"Dog is named Pastor, just like his owner?" Carla asked, referring to the short, balding Preacher who was now surrounded by taller, three less-follically challenged ones seeking his advice. "That is strange."

"And inappropriate. Brother Ralph isn't a Pastor. And refuses to be called one, in private or public," the middle aged woman said of the middle aged gentleman Preacher as she looked at him with romantic yearning. "Whoever marries Brother Ralph is going to be a lucky woman. He wants and deserves a woman who can take care of his needs, and wants. And he does love my macaroni salad."

"The way to a man's heart is through stomach," Carla offered. "Lord willing."

"Yes, Lord willing," the woman said, placing her hands in a gesture of prayer, sneaking a request to the Big Man upstairs.

"Pastor" had been diverted to another parishioner, John in particular, who got picked up the ball, got on his knees and started to converse with him in a language Carla didn't recognize.

"I'm sister Edna," the woman said to Carla with a bow. "And you are?"

"Natasha," Carla replied, sensing that she was not yet allowed to give herself a theological or congregational pre-fix.

"John's new...therapist. I hope. And pray."

Carla witnessed John asking the dog questions, referring to him as 'Pastor' with every desperate inquiry, then thanking him by name every time it would bark or whine out another 'answer'. "Yes, his... temporary therapist," Carla offered by explanation,



feeling that the description was painfully accurate. An assigned role that had to be played out effectively, and discretely. It was something that Carla understood all too well. He had heard, felt or by Creative necessity and survival, imagined the ghost of Beethoven advising her about the meaning of birth, death and everything of importance in between. She asked the Silence to speak to her again, but all it said, through a wind in the trees according to her real life ears, was 'be vigilant, effective and caring.' The life she felt, or imagined, in her womb (and on an up day imagined to be another incarnation of Beethoven) agreed.

## CHAPTER 17

“And the significance of all of this?” Nurse Andrea asked Doc Mikey as they looked at the patient in the enclosed garden of emerging green under the snow cloistered within the sterile white Utopian Mental Hospital. “And the reason why someone, maybe you are paying me overtime to do this obligatory shift that I really don’t want to do? On Krazy, spelt with a K, Katey, spelt anyway she finger-paints it on any particular day?” she continued regarding the lone, scantily clad patient outside who seemed to have talked several roots into sprouting through melting February snow. “What does she have to do with all of this story of yours?”

“More accurately, what does Krazy Katey have to do with this story or OURS,” Doc Mikey replied in a raspy voice that was tenuously hopeful.

“I don’t get it,” Andrea answered. “AND don’t want to!”

“You will, whether you want to or not,” Doc Mikey continued, looking at his watch. “In another hour.”

“An hour earth time, or Martian Mikey time, time spelt of course with a y?”

“A little bit of both?” the answer, posed of course as a question. “But for the moment, we both have to attend this conference on new psychoActive, big A, drugs,” he continued, pointing Andrea’s attention to a new poster on the wall. “Big time Continuing Education points we BOTH need.”

With that, Doc Mikey left the hallway, leaving Andrea to monitor Krazy Katey with a fresh pad of paper. Her job was to fill it with notes on everything Krazy Katey was saying to the plants, and blathering to the imaginary people around her.

Meanwhile, Doc Mikey went back to his office and continued to write. Though to everyone else he was the picture of good health who would live forever, his oncologist knew otherwise. As did the viruses, toxins and/or demons which were attempting to colonize other areas of his brain. This time, they tried to silence his voice and message

to the world with headaches, and a tremor in his phalanges.

“No!” he grunted to them, in several languages, as he kept writing, using four of his still functional fingers to continue. “I will finish this, to set the record straight. For Karen and, you, Carla.” Feeling the need to rest his fingers, and redirect his brain, he looked at the newspaper article again from nearly two decades ago. “They say you are dead, Carla,” he said to the picture of the victim of the fatal car crash. “But I still see you in my dreams.”

“And the alternative reality your dimension-traveling brain box on a good day says is real life?” he heard from behind him. The voice echoed through his head as if it came from places past, present and future, all at the same time. “If you dream hard enough, maybe you can resurrect me.”

“Or if I work hard enough in this realm, to give you a reason to become alive, legally and otherwise, Carla?” he replied.

