

Every Martian Needs A Bunny

MJ Politis, Ph.D., D.V.M., H.B.A.R.P.

Copyrighted, April 10, 2016.

mjpolitis@yahoo.com

All rights reserved.

CHAPTER 1

The sky was a deep blue, clear, with not a single cloud in it, the wind held to a standstill under a bright sun that made anyone under it squint, and anyone who dared to challenge its authority to shine eye to eye blind. A picture perfect day in Manitoba, visually anyway. As for the other senses, the noon air was a balmy twenty-five below, causing nostrils form dry icicles and any exposed skin to freeze dry, then crack. All together, an inhospitable day to be outdoors for most creatures bearing no fur on their skin. But workable for those whose bodies were covered with a layer of hair.

Such was Bunny, a gray rabbit who frequented the Wilson household's glass door, not for the shelter from the wind it afforded or the reflective rays of the sun that some how 'double heated' the snow outside of it. No, Bunny, came to see Michelle Schmitt-Wilson, the lady of the house who sat down at her piano, the only portion of her model, super clean, well-furnished home that she related to. Or liked. Or valued. Including her reflection in the mirrored glass of the sliding door.

That reflection revealed to Michele, yet again, the body of a 45 year old woman with a thin face, big brown green eyes, and straight blonde hair that had finally re-grown back down to tips of her D-cup breast after one 'look your age' makeover and another self-sabotaging bob she had given herself hoping that changing the outside will transform the inside. She looked half her age, now that she had lost a quarter of her weight. A loss of poundage that come off for some good reasons, some logical reasons, and some metaphysical ones. "Eating those scones and veggie samosas instead of pizza pops and donuts is actually paying off," she said to the reflection. "But those lines around your eyes say that between your ears, you're getting very old. Or should we say life experienced, meine immer mit mir Freund," she said, translating 'my always with me friend' into the language of the only real friends she ever had.

Michelle opened up the piano bench, pulling out the bound imitation leather volumes of works by Onkle Ludwig, Onkle Wolfgang, and then finally, the legacy of the secret lover that her husband never really knew about. "Claude," she said while thumbing through five obscure early works of Debussy, and two from his later life. Music that was never played in his lifetime except by himself, put down into print by the struggling Frenchman in the hope that someone would play it. "Yes, I will honor you by giving you my hands, and my heart," Michele said as she closed the piano bench, sat down, and placed the music on the stand atop the discount Yokamura baby grand piano which she wished one day would become a Steinway. "And we have an audience for you as well," Michelle said inside her tired cheeks to the ghost of Debussy, who she kept alive so often by

playing the twenty better known pieces by the composer by heart, with her heart, then finally recording them on a CD that was too brilliant for the world to understand. They were of course too heartfelt for the world to embrace. And too intense for the world to be awakened by. At least the world of Brandon, Manitoba.

“Mister Bunny,” she said to the rabbit as he wiggled his nose at the glass outside the window while she went into her usual warm up with a Bach Invention from the Goldberg Variations. “Thank you for coming by and giving my life meaning. For listening to what I play. For having an ear that wants to hear, which gives me the Purpose and means to channel something worth hearing,” she said to the hare. First in English, then in perfect Parisian French, which she had learned as a teenager in preparation for going to McGill University, with the Mission of heading to Europe for a career as a music professor and practitioner. A sojourn to the place where Debussy lived and his spirit still lingers. A trip she never took, due to the simplest, and most tragic, reasons--- lack of matching funds promised by her parents.

And lack of encouragement from two young men who said they loved her too much for her to leave. One of those men was now her husband, or more accurately, a roommate who paid most of the bills because he was better with money than innovation. The second was a memory, the 'one that got away because maybe I tried to pull him in too hard' twenty years ago, who lived on the other side of Brandon. Yet who Michelle never saw or encountered anywhere in her travels throughout the town that masqueraded itself as a city, most pathetically to its own life-long residents.

The memory of that second man stilled Michelle's fingers, causing her to end the Baroque Invention earlier than expected, but with a bluezy coda that would have pleased Old Johan Sebastian Bach. It gave her a jolt of needed energy, along with a chuckle she shared with herself. She felt applause come from Bunny as he edged closer into the window so he could hear her with not only his ears, but his belly.

“So, it's just you and me now, again, Mister Bunny,” she said, feeling the liberty to give the big eared furry visitor a gender. “I KNOW you'll appreciate this more than the brain-dead, lazy and egotistical brats whose parents hire me to make them into musicians. And the officiators at the competitions who have as little imagination as the metronome that's always tick-ticking in their by-the-numbers heads. And the radio hosts who say that the only way to play Debussy is like a dainty Barbie who won't dare put any feeling onto the the keys on piano because they may break a nail. No, we both know that Debussy's warmth only comes after you connect to your inner Fire. Right?”

Bunny wiggled his nose 'yes'. So did Michelle's reflection in the mirror, that seemed to be even thinner than the last time she looked at it. Thin because Michelle knew how to use the most effective kind of weight control. “Dedicate yourself to you art, and put the muscle between your ears on hyper-drive and you'll burn off so many calories that you'll one day convert your body mass into energy. That conversion of mass into energy was stated as a reachable fact by the Prof who taught the physics class I had to take for that fallback degree in biology. A degree that I never used, that I got Honors in, and that I

never wanted to get anyway,” she said to herself as she opened up the Debussy piece, an obscure posthumously-published work that Claude probably only played for the Bunny outside of his window in France during his lifetime.

Michelle took in a deep breath of sterile, artificially-humidified Manitoba air, arched her back, flexed her long, Rachmoninoff-sized fingers, and then attacked the keys. Then swayed back and forth as the river she dived into took her for a ride that transported her to that higher and deeper place that kept her Alive. Which made her sweat, even though the room was barely 60 degrees F. Then that mad journey towards the always turbulent ocean of discovery made her smile. Then laugh. Then made the Silence between the notes feel louder than ever. With added harmony that felt like a rabbit purr. With choreography of her most valued audience member with his nibbling mouth, then swaying body. Moving with the music as a percussion section that suggested a new beat, which integrated with her own. A beat that had its own mathematics to it, and breath, which was never constant but always present, and evolving.