“It’s impolite to call me by my first name,” she countered, taking a seat and helping herself to some material realm warm coffee and not yet stale donuts. “You know, Michael, you should eat better. You were smart enough to become a doctor, you know.”

“And smart enough to let the world think your mother was dead all these years,” Nurse Andrea snickered, barging into the room. “And ballsy enough to force her to have a reunion with her sister?” she continued, holding up the poster for the Continuing Education Pharmaceutical seminar. “Maybe you can tell me why you’re trying to get your mother and aunt together again?”

“And maybe you, Michael, can tell me why this Nurse knows so much about you, and us? And you can tell me exactly what your cousin here knows about Krazy Katey?” Carla demanded.

“Krazy Katey who has a masculine chin and stubble on her face?” Andrea shot into the tense, thick air between Doc Mikey and his officially dead Mom. “A transgender freak who...” Andrea stopped talking, allowing her brain to figure out the rest. “Krazy Katey is Jumble-Brained John? And my biological mother, the presenter of this seminar...”

“...was very disappointed, and heartbroken when she found out you quit playing piano, and decided to play with boys instead, and Andrea,” Carla interjected.

“As I was disappointed and heartbroken when she sent me away, with no forwarding address, ‘Auntie Carla!’” Andrea barked back. “Something tells me that I have a right to know about everything involving you, my cousin Mikey and me.”

“Or your mother can, and will, if I have anything to do about it,” Doc Mikey offered between coughs that brought up more blood than phlegm. His sorrow regarding unfulfilled things in life and fear of death merged into mad laughter. “And maybe, my

Mom here, who I WILL continue to call Carla, can play this cancer away on the piano in the rec room, to the tune of the molecular magic my aunt Carlata's miracle medicines do on my head."

"Assuming no one with any legal or industrial might knows about it, Michael," Carla reminded him. "You know what Jumble Brain John's father would say, or do, to all of us if we ruin his professional and personal plans."

"Yes, I do," Doc Mikey said, feeling his aching head. "Including giving you this new elegant toxin that's a model of neurological disease. One that his company hasn't cured yet."

"But that Karen, or, as both of you wackos and weasels probably call her, Doctor Mom, maybe has developed and isn't sharing it with the company that funded the work?" Andrea shot back. "I'm assuming Auntie Karen doesn't know either of you work here, 'cussing cousin Michael' and 'auntie Carla'. Or that John was given the special surgery he always wanted, along with a private, locked ward to enjoy it in."

"Right on some accounts, Andrea," Mikey conceded.

"And wrong on some others," Carla asserted. "Very wrong, she continued, engrossed in a very private and solitary viewing of

Andrea wondered how Doc Mikey was able to acquire Jumble Brain John as a patient, and how he managed to convert him into Crazy Katey. And if it was by John's choice or one of his alter egos who Doc Mikey decided should rule that tortured, yet dangerous, soul. She reasoned that John's transfer to Doc Mikey's care was done covertly, and at the price of his own life. She dared not ask the details of such, fearing losing her own. Yet, Andrea had to know more about what happened to Carla. Perhaps some of the answers had to do with why Andrea was given a new name when she was given to her foster parents, and told to never reveal that she had been 'Jamie' to anyone. At the time, 'Jamie' was told by her new foster Dad and Mom in Iowa that she was a child prodigy with exceptional abilities not only on the piano, but for mathematics, biological science, and geological planning, with a photographic memory that was uncanny for not only memorizing complex musical scores after one playing of them. And that if she was raised in the wrong family, her gifts to save humanity would be harnessed to destroy it.

While Carla and her biological son, Doc Mikey, conversed in a language that sounded more like it was from another planet than a tongue spawned by mere mortals on planet earth, Jamie recalled that in her own childhood after the fostering, she became less intelligent, but more happy. Maybe it was something in the succulent meals prepared for her by her normal under the hippie-dippie facade, loving and nurturing foster Mom. Or the recreational weed and inventive cocktails she learned to like as part of her forced socialization program. Or maybe it was something in the mind-numbing, soul-soothing, thought destroying commercially-distributed sounds on the radio and tv that were always on which the DJs, and her foster parental units, called music. In any case, all Andrea

wanted now was to become a Nurse who did her day job up to but not beyond minimal basic requirements, so that she could collect her pay, go home to the latest boy-friend with potential to become a man-mate, her dog, and her big screen TV that she knew was lying to her all the time, but doing so in her best interest.