Michelle could hear Claude Debussy himself put his arm around her shoulders. Take her muscle-bound wrists into his tender hands. She felt his eyes look into hers from the faded yellow pages bearing his notes on the music which hadn't been taken out of the Toronto University Library for decades. She, Bunny and Claude were one...until...

“No, I won't answer that, Claude,” Michelle grunted behind clenched teeth as she heard her cell phone ring. “They'll leave a message if it's important, Monsieur Bunny,” she assured herself as she blocked out the annoying technical sound of the device with louder notes on the piano. “Which I'll get later,” Michelle promised the responsible part of her brain as the phone continued to ring, then finally turned silent. “It's probably nothing important anyway,” she said to herself. “It's not like I'm a doctor on call, or.... maybe I am,” she pondered, considering her ailing father's condition. And mood swings that took over his mind while he sloshed along with the booze he had been drinking his whole life in a brain floating in more firewater than cerebro-spinal fluid. Fluid that HE put there, and which he insisted on being re-filled by every visitor to his private room at the Nursing Home who he conned, cajoled or ordered to sneak him in a bottle of something from the liquor store. Along with cigarettes he would use when his wife wasn't around that he claimed would make the emphysema in his lungs go away.

The thought of cigarettes and booze stilled Michelle's fingers, and made her think about her unfulfilled past rather than her stagnant present. “You and Mom both smoked and drank away what was supposed to be my 'get-the-fuck out of Manitoba McGill UNIVERSITY and not college' fund,” she yelled at the phone as she resumed her duties playing for Claude and Bunny. “So call someone else who will listen to your lies and say that they're all true because you're dying. You've been dying for the last four years, as I calculate it, but you don't seem to do anything except make yourself more miserable, and sick,” she continued behind gritted teeth. “Because you wouldn't listen to me when I told you the cigarettes are burning your lungs out and the liquor is pickling your, according to the stories mom told me anyway, once bright and maybe brilliant brain.”

The phone stayed silent, allowing Michelle to return to being herself. The clock on the wall ticked away another two minutes of her unrealized potential life away, or as she measured time, another 10 measures of Debussy channeled through her fingers. Then the phone rang. For better or worse, she decided to stop playing and see who it was. The call display showed 'unknown number', but the message said "Important! Life or Death!"

"Pardone moi," Michelle said to the ghost, and Spirit, of Claude Debussy who she visualized sitting on top of the piano in a lotus position zenning into the music she had played. "Entschuldigen, Herr Bunny," she nodded to the rabbit outside the window, anticipating that her floppy eared friend from a realm far more kind and perhaps more Real than the 'normal' world was in a mood for some Bach or Beethoven.

She picked up the phone, anticipating that it was from a payphone. Maybe at the Emergency Room where her father had been admitted for more than one asthma attack due to his burnt out, nicotine-coated lungs.

"Hello," she said, anticipating the worst.

"Hey, Michelle," she heard from a cheery caller, with a voice confident as it was comfortable with itself. "Just calling to remind you to put the roast in the oven at three because we have dinner guests coming at six. And put the big one in, because my boss is bringing over his kids. They want piano lessons and I told them that you give the best bargains in town. And this way, you can contribute something of your own to the household expenses."

There was so much Michelle wanted to say, and needed to say. But, she didn't. Particularly to a husband who had less appreciation for her music than Donald Trump would have for a private audience with the Dali Llama. Russell was all about money, normality, consistency, security, and of course money. And social prestige. A perfect administrator who shoveled papers across his desk at work, along with praises for the 'little woman' at home when he felt accomplished. And insults at her irresponsible Bohemian aspirations when he felt like a loser. 'Doctor Michelle' of course endured whatever he threw her way, since he was the one who she had pledged to take care of in sickness and health. What she didn't realize at the alter two decades earlier was that not Russell would soon come down with the worst sickness of all--Dull out disease. A deadness of soul which is contagious, even to Bohemian Martians such as herself is she was not careful. A condition of lifeless 'normality' she contracted periodically when she dared to not practice 2 hours a day on the piano. And if she dared to consider Herr Bunny just a rodent with ears best taken care of with some rat poison. And if she dared to not visualize Claude Debussy sitting atop the piano, who said to her, in the language they shared, "forgive him, he knows not what he is, or the toxin he is spreading to the world. Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's but give to God that which is Alive, because God IS Life, not the stoic sterile images on the Church Walls."

"But why?" Michelle asked Claude with her Mind while her brain let her mouth engage

in a more-listening-that-talking conversation with Russel as he complained about his life, and himself, and her. “Why did I, a Martian, get involved with an earthling like Russel?” she asked Claude.

Claude referred her to Bunny, who with his whiskers seemed to say, “without counter-revolutionaries, Revolutionaries would not become better at Revolution. And without being around the walking, and sometimes even dancing, dead, Artists like you would not become more Alive each day. Yes, Comrade? Yes, my dear human, who probably is the only one of your species who really knows who I am, and seek to become.”

Michelle considered the proposition, and it seemed to make sense. As she agreed as well to the 'logic' from her courteous hubby, assuring him that dinner would be ready in time, and according to his specifications.

CHAPTER 2

Jennifer O'Keefe's piano lesson went as scheduled and as planned. As did the talk Michelle had with her mother afterwards. “Maybe if you stop assigning my daughter those scales to do, she'll have more fun and get better at playing the piano,” Gemma O'Keefe had advised Michelle when writing out the check for her services. “Music is supposed to be more fun than work, and those Mozart things you assigned to my daughter are so 'yesterday', and totally uncool, ya know?” the homely, desperate-to-be-cool forty year old mom who looked more like 60 in her newly-purchased tight-fitting hipster teen ensemble (complete with custom-made rips in the knees that marked the price of the outfit up by 400 percent) said regarding her always hip and cool, perfectly proportioned 14 year old daughter. “I'm like, totally disappointed with her progress, and if she doesn't get better with you, I'll have to hire Lin Cho as her music mentor, who lets her pupils play what they want to hear, and, besides, she's Asian, and the Asians ARE better musicians than we ever are because it's in their genes. Besides, Jennifer told me you're a buzz kill. And that she hates Mozart.”