Yet, after hearing the story of Carla and Karen, Andrea could never go back to being a normal citizen. She felt her Soul awakening, her mind escalated from sub-light speed to warp 17 velocity, and her willingness to accept comforting answers to any problem as the truth smashed into smithereens. As such, her affections for her generally kind and always overpaying boss, Doc Mikey, turned into hatred. And the only desire she had for Auntie Carla, the aging Hippie with firey eyes, was to punch her in the face to extinguish whatever other worldly flame was growing behind those oculars. But, still she listened....against her better judgment, and sense of self survival.

## CHAPTER 18

“It’s the client’s fantasy, not mine,” Carla told herself as she danced the first waltz at the wedding reception with John, as his bride Natasha, recalling that such was what the SMART strippers said regarding the men who gawked at, ejaculated to or worshiped them while they did their exotic dancing on stage. As for John’s fantasy, there were many versions, which Carla found out while dating him, initially ‘behind’ his wife Karen’s back, then with her permission, then with her blessing. “This dance is for you,” she silently told the unborn most probably ‘life’ in her womb fathered by Peter, which the lab report clandestinely doctored by Karen said was John’s. Carla had no reason to doubt such, as she was very careful with regard to protection, and John believed her when she said that his penile appendage actually did sprout out semen rather than urine.

John believed a lot, depending on who he was at the moment. Ralph the Conspiracy freak filtered his water and overcooked his macaroni because he believed that debilitating viruses were being distributed to the public by clerks at local grocery stores who where minions of scientists who were using their customers as guinea pigs. Elmer Grammercy wore a collar of aluminum foil around his neck so that the rays of wisdom from the Starship send by the Heavenly father would keep his aura healthy and his brain informed. Kathrine LeFevre was an incarnation of a French Duchess whose head got chopped off in the reign of terror after her lesbian mistress, Marie Antoinette, was executed by the Revolutionary mob, explaining why when John put himself in Karen’s clothing he always covered his neck with a soft, silk scarf. Napoleon Schwartz believed that everyone was out to kill him, and though he didn’t have the balls or manipulative skills to exert control over his enemies as effectively as his Uncle, Machievelli, but his ability to remorselessly slice and dice anyone within hearing range with his tongue was second to none. Still, under all of it, John was more of a tortured soul than an evil one. Whatever viciousness he was capable of, or did, was most probably due to someone or something possessing him, rather than him being at the wheel of the ship that was his unsteady frontal cortex. Most notably, he was possessed in the Chinese sense of the world. The dull out virus that made him lifeless, boring, procedural and intellectually simplistic was contagious, pulling anyone who didn’t come in with

'protection' between the ears into a black hole of 'nothing' which was far worse than flatlanded Hillside, Saskatchewan. And as Dylan's song said, 'Too Much of Nothing' can drive the sane into the crazy, the caring into callous, and Alive into the worst kind of dead. No wonder why Karen was willing to do anything she could to escape being his wife, or anything else.

The dance was a traditional waltz, to the accompaniment of a technically challenging classical piece that Karen didn't recognize, but knew that she could and should expand to something that had more vitality and creative expansion to it. She envisioned in her head a rock opera with jazz and Reggae undertones that she could write a libretto with edge, humor, intelligence, intensity, and a little more edge just or MAGNIFICENT measure. Maybe a movie beyond it, which she could change the world with. But in the meantime, present realities had to be dealt with.

Over John's large and very muscular shoulder, Carla noted the pianist, John's daughter, Little Jamie at that piano. The six year old, continued to play with the mastery of a 60 year old Maestro pianist, having spoken to no one at the wedding or reception, and never looking anyone in the eye. But little Jamie seemed to convey to Carla with her eyes both a warning for not being who she really was, and a welcome for being her step-mom. What Jamie knew, or didn't know, about the whole thing, was a mystery to Carla. As was what was going on behind Karen's seemingly 'old and respectable' eyes.

Karen sat one of the tables in the back of the room, with John's father, Horatio. Of all the tables in the reception room, it was the one with the most stable, intelligent and respectable of guests. They drank little, and discussed a lot, mostly with each other. Their movements with regard to everything were minimal, as was such with the ultra-rich who paid others to do their running, bidding, working and sweating, and did so with a nod of their finger or presentation of their credit card. Indeed, they were the stingiest tippers in the room with regard to the hard working food and drink servers, but the most waited on. Those modern day promoted serfs appreciative beyond measure when they got nods of approval from that table, and seemed to haggle with each other at the kitchen door as to who would schlep food, drink and napkins to those immobile aristocrats.

At the socially appropriate time as voiced by the DJ, Carla invited Karen to come dance with ex-hubby John with a discrete glance. She declined, nudging her escort. John's father got up up to the dance floor, requesting of his son that he have the honor of dancing with his orphaned and family-less new daughter in law. It was graciously given, John fended off by Daddy Fearest to another woman, apparently someone John knew from his adolescence by the way they greeted each other.

Carla found herself secured within the strong arms of a Horatio Peterson, as refined in his ability to dance as he was skilled in the art of dressing for success, and professional acknowledgment. Everything about the man who John, in private, described as a scholar saint or a vicious mobster, depending on which personality was loudest inside his cranium, seemed...classy. And caring. And somehow all knowing. Carla, as Natasha, was about to compliment him on the his dance steps, in mixed Russian of course. It was

silenced by the patriarch whose honor as a scientist and demeanor as a gentleman in matters of business whispering into her ear.

“Before you say or think anything, I hope that you know you are part of our family now, whatever or whoever you are,” Lord Horatio said coldly. “And this family sticks together. We take care of each other, emotionally, psychologically and financially, with descretion and effectiveness. We do what needs to be done, no matter what we need to do it.”

“At what price?” Carla wanted to say, but didn’t. For the first time, Carla felt trapped in a maze of her own making, confirmed by Horatio, who insisted that she called him ‘Dad’, He held her with a firm, grip that was as strong and cold as steel, his understated yet paternalistic smile conveying nothing but ‘fatherly love’ for his new daughter in law.

Looking over Lord Horatio’s shoulder while he gazed at his watch, Carla stared at Karen, asking her with her mouth, “What the fuck do I do now?”

Karen shrugged her shoulders, at a loss for what the next step was in the elaborate plan to fund her own research, free herself from psycho and/or flatland John, as well as to provide Carla with an income badly wanted for her expanding Art to save the World, and sorely needed to be sure that Peter’s child will grow up to be more upstanding than he turned out to be.

There was nothing Karen did at the rest of the wedding that indicated Karen’s having recognized Carla as her sister. Then again, she didn’t expect her to. As an actor being judged by harsh and powerful critics, of course Karen had to convince everyone around her that she approved of Natasha marrying John. Natasha being invited into one of the most powerful families in Canada. Natasha being streamlined for citizenship so that her children would not have difficulty acquiring high level positions when they got older. But after this first act of a very long opera was finished, the rest of the drama played itself out.

John decided that he wanted to have his honeymoon at his new digs, a mansion by anyone’s standards. The first night of that stay at the most opulent home in town ‘vacation’, he appeared after having a shower as Sister Olivia, a cloistered Nun who decided that she should retire early, after which she whipped herself into holy obedience, and finally fell asleep. The effect of whatever drug he had been given by his physician, or personality inserted into his head as a child, lasted until the next morning. Carla, as Natasha, asked Sister Olivia for permission to go shopping. It was granted, and encouraged with a wad of money ‘she’ pulled out of her bra, evoking an erotic sensation that Sister Olivia tried to deny, but couldn’t.

Natasha assured the staff at the Mansion that she could drive herself around. It took three left turns and five red lights for her to shake what she felt was a tail on her ass. Finally, she ditched her army of well intended, to the best of her assessment, pamperers. She parked the car at the most expensive clothing store in town, then did a quick change

inside in the rest room. The change wardrobe into Carla artistic hole-ridden attire, along with putting on a blonde wig more suited to her old identity than her new black haired beauty hair extentioned one, and a long walk on which she was not followed, led her to the post office. The clerk recognized Carla as Wendy Pearce, who had recently purchased a mailbox. Inside the box were, as promised, checks from Karen, very cashable as Natasha's desired identity. Also present were letters from three lawyers Natasha had seen, as Carla. All of them informed her that the annulment of the marriage to John that Karen said was both legal and possible was now illegal and impossible. The reasons for such were not given.