“I didn't know Jennifer felt that way about me and the music,” Michele smiled back as Gemma finally signed the check Michelle so desperately needed to buy more sheet music, a soon-needed visit from the piano tuner, a recording system from THIS century so she could share her music with the world outside of Brandon, and a down-payment for her yearly four day pilgrimage to Montreal. Pilgrimages she made in the fall to see the brilliance of the the autumn leaves which graced the East, hear musical dialog en francais in the streets, and maybe get discount back row tickets to a concert or two where she would imagine herself never having to go back to Manitoba. She dreamed about the day she could do at least one of those trips 'out' with someone who would appreciate the cultural richness and unbridled expression of Montreal, and her. Someone who would make her forget the rich, uncultured morons like Gemma O'Keefe who only went to concerts to be seen by others. A special traveling companion who could make Michelle laugh at, rather than feel intimidated by, the 'music must be played according to the beat

of the metronome not the whims of your frivolous and undisciplined heart' CBC-adjudicators from Toronto who came into Manitoba two times a year to see if any of the 'colonials' there were worthy of being trained to be the musical monkeys that they were.

But for the moment, higher aspirations had to be put aside. Michelle's bus pass was about to be a day overdue. The arrangement with corporate clone hubby Russell said that Michelle had to pay for all of her expenses related to her musical 'hobby' as well as the health food she found was essential to maintain her regained non-obese, and all things considered, healthy body. Such required smiling for the upper crust patrons who always mispronounced 'Mozart', and whose patronage would be stopped if you corrected them. Or if you dared to suggest that their spoiled brat daughters would make something of themselves if they learned to connect the Bliss within and beyond struggle. But such didn't make sense to Gemma O'Keefe, whose neck, earlobes and wrists were overloaded with diamonds, pearls and gold. Or her daughter Jennifer, whose head, neck, nose and tongue and Goth tattoos said 'effortless success is the best kind'. Unlike Michelle, both of these over-decorated earthling humanoids were able to maneuver your man into giving you whatever you wanted, a skill that was often passed down from mother to daughter, and never to strangers, or scholar-servants.

“Same time next week?” Michelle asked as Gemma showed her to the door, walking a more rapid pace than usual in her stiletto heels.

“We'll let you know,” Gemma smiled at Michelle, showing off a mouthful of blinding white teeth. With outstretched arms, she handed Michelle her oversized, second hand, out of style overcoat, as if it contained something infectious. Not considering of course that Michelle chose that overcoat because she liked it, BECAUSE it was not hip, cool, or overly paid for by a rich husband who wanted to show off his arm candy.

“So, same time next week, Jen?” Michelle asked the pupil who had apparently more endured than learned from her.

“Whatever,” Jennifer slurred out of the corner of the side of her mouth from the living room, while putting earplugs into her auditory portholes, closing them off the the world of 'strugglers' as she caught up with texts from her hip friends, and conquered commoners.

But Michelle still saw something in Jennifer. A glimmer of light in what had now become pitch black, weed-smelling fog. The resurrection of the girl Jen used to be a year ago, before she went Goth, or whatever she was supposed to be. A girl who reminded Michelle of herself in her rebellious teen-aged years, twenty-five long years ago. “I do think that Jennifer can become good at the piano, and really great at life,” Michelle said to Gemma just before the door was about to be slammed in her face. “If I didn't, I wouldn't put you or her through these lessons,” she assured the 'lady who does lunch' who slipped back into being a mother, for a moment anyway. “Or wouldn't put me through it either,” Michelle smiled back.

“We'll let you know,” Gemma said to Michelle with a condescending grin as she closed the door on Michelle's mastery-in-servitude face.

Huddled up into the sleeves of her overcoat, carrying her overloaded briefcase of sheet music in a world where everyone stored everything on their phone, Michelle walked past the four car, heated garage in which the newest of gas guzzlers sat. She wondered what life would have been like if she had slept, power-bitched or cajoled her way into being someone who owned even one of those cars. But, such was another 'what if'. “Maybe it isn't too late to give up on me and join the world?” she thought. “Maybe I can learn to be the perfect wife to Russell to his face while fucking him in the back,” she continued. “Tell him EVERYthing he wants to hear and get what I want, need and, all things considered, deserve,” she thought to herself, yet again. “I'm the only one in the congregation at Church who actually DOES listen to what Jesus said and did, and try to do it, or trying to do it. While everyone else is concerned with showing off their wealth, piety and developing their guilt-giving skills. And arranging the bylaws of Jesus' commandments, and heartfelt, hard-earned suggestions, by saying things like if you develop a love for someone who isn't 'saved' by Jesus, you're a whore. But if you have the most lurid carnal fantasies about another member of the congregation who is 'saved', then it's just God's will saying that you have to boink him in the sac a zillion times, and create babies who will make other babies, and overpopulate the world with more 'saved' souls.”

By an accident of fate, Michelle was born with free will. And she still knew how to connect to it, a miracle that came more from Jesus than any Pastor she ever knew. An avid reader of philosophy books when most of her classmates were reading teenbeat magazines. Michelle was particularly fascinated with the women philosophers of Ancient Greece, fourth Century Constantinople, and Renaissance Italy who not only entertained the men with music, but also taught the men, what the music of the soul was about. She envisioned herself being one of those women in places a lot bigger than Manitoba, or for that matter Canada as well, finding or creating a new Socrates or Michalangelo. But, as the expression and painful reality goes, a second hand briefcase filled with could've's and should've's along with a Canadian loonie could buy you a coffee at Tim Hortons. Or as the price was now, two dollars. The price of a one way bus fare, a route of transportation that Michelle had to take if she was to go anywhere, as one of the bridges not taken in her past was not getting a driver's license twenty-five years ago.