Carla's next move was to call the airlines, requesting info about one way flights to northern Newfoundland, Interior British Columbia, and finally the flattest and most distant area of Manitoba reachable by plane. Her deciding which escape route to take was short circuited by a man she hardly expected to ever see again. He gently placed his large right hand over her small wrist, cancelling the call with a damaged finger on his left.

Carla looked up at unexpected visitor clad in a black leather jacket, a newly sprouted mustache and a hastily chopped head of hair with dye that didn't match his complexion. "What are you doing here, Peter?" she inquired with a defiant growl as he grabbed hold of her phone, checking the call display. "And what do you want?"

"To remind you that if I could find you, they will," he said.

"And 'they' is who?" Carla barked back, grabbing back her phone.

"If you don't know that, it means that they most certainly will do a lot worse to you than delete the messages on your phone," he said. "Or give you a haircut a lot worse than mine," he mused.

"So, what am I supposed to do about it."

"The question is, what are WE supposed to do about it," he proposed. With that he pulled a manila envelope from his pocket and presented it to her, being sure that the clerk was busy with another customer before giving Carla the go ahead to open it. "It's a life insurance policy," he said by way of explanation.

"With you as the beneficiary, Peter."

"And provider of ALL of the money, as well as a new identity to spend it," he continued, handing her another envelope. "You can be the agent who discovers the undiscovered works of Carla Steiner."

"Since when someone else, who doesn't know me, says I'm a genius the world believes it, when I say it, I'm bragging or deluded," Carla noted. "Like in Ghost Agent, the comedic and dramatic script I wrote, and still believe in, about a brilliant writer and

self-destructive marketer who was given an involuntary sex change operation by his ex-wife, and then, as a woman, marketed his works better than could have done as a man.”

“Which you can pull off with some facial instead of reproductive surgery,” Peter interjected, stroking Carla’s hair with affections that he seemed terrified of turning into rekindled romance. “That will hide your identity a shit load better than merely putting on a black Natasha hair, upgrading your Russian, and getting fake documentation from your Russian friends, who aren’t as good as forgery as my Russian associates.”

“And what guarantee do I have that you’ll run away with my life insurance money, like you ran away from the son or daughter that YOU wanted more than I ever did?” she challenged. “While I am resurrected as a ghost with a new identity that you created?”

“What guarantee do you will be in the land of the living when John’s father and his mafia buds find out about your real identity, ‘Natasha’?” Peter replied. To verify his claim, he produced a picture of Lord Horatio with several prominent Dons in the Italian, Albanian and Russian mob. He named all of the diners at the table with a certainty in his voice that Carla felt compelled to believe.

“Okay, so how am I doing to die?” Carla offered. “It can’t look like suicide, you know.”

“Drunk driver,” Peter replied, after which he provided Carla with a map on which was circled at time and place for the accident, along with the keys to a rental car. “The corpse will get burned, but the brakes on the car will be verified as being broken.”

“And after I collect the money, we’ll both live happily ever after?” Carla barked out.

“The THREE of us will,” Peter continued, gently stroking the skin over the womb in Carla’s belly that had just turned into a slight bulge. “If both of you will forgive me,” he continued, on his knees, with more sincerity than Carla ever heard or felt from him.

## CHAPTER 19

“So, where’s Peter?” Andrea barked at Doc Mikey. “Dear Old Dad, who nurtured you into becoming the ‘brilliant’ physician you’ve become, who’s a misfit in the world of science and the arts.”

“Watching over us from another place, or another incarnation maybe?” Doc Mikey replied, losing himself in thought as he stared at a clear blue sky outside the window that had turned abruptly gray and angry. As his thoughts got deeper, the gentle breeze turned into a very vocal wind. “I dream about him sometimes.”

“But never met him,” Carla interjected, just as Andrea’s flippant attitude towards ghosts



turned into believing in both their existence, and power. “Peter died in a real car accident after my fake one. A real accident that was no accident, according to the detective who had a private conversation with me a day before he was reassigned to another town,” she continued, tears of grief and anger streaming down her beet red cheeks. “Leaving me with the money from my own insurance policy, but nothing I could collect from his insurance policy. And if I tried to collect it---”

“---The suits on both sides of the law would see to it that you wouldn’t live long enough to spend it,” Andrea concluded. “Which left you with---“

“This misfit,” Carla said, laying her prematurely aged hands on Doc Mikey’s shaking shoulders. “Who I asked one favor for all the schooling I paid for him to get.”

“To find John, convert him into Katey, and keep him safe from his father,” Andrea surmised. “And to, at the right time, bring Professor Doctor Karen Steiner to this institute so she could do her own research,” she continued, looking at the picture of the presenter of the new CE lecture, aka, ‘Mom’. “Who looks a lot like you now, ‘auntie Carla’. Behind the eyes anyway. Now that she’s maybe one of us instead of one of them?”

“Let’s hope so,” Carla replied.

## CHAPTER 20

Karen’s presentation was by the numbers, as approved by the creators of the New Mathematics. For all of the docs, nurses and hospital administrators who approved all purchases, the Peterson Pharmaceutical Company provided the best pastry available, along with catered delicacies ranging from French quiche to Japanese sushi. Pens, pads, calendars, tote-bags and mugs bearing the name of the company were inescapable to the eye, even if one wanted to. “So, are they putting something in the food to make us accept their medical fairy tales as biological truth?” Carla said as she sampled the food, or more accurately gobbled it down into her chronically underfed belly. “They do make it so appetizing.”

“Just be careful to let everyone see you eat them like a lady, Doctor Jackson, and not like a grad student eager to get a free meal, or a homeless visitor from the street looking to fill up your stomach and purse with enough food to make it to the next week, Mom.” Andrea reminded Carla. “And that lab coat we loaned you has to stay clean! Along with the tailored business suit under it that I lifted from the lockers of the last CEO admitted here for rehab.”

“Which, if she is to be completely rehabilitated, she won’t need when she gets cured, as such stands to reason and previous experience, no doubt, ” ‘Doctor’ Carla replied with sharp constants and under-expressive vowels, in the manner of the upper crust English scientist she was supposed to be, tempering her gustatory habits to match such. “I am

fully aware of the questions I am required to ask of the presenter. And I trust that you are well rehearsed in what you will be providing from the wings,” Carla continued with a stiff upper lip and an upwardly located chin. “I assume that you are up to the required task this joint endeavor requires of you.”

“Can do,” Andrea replied, purposely using small words and simple phrases, well aware that Carla would revert to being direct after she had convincingly been overly verbal so as to hide her real identity. “And will do!”

With that, Andrea exited the lobby outside of the auditorium, to take her place in a hidden portion of that room. Entering into the fray was Doc Mikey, with his escort, Krazy Katey. Or maybe Doc Mikey was Krazy Katey’s escort? By the way they seemed to be a natural couple, both seemed to be the case. But, so far anyway, it was Mikey who did the talking, and Krazy Katey who did the listening, along with laughing at his jokes, most of those said in a variety of languages, including one that Carla understood very, very well.

“Hey, that’s OUR language!” Carla said to Doc Mikey while Krazy Katey indulged in a chuckle that turned into a flattering laugh. “The backwards talk that me and Karen used to converse in.”

“That I learned so I could converse with others,” Doc Mikey replied, proudly, pulling out a small writing pad from his pocket. “And which, I’ve prepared my script of questions with, in case I revert to becoming linear and procedural. The most deadly sin for us, Mom,” he said while looking at Carla. “And the most effective way to be liked, promoted and entrusted with more power,” he continued, referring to the plethora of medical professionals in clean, sterile white lab coats and associated attire who still didn’t understand the difference between sterile, clean and dead. “They can’t think outside the box, so they try to ram all of their patients into a bell shaped curve.”

“You mean they can’t FEEL or INTUIT outside the limitations inflicted upon them by others, or themselves,” Carla continued, in a soft voice raging with revolutionary fire that contradicted everything about her reserved professional physical demeanor. “Which is why I and the world, and Karen, are thankful that you’re allowing and encouraging John to be Krazy Katey, the personality closest to his...”