Michelle was always a walker in a world of drivers. That condition started with a fear of driving due to the way her eyes perceived the road when behind the wheel. Then she became convinced that she was a bad driver, thanks to by her computer geek brother who sneaked insults at her when assigned by his father to teach his younger sister how to drive. They were re-enforced by husband Russel, who said he would give her cab fare when she needed it. As long as, of course, it was to places where he wanted her to go, and that the taxi never took her out of Brandon.

After finally reaching the bus stop, Michelle huddled behind the glass walls that shielded her from the five mile an hour wind that made the temperature feel ten degrees colder. Her eyes were startled by a sign that had been put up yesterday, or maybe earlier today. "Bus service on route 4B suspended on a count of construction," came from from a mouth lacking most of its teeth but lacking no warmth with its smile. "The suits need something else to do today to make our lives more challenging, aye?" the First Nations man in the patched up parka continued. "I used to work for the Williamson company, and they laid me off, then everything else went to shit in my life," he ranted on through white fog coming out of his mouth tainted with booze. "It sucks," he concluded, after which he freshened whatever fire was in his belly with a sip from a flask. He offered a swig to Michelle.

"No thanks," Michelle replied with a sincere smile, trying to hide her strong opinions about drinking and drunks to herself. "I'm not driving."

The old Indian appreciated the joke. "That's a good one," he said, as he helped himself to another swig. And Michelle got a glimpse into the tragedy that must have been his life. His fall from grace, as she recognized who he had been a hundred drunks ago, by her calculations. "Do we know each other?" said the once-young and now irreversibly-old man to Michelle as she observed herself staring at his face. From an angle she thought he couldn't detect. "I remind you of somebody?" he shot into her soul, after-which he belched, then farted, feeling one of the few reliefs still left to him in life.

"We're all the same soul," Michelle offered. She hoped that Jack Klugmore didn't recognize her as the trophy wife of the middle level manager of Williamson Construction Company who was now about to be promoted to a seat on the board room that met on the TOP floor of the CN Building. The man who signed the papers firing Jack for stealing building supplies that his best buddy pilfered, as it was discovered later. Too much later to do anything about, as his best buddy married the boss' daughter. A boss who as a 'good Christian', was now running for his second term in the Provincial Parliament so he could continue stealing from the public legally. "We're all the same soul who share our accomplishments and failures, feel all of our pains and passions, whether we know it or not."

Jack absorbed Michelle's remark, then laughed from a dark place inside of his scrambled brain. "That's a good one," he replied, after which he downed the rest of the flask.

Meanwhile, Michelle found herself visualizing herself in that broken man's duct-taped-together parka. It wasn't that she was in any want of her husband's mostly-legally-earned money. She needed it. Her attempts to make any real money on her own had all failed. Though she had earned an Honors degree in biology, it was worthless unless you could afford to go to Medical School, or wangle your way into graduate school with one of the few researchers who had enough pharmaceutical company grants to hire and sustain Ph.D. Candidates, who would most probably be jobless after they got their degree anyway unless they knew how to manipulate people better than they could master molecular biology.

Michelle's attempt at working in a hospital as a lab tech got short circuited when it became unionized, requiring her to take expensive courses to learn what she already knew. Getting loans for anything was short-circuited by the computers at the bank telling her that her married status disqualified her for getting any assistance, and the real faces of the real bankers in town saying, with kind and understanding faces, "your husband Russell has money, and your parents made good money with their investments. I'm sure they are more than willing to help you out because they really do love you."

Besides, there was the economic curse that Michelle carried with her wherever she went, no matter how hard she tried to shower it off. Though she was the best teacher of piano in Manitoba, she never knew how to make it turn a dollar. She would over-spend on sheet music for deserving, promising and hard working students, then four lessons later be laid off because those students were swallowed up by the herd of 'fun to be dumb and lazy' humanoids who preferred to play with their iphones or genitals because it was easier to do so. Which, to be fair, it was. In the short term anyway.

No, Michelle was a long term thinking, and aspirer. A service rather than profit oriented misfit who wound up working harder for clients who could nothing for her than those who were rich in pocket. She had read someplace that those rich in Vision were poor in pocket, recalling that Schubert, or maybe Schumann, moved 60 times in his lifetime in 19th century Vienna to stay ahead of the landlords while teaching piano to keep his own biological instrument fed and his piano sort of in tune. While Beethoven, living in the same city, lacked for nothing. Except of course a really good ear doctor who could restore his hearing. Then there was the case of Handel, who was the toast of Europe after leaving his native German home, whose music was well paid for and popular. And Johann Sebastian Bach, who never left his home region and wrote more works that were not publically played in his lifetime than those that were. But whose works outdid Handel's in popularity and substance hundreds of years later. Most of them uncovered 200 years after Johann's death.

Michelle considered all of that, and what happened beyond the grave, as she got on the bus. As life did so often, her thoughts preceded her perceptions. The new bus route took the long way around the city center, affording her a view of the cemetery. A place that felt more alive to her than dead. She could hear the souls buried there saying something to her...Something that required a musical and answer, or maybe something new she should do with her life. Something that life would force on her as she didn't have the ability to force it upon herself anymore. Starting with a change in the 'wheres' of it, when the bus stopped at the Safeway in the portion of town she never went into. Where she could get the food she needed for her own sustainance. As well as the processed crap that her husband demanded. Processed semi-organic material which was making Russell not only blimp out, but become more miserable, sick and old with every meal. The temporary detoured bus route also led to a chance to sample the new Tim Horton's next to the old Safeway prior to shopping, after availing herself of a badly needed piss break and hot drink.

Inside the new Timmy's, a fresh tray of chocolate-covered Bavarian creme donuts laid in front of the glass counter said 'eat me' with every whiff of freshly-baked aroma that emanated from them. Those aromatic demons and demonesses coaxed Michelle to once again become the contented girl with the ample 'love handles' around her waist that she had become soon after her marriage to Russell 15 years ago. Love handles that Russell didn't seem to mind, and even seemed to approve of, and encourage. Maybe to keep her home, or maybe because he wanted to feel secure in his own increasingly corpulent 'man-sized' body.