Before Carla could continue, she noted that Doc Mikey was stag. “Where did he, eh, I mean, she go?” she asked regarding John.

“I don’t know,” Doc Mikey replied, frantically looking with his eyes at every corner of the room. “But I better find her.”

“And fast!” Carla shot back as the door to the auditorium opened, smiling ushers with programs inviting the well fed and pre-indoctrinated congregation to enter.

## CHAPTER 21

Doctor Carlata Steiner's seminar lacked any delays or stutters, every word and inflection coordinated with the power point presentation on two screens, with visuals that were always moving, or more to the point, keeping the view mesmerized. Even the spontaneous jokes seemed pre-rehearsed. Every item of clothing and jewelry on her matched the hue of something projecting on the screen. Her face lacked any wrinkles, her physical proportions, hair and complexion matching the ideal woman any girl of 18 wants to become when she reaches the downhill side of the Big Four O. Indeed, Karen, who had always had more fat and other variations of hidden 'ugly' than her sister Carla when a teen, had mastered how to avoid the extremes of sexy slut and sorority sterile. Everything about her was classy, not a whiff of crass. But to anyone with a thinking brain and expanding mind, it was empty calories, along with toxins masquerading as nutritious food. The rehearsed talk promoting everything Peterson Pharmaceuticals had as gold, and the products of their competitors as bronze at best.

"I don't understand a word of this scientific psychobabble," Carla whispered to Doc Mikey after the third category of new miracle drugs for defective brains that also could keep the body from aging had been described. "But I can smell bullshit between the lines."

"Which I can verify, because I understand ALL the words, and know the medical fairy tales her company used to construct these tall tales," Doc Mikey noted. "But there are some golden truths and very novel findings between the lies, boasts and economically-profitable simplifications." He showed Carla the notes he had taken. "I remember reading about them in the abstracts of the Neuroscience Society."

"Which never got to press in the established journals or officials at NIH who approved clinical trials, I'm guessing, because the powers that be had a talk with the editors?" Carla surmised. "Do you think that my sister really was responsible for the shinola within all this pharmaceutical bullshit? And that she's still dedicated to changing the system from within it?"

"Revolutionizing it, according to the last time we really talked," Carla replied, as she caught view of a man in a blue blazer, grey slacks, spit shined 300 dollar shoes and a 'hey, I'm just one of the people, dudes' pony tail in the back of the room nodded with approval. Such gave everyone around Horatio Peterson permission to love rather than merely like what was happening on stage, as indicated by the way they took actively took notes and nodded 'yes, more than very true and innovative' when Lord Horatio looked their way.

"Forgive them, for they DO know what they do, and what they haven't done," Doc Mikey explained regarding the independent university researchers who depended on funding from the Peterson Company, and the Docs who dealt with human patients rather than lab rats, there was big money and prestige in being the ones chosen to do clinical trials with ANY Peterson name drug, with no liability or lawsuits as long as the lawyers

got the data before the medical review boards. “I just wish that there were SOME drugs they tested on rats before people,” Doc Mikey said. “Which I know you tried to warn the public about with Flagstaff Conspiracy.”

Carla recalled the novel and script she wrote about a company of International White Supremacists who tested new cancer treatments on steadfast traditional and isolated bands of Indians in the Southwest after giving them tumors which the public was told were the result of them ingesting a special strain of peyote linked to a psychedelic religion resurrected from their pagan past. The toxin was introduced through a bakery, as were three different treatments, along with one designated group of course being given placebos. Rodent studies for the miracle drug that could cure brain cancer and eliminate hallucinations associated with most brands of normally occurring schizophrenia were conducted a month after the one of the drugs proved to be effective on humans. While waiting for official clinical trials to be verified, the investors were hard at work buying stock in the fledgling pharmaceutical company that developed it. And for good measure, in collaboration with their buds within the CIA, preparations were being made to create world-wide epidemics of the ‘crazy cranium’ disease in third world populations world-wide, most particularly Islamic populations, the cure offered to those countries that were sympathetic to non Islamic and pro American interests. “Yeah, Flagstaff Conspiracy,” she said with a proud smile and life-tested eyes. “The project that probably got me blacklisted, even among the hip, cool and alternative.”