“It wouldn't be so bad,” Michelle pondered as she observed her thin waist in the reflection of the glass between her and the donuts. “It's not like this slimmed down engine is gonna take me except for a spin around the driveway under the sheets on Russell's birthday when he wants to have sex with me, or on my birthdays when I claim that I have a headache or that it's the wrong time of the month, again.”

Michelle never felt more dead ended, and something else she never thought would happen to her. Old in the head. Complimented by hungry in the belly. Which forced her hand to rise up to call the clerk's attention to her, interfered with by the last thing she would ever expect to see in the reflection of a Timmy's glass case.

“Sean?” Michelle gasped with a dropped jaw.

“Michelle,” the reflection smiled back. “Ellie?” it then inquired.

Michelle turned around and saw that the reflection was indeed accompanied by a real body. One that looked different than she had remembered it from two century-long decades ago. With a feature that finally could be described by the most obvious word that came to her mind, a mind that had been taken into the Twilight Zone. A time, space and dimension of 'Now', where past, present and future all merged into a single entity. “You look thinner than the last time I saw you, Sean,” she said, recalling that she referred to him by name, something she had never done when talking to or about her brother, husband, or mother. Not for a long time anyway.

“I suppose so,” Sean said with a tight lipped smile holding back a sackful of secrets. “And you look...” he continued, as Michelle felt herself being assessed from head to toe, then back up again. “Fantastic, Ellie” he concluded with a grin that said 'happy'.

Michelle was at a loss for words. Not so much because someone finally said she looked fantastic, but because she was addressed by the name she preferred to call herself rather than the one given to her at birth. The name that Sean called her when they were both 18. When they could eat as many Bavarian Creme donuts as they wanted to without blimping out like the image of the jolly, fat German baker under the price list. That magical time that came back to Michelle instantly, and according the spark in Sean's eyes, it returned to him too.

“I'm waiting for a bus that's not arriving for another half hour. And you, Ellie?” Sean

asked her.

“The same, Sean,” Michelle replied, consciously putting aside the scheduled need to pop into Safeway to pick up yummy-put-more-fat-on-the-tummy din-din for Russell, whose diabetes was getting way out of control. Or the lean meat, veggies and nuts that had become her staple diet. “I came in here because it's too cold to wait outside,” she by way of explanation for her perhaps accidental whereabouts.

“Yeah, it is,” Sean said, inviting her to sit at his table. “There's someone I want you to meet, Ellie” he said en route.

On the way to the table in the back of a very crowded Timmy's, Michelle wondered what Sean's wife looked like. “Maybe she looks exactly like me,” she said. “Or the way I used to look back then. Or maybe she's better looking,” she continued, noting that though Sean's face was gaunt, and he had lost at least a third of his normal body body weight, he looked as handsome as ever. From the neck up he still was a working class welder by day and unstoppable hockey player on the ice by night who was a catch for any woman, or for that matter, maybe man. The latter, if true, would explain why she had not run into nor seen Sean in Brandon for twenty years. Though Brandon's PR signs on the highway all said it was a city of happy, smiley, open minded people, in reality such was reserved for those of the Right (and proper) religion, political affiliations, and sexual life style.

Michelle's eyes looked at every customer across from an empty seat, wondering if this was the one who had stolen Sean's heart after the break up. She prepared herself to like whoever it was, respect them in any case. And if he, or she, was wrong for Sean, to correct the 'arrangement' for what was good for Sean. Such was the least she could do, given that her ex-flame deserved someone who was right for him. No, Michelle was not at all jealous of whoever she would have to make nice with at the table. Most normal ex's would be.

But Michelle, as Bunny kept reminding her, was not normal. She had been plummeted into the realization that jealousy was a lower emotion, experienced by those not intelligent or enlightened enough to know that ALL of us are loners. Only able to get a complete package of love, whatever the fuck that was, from different people, according to our own individual needs. Like the French, who knew that you got Agape, love of spirit, from your wife. And, if you needed it to stay sane, or balanced, Eros, love of flesh, from your Mistress. And Philos, comradeship between souls, from your best girlfriend at the gym or your best bud at work, or from your kids when they grew up to be adults, thankfully in their OWN image rather than yours. Yes, that was the situation. But Sean had been the provider of Agape, Eros, and Philos back in those golden teenage years, as Michelle remembered it anyway. Of course, that was before the break up when they both hit twenty, the details of which Michelle saw fit to ignore for the moment. In any case, she prepared to meet Sean's new 'whatever' on Sean's terms.

“So, here she is,” Sean said regarding the occupant of the seat opposite to his coat.

“Esmarelda,” he continued, proudly putting his arms around his beloved's belly, as he pulled her out from under the large coat. “By the look in her eyes, she wants to lick your face dry,” he smiled.

Michelle was initially happy to know that Sean's new love interest was a canine covered with fur rather than a humanoid covered with made-in-China Parisian perfume from the dollar store and love juices that emanated from his scrotum. But by the way Sean hugged Esmeralda with his arms, it was out of more desperation than love. And as revealed when his shirtsleeves slipped down to his elbows, those arms were emaciated, barely able to hold the 14 pound canine up. “She's my mother's dog, but Mom's in the psych wards again for weekend, and it's up to me to take care of her,” he said. Michelle put her still strong arms under the Jack Russell's belly, then gently placed her back into Sean's lap, covering her with his coat so the management wouldn't notice the four legged customer. Then she smelled something on Sean that was more scary than expensive perfume from a cheap woman, or anal secretions from a canine with a wagging tail.

“Radiation burns,” he said by way of explanation, looking down at his chest. Allowing Michelle a view of the burnt flesh under his shirt, but not forcing her to look at them. “The doctors said it was necessary, but...”

“Is it, necessary?” Michelle asked.

Sean pondered it all, agonizing over thoughts lingering behind his down-turned eyes. Finally, he looked up at Michelle with a smile. “Not as necessary as seeing you. And...this.” Sean reached for a soda on the table. He poured some into an used cup from another table for himself, and some into a fresh cup for Michelle. “On the beat of three, Maestro Ellie?” he asked her.

“Indeed, Captain Sean,” Michelle smiled, recalling the libretto for an opera that always gave her joy, despite the disapproval of soul dead audience members who were watching.

On the count of three, Michelle and Sean both drank the soda, then pushed it out of their nostrils, speaking to each other with a musical conversation that they both understood and enjoyed. Esmeralda seemed to enjoy it too. Sean belched out the first three notes of Beethoven's fifth, Michelle adding the next note, on time, then on the second verse, with a delay that converted warmth into humor. Then a smile from Sean, which activated every portion of her spine. Then another round of belching which honored Onkle Ludwig, and pleased Esmeralda, culminating into a silent portion of the Symphony's first movement that was followed by a kiss. Felt by Sean and Michelle simultaneously, and shared by both equally.

Michelle didn't remember how long the kiss lasted, but out of the corner of her eye, she could see several pairs of diners around her smiling. All of those 'established' couples seemed to wish they could have what the two soda-silly lovers had. One of those couples were inspired to hold each others' hands. “Danke. Thank you” the old German tourist husband bowed. “From me too,” his aging wife, or perhaps his wife, said in

broken English with an Eastern European accent, giving her hubby with the wrinkled, stubble-covered face a peck on the cheek. “If we don't keep ourselves young, we get old long before our time,” she smiled. “Is true, yes?”

“Yes,” Sean said to Michelle with a wide smile that brought life to his gaunt, pale face.

“You bet your ass, and any other body part that you value,” Michelle answered with her eyes.

Esmeralda barked something that said 'now that you two legged life forms have had your fun, I need to take care of my needs.'

“She has to go,” Sean said regarding the canine's anal requirements.

“As do I,” Michelle replied with down-turned eyes. “For now,” she continued, pulling her calling card as a piano teacher out, placing it into Sean's hand. A hand that gently put its fingers around hers. With no possession, guilt or desperation. Something she had not experienced in nearly twenty years. Or perhaps never at all.

CHAPTER 3

The next day, Michelle sat down at the piano bench for her hour long practice session in the ground floor of the big house that suited husband Russell's image of her. There was much to contemplate, consider and conclude. Starting with what she should play to integrate all the thoughts and desires swirling around inside her head. Normally the music of Bach put things together, but after playing the first three measures of the third Goldberg Variation, the music made as much sense as Goldberg and Johann Sebastian trying to become stockbrokers for Goldman-Sacks.

She thumbed through her music sheets, looking for something romantic, but which also made sense. Chopin, perhaps. But, no. It was too flighty and young, and Michelle knew that she was a lot older inside than twenty years ago when she broke up with Sean. Then she considered Beethoven, the Spring Sonata perhaps. An early work by Onkle Ludwig but after playing the first six bars, she realized that it was written by a very young, and naive, Beethoven. And, besides, it was intended to be played as a duet, in collaboration with, rather than merely accompanied by, a violin.

Though Sean appreciated and liked Michelle's piano playing back then, the only musical instrument he could play was the spoons. An instrument which, truth be told, he played very well when scooping ice cream off her neck and upper chest after one of their pie fights. Fights that they started by mutual un-verbalized consensus between them when they got stuck going to Church picnics where the Pastor claimed that the only way to go to heaven was to make your expressive mind as dead as the tombstone you were buried under. Or Christmas parties in the Biology department where the dead frogs fixed in formalin were the most Alive creatures in the room.

Michelle thumbed through all three piles of sheet music, unable to find one that fit the occasion. One which would lead her mind into figuring what to do about Sean if he called back. And what to do about him if he didn't. None provided the roadmap. But, as the expression goes, the show must go on, and her audience was waiting.

“So, Mister Bunny, what is your pleasure today?” Michelle asked her furry friend though the glass window that kept the room warm, the piano in tune, and the Bunny within a nest of twigs, old clothes and shredded up rejection letters regarding the CDs she had sent out to 'important' places in the East for as long as she could remember.

Bunny answered with a wrinkle of his nose, then a pawing of his right front leg. Under him was a rabbit three quarters of his size, who he proceeded to impregnate with a smile on his face. Something shared by Mrs. Bunny, or perhaps Mistress Bunny.

“And I thought I was your favorite girlfriend,” Michelle smiled to her always loyal and appreciative furry friend. “But, fish gotta fly and birds gotta swim, I suppose,” she concluded, vicariously enjoying the love transpiring between the two hares. Not questioning if that love was Eros, Phillos or Agape. And considering that maybe one could get all three in the same package.

But there was one thing that would be required for such to happen. Sean would have to call back as the first step, leading to the bigger issues like building a life outside of Brandon, or Manitoba. It was futile to expect something positive to happen if Michelle called him, and destructive. And besides, she had forgotten to get his contact number at the table in Timmy's. “Or,” she considered. “Maybe Sean purposely didn't give me his number.”

The thought was frightening, and real, particularly when Michelle looked at her left hand. She recalled that she had not taken off the wedding ring from her finger when reconnecting with Sean. And she had explained nothing about the story behind it. And she forgot to tell him that the seven carrot diamond embedding in the ring was Russell's idea, or rather his keep-up-beyond-the Jones' socialite mother's. And that Michelle's entire life savings in her very personal bank account could barely pay for an imitation silver ring and nose piercing at the 'Branding Iron' tattoo parlor on 20th Street in very DOWntown Brandon.

“Yeah, I know. Sean's protecting me from myself,” Michelle said to Bunny, then to Onkle Ludwig as the image of Beethoven with even wilder hair and determined eyes than the previous one appeared. Clad in an oversized coat not unlike the one Michelle had picked up at the Salvation Army two years ago, he leaned against Michelle's piano, working on a new composition in the after life, ascoltating what he was intensely writing on the sheet. A blues rendition of a Frank Zappa tune that changed rythms every time the listener thought he or she could predict where it was going. With German lyrics that were alternatively profoundly Shaespearian and colorfully vulgar. “I know, it's time for me to compose my own composition too,” Michelle said to Old Ludwig. “But in the

meantime, can you suggest something that Bunny and his fuck buddy, and maybe soul mate, out there could celebrate? While I try to convert this death inside to me into Life, Onkle Ludwig. You know what it's like to want someone life says you can't have, and your Calling says you shouldn't be tied down by. Remember your Immortal Beloved? Who was...?"