“Because it was too human,” Mikey replied. “As well as...accurate,” he continued, holding onto his head, behind which he was probably hearing and seeing things that if he reported them, would win him a lifetime stay in his own mental hospital, or a morgue somewhere. “But what worries me now is the casting of this play,” he said regarding the ponytailed WASP aristocrat sitting in the middle of the auditorium who was as much a hippie as the record promoters who got rich selling Peace, Love and World Peace albums from Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie during the failed, foiled and fucked over from within Revolution of the 1970s. “The idea was to have ‘Lady’ John Peterson in the room to stare into Doctor Karen’s eyes, not Lord and still probably her Master Horatio Peterson.”

“You’re underestimating the power of music,” Carla replied. “And what would have happened if someone played Beethoven’s Appassionata in October, 1917 at the Kremlin and not the Internationale.”

“The music that Lenin ordered never to be played in his presence,” Mikey noted. “Because he know he would become soft, and humane. Disabling him from making the cruel compromises he knew were necessary to give ‘each gives according to his ability and takes according to his needs’ a chance in Mother Russia. Which became non-democratic of course, when he gave ‘necessary evils’ like Stalin too much power.”

Carla ‘shh’d’ her medically trained but still humanely thinking, perhaps soon to be departed from the land of the living, son with a stab of her professional second hand stiletto heels on his tender feet. “Cue Andrea...NOW! Before the toxic sound waves

coming from those loudspeakers decorticates us ALL!”

Though it was before the prescribed time, Doc Mikey texted Andrea to short circuit the hypnotic, upbeat, patriotic music that was prearranged by Doc Karen’s technical staff, replacing it with something that made her stop talking, start thinking, then start feeling.

Smooth inflections of medical terms from Karen’s mouth were replaced by ‘ehs’, ‘uhms’ and then silence as she heard the Appassionata passages she had played in her teen years, and been moved by. It was not being played by someone who gave so much Life to it. Karen’s previously captive audience was stunned as the directed glances she had orchestrated with her ocular portholes dissolved into a blank stare. Her patron, boss and, perhaps (according to their matching rings) husband Horatio was angry. He rose up, turning to the confused Hospital Administrator who had introduced her. “Could someone in the technical staff please correct the musical track. It’s highly distracting.”

“Jarring, disruptive and painful to the sensibilities,” Karen said, regaining her power of speech.

“Indeed!” the mild mannered, kind to everyone from the janitor up ‘hippie’ Pharmaceutical mogul declared with royal indignation.

“And necessary,” Karen declared. “As is some clarification of some of the points I already made,” she asserted, flashing back the slides to the first one, providing words from her mouth adding to and challenging what was in print.

“Indeed!” echoed repeatedly from the back of the room, in pitches that went from a self-hating voice to that of a self-approving female alto, bordering on soprano. All eyes were on Krazy Katey as she danced her way to the stage, then stood seductively behind Karen, humming, then ‘lalaing’ to the music. Her presence and brilliantly harmonic accompaniment to the piano music made Karen smile, most particularly when the originator of the music was evident when the back curtain went up. Karen’s gratitude for whatever was happening turned into scientific fire and medical wisdom, She started by turning on the computer at the podium and making her own overheads, from which she related medical hypotheses and cures that baffled Carla technically, but which felt...real. Eventually, Docs and researchers in the audience seemed convinced of the validity of her discourse. Enough of them for Lord Horatio to lose most of his supporters. And for him to take an exit from the room as the as the second group of new converts to biological truth rather than medical lies looked at him accusingly.

When Karen was stuck on a medical point, or feeling scared of jumping off another cliff, wings were provided to her by a nod of approval, from Carla. Doc Carla still didn’t know if she had been recognized by Karen as her sister, but such would be a detail to be dealt with later. Along with many other details.

CHAPTER 22

Some would say that the entire story was imagined by Doc Mikey, whose mind had turned into brilliant as a young man, and whose brain had turned into an organ manufacturing psychedelic fables before he could become an old one. But, as he wrote in the final memoir derived from very real sources, 'believe it if you need it, leave it if you dare.'

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