Michelle waited for Ludwig's ghost to tell her the identity of the woman, or maybe man, who had stolen his heart, then had disallowed the Maestro from sharing it with her, or him. A historical question which, if answered correctly, would win Michelle an all expense paid scholarship to any university in Europe and a faculty position afterwards. And if she could write the screenplay based on the story, enough money to buy a hundred Steinways. "So, Onkle Ludwig," she asked the masochistic workaholic image in her head that appeared before her desperately imaginative eyes who she needed to be real more than ever. "Your immortal beloved was..."

"...Pathetic," Ludwig replied, seeming not to have heard Michelle. Something that made sense to her, as in real life Beethoven was in real life was deaf to all sound that could be heard by the biological ear. But, the ghost of the tortured composer who released so many millions of people from being tortured by mediocrity after really hearing his music was channeling something. A suggestion Michelle took to the piano, without bringing out the sheet music.

Michelle never played the 'Pathetique' with more fire, heart and vulnerability. It drove Mister and Mistress Rabbit to become more active than any Energizer bunny. And drove something into her soul that she needed more than ever. Conviction. The courage to do what Spirit Called her to do, no matter what humans on earth said, or even what the ghosts she invented in her head advised. She would need it, particularly when the next call came in, earmarked 'urgent'.

To keep Bunny going, and herself connected to the Beethoven in the belly, she cranked up the stereo speaker between her ears so she could hear the rest of the music that she would have played on the piano while she engaged in earthly conversation the caller at the other end of the phone. A survival trick that, so far anyway, no normal earthling had cued in on. "Daniel, is something wrong with Dad, or Mom?" she asked her brother on the other end of the phone.

"The usual. Your caring about your hobby more than them. According to Dad anyway of course," he replied with a monotone voice devoid of any emotion. Not an emotion that someone other than Michelle could pick up anyway. "And being a slut again in public of course, which is okay, because after all you are emotionally immature, which is okay, because I suppose being underdeveloped as you are, you didn't know any better," Daniel continued in that tone which made him seem like the friendliest support staff computer geek you'd ever get on the phone. A procedural cordial voice that deflated any sense of struggle, emotional intensity, or humor.

Michelle wondered why and how Daniel knew about what happened across town with

Sean. Maybe her big, in ways corpulent as well as egotistical, brother was stalking Sean, or stalking her. Maybe Daniel was preparing to write another 'you married a slut, you know' letter to Michelle's husband Russell. Intended to break up the marriage to make Michelle more miserable, as she had always committed the primal sin of being expressive, Alive and artistically creative. Something Daniel never was or could be, as the forty-five year old virgin never left the computer lab between his ears.

But thankfully Russell never believed those letters, and for good reason. The accusations Daniel made about his sister, who perhaps he wanted to have as his own first-sex partner himself, were all false. Tall tales about Michelle making out with ex-flame Sean on the table of Tim Horton's would also be registered by Russell as another fantasy conjured up by a mild-mannered computer geek who knew enough to never blow up in public, but who was able to make anyone else blow their top as he needed them to.

Yes, the requirement to feel guilty about almost anything, including rain, had been inflicted upon Michelle by Pastor, and every one of his minions. But somehow she learned how to channel that most unproductive of emotions into responsibility, the most effective form of caring. Something that she, rightly or wrongly, extended out to everyone, mostly to those who cared about her least.

“What' going on with Dad?” Michelle asked, as she saw Ludwig disappear, then Bunny taking his girlfriend out for an after-boink snack of nuts and berries in the patch of wild bush behind the house. “Medically speaking that is!” Michelle demanded to know. “You didn't give him more liquor and cigarettes, did you? Don't you know that making him like you more is going to kill him faster? And more painfully? And have you considered that if he really wants to die, there are faster ways we can make that happen for him? And maybe you can just consider that maybe, possibly, God won't send him to hell if he gives us the go-ahead to arrange things?” Michelle said, self-observing that her anger at Daniel, her father and her chronically-accusative mother had turned into genuine concern for an old man dying of regret, while fearing the worse from his 'loving' Creator. Tears came down Michelle's face, but she dared not let Daniel hear them. Yet, he did.

“You always ask insensitive questions and say the stupidest of things,” Daniel said with a mild voice and brotherly smile. Then he started in on accusing Michelle of being the worse human being on the earth while he spoke as one of the nicest. She listened with half of her left ear, then none of her ears, particularly when she noticed another call coming in. From a number she didn't recognize.

“Please let it be him!” she said to herself as she fumbled around to find the 'person calling' button on her phone, which so far, protective brother Daniel didn't hack into. Finally she was able to find out who it was, just after the caller hung up.

“I have to take this,” Michelle interjected at Daniel in the middle of another one of his 'instructional manual' morality sermons. “It's an emergency.”

“What's more of an emergency than your own family?” Daniel challenged. “Who gave you body birth.”

“But not my soul,” Michelle replied, with a smile. “Gotta go, Mother Ship is calling me back to Om planet,” she continued, observing a smile coming from her mouth. And feeling humor emanating from her gut. A strange sensation that only happened when she was playing the piano. Amplified now to every part of her body.

By the time Michelle shooed brother Daniel away, the caller had sent a text message. “Nanu Nana? Nana- Nanu?” it read, an address and time appended to it.

“Da, da, Comradski Cosminaut,” Michelle texted back, envisioning Sean at the offered time which would be past, present and future all at the same time. And a place that was the Eternal Now.

CHAPTER 4

Michelle was worried about a lot as she got off the bus in front of the building containing Sean's new 'very bachelor pad', as he described it in his latest text. She could feel someone watching her over her shoulders as she went to the outer door and push it open. Then those set of eyes peering even closer as she approached the directory buzzer board, hiding the movement of her fingers on the display with her coat to hide the number she was pressing. A coat which had a hood covering her head, a pair of sunglasses over her normally wide open eyes.

“No,” she told herself regarding the 'second hand cloak and Halloweenie store dagger' motif she seemed to be imitating with her movements, and negativity-plagued mind. “Brother Daniel is looking at his computer screen at work now, hubby Russell is with an important client at the Ratistidst Dining room, and as for the Old Fart in the sky with the big beard who created a special commandment for women to honor, obey and lick the toe-jam off their men, even after they come home reeking of having sex with their secretary....” she rapidly postulated, then stopped herself. A reflection of herself in the lobby mirror brought Michelle into dialogue with the Higher Mind rather than the brain stem and limbic lobes of the 'bwain box'.

“Time to take off those dark glasses with the rosey-colored frames and see the world as it is,” the reflection seemed to say to Michelle. “And open up those ears too,” it continued as she took off the shades, then heard Beethoven emanating up from her gut, replacing the painfully repetitive 'Hearty Party' country tune that her fellow passengers were bobbin their heads to on the bus radio. “God, if He is real, wants us to be Alive,” she said in a whisper with an assertive smile. “While at the same time being responsible,” she continued with a softer voice as the buzzer to the inner door of the apartment building rang. “Above all do no harm, WHILE making a maximal impact in the world, and in everyone around you,” she muttered to herself when the inner door to

the apartment building opened up, beckoning her to enter the lobby lined with bright flowers. Yet smelling of cleaning solution that would fry a hole into anyone's nostrils as you got closer to the emotion-arousing flora.

Michelle waited for the elevator for a full minute, which seemed like an hour. When it finally opened, she stepped into the cubical, feeling the hard steel on the soft souls of her mucklucks. With a jolt, it pulled her up to the fourth floor, then lingered a full two seconds before opening.

The corridor in front of her seemed like another world, for reasons she could not ascertain, or define. It felt like one of those hallways in a starship rather than a hallway in an apartment building that had a unique name, but was built with the same construction materials as every other structure over five stories tall, and by the same company. The company her hubby was indentured to, by his own choice and inclination.

“So,” Michelle thought as she walked down the modernly-lit 1950s purple-carpeted corridor, smelling the aromas coming out of each of the doors that came into her nostrils on the long walk down to the one with the number corresponding to Sean's cliff-dwelling cave. “This must be a building occupied by professional cooks, or 'little women' who stay at home all day to bake cakes and casseroles for the 'big man' to come home to,” she pondered as the nostrils in her, according to Russell anyway, oversized honker picked up aromas of mouth-watering cheddar cheese appetizers, juicy pork roast with pineapple-honey sauce, and straight-out-of-the-oven triple fudge brownies.

Michelle heard, then felt, a rumbling in her stomach. One of those unkillable reflexes from a once oversized tummy that used to get what it wanted, which she now only fed what was needed. But, no, there was something else going on other than lingering cravings for food that was toxic to her finally-in-shape body and pleasing to the tongue. The thought amplified into her worst fear as she proceeded to the door down the corridor which, according to the linear progression on the other corridors she got lost on, would have the right number on it. “Yeah,” Michelle said to herself. “Maybe Sean's bachelor pad really is co-habitated by a maid who lives there full time. Or a girlfriend he forgot to tell me about who's gonna surprise me with a great meal the three of us will share,” she concluded. Then allowed herself to think of a more logical, and kind scenario. “Sean's mother is a great cook, and maybe she still lives with him. Or he lives with her. In any case, it's going to make a 'threesome' more restrictive. Or, maybe more interesting,” she pondered. “His mother tolerated me on a good day 20 years ago. But, I've grown up and maybe she has too. And besides, maybe we'll talk the whole thing out over lunch, which would be, according to the aroma about to invade my schnoz...”

At the door bearing Sean's number, Michelle could smell no aroma resembling food. Instead, it was a foul odor of what happened after disagreeing with an ingested culinary treat. Sean opened the door, slowly. “Stay out there a second, I have to clean up the mess first,” he said from behind the peep hole, behind which Michelle smelled the distinctive odor of vomit. She heard Sean emitting another bolus of such into a bag. “There, all cleaned out,” he related with a cheerful grin, pale face, and jaundiced aura,

holding the bag of barf as he finally opened the door. “Thanks for coming, really,” he said between coughs, inviting Michelle to enter the room.

It was more like a cave, darkened by the curtains being closed, a dim lamp on a distant table the only source of light. A primal man-cave in which the only thing one could hear was silence. And the ticking of a clock on the wall that loudly announced the passage of time. “My metronome,” he said by way of explanation for the agonizingly-regular tick tock which he knew jarred Michelle's senses. “An antique from my Mom that I can shut off if you want me to.---”

“ ---No, that's okay,” Michelle said as she negotiated her way to find naked floor amongst piles of dirty laundry, pizza delivery boxes, and piles of feces.

“Some are mine, some are from not being able to get Esmeralda out in time,” Sean said by way of apology. “It happens,” he smiled by way of explanation. “But, I did clean up the kitchen so we can talk in there,” he said as he led Michelle to the only room in the house that was clean. In which there was a cot with a sleeping bag on it. Over which was hung a picture of Michelle and himself that brought back a fond and special memory.

“Remember Prometheus?” Sean said of the stuffed rabbit in the faded photograph of himself and Michelle at the Provincial Fair, featuring in the background a sour-pussed not so fair overly-tattooed Carnie dude. A savory character more like an bit player in a Felini-gets-lost-in-Florida flick than someone worthy of being in the universe in front of the big screen. Who had cheated Sean and Michelle out of twenty dollars at the 'Dunk the Wabbit' booth in quarters, till Sean and Michelle figured out how the Carnie booth operator kept all of his rabbit dolls afloat no matter how many water buckets you dumped on them. A trick that was revealed when Michelle distracted the friendly Carnie booth operator with a flirtatious smile while Sean deflated one, then two, then three of the bunnies with pin pricks when the beer-breathed Carnie with the track marks on his arm dressed as Elmer Fudd wasn't looking.

“I remember Prometheus verwy, verywy well,” Michelle said as Elmer Fudd. “What happened to that wascawwy wabbit?” she inquired.

“He's been waiting for you,” Sean said, pulling the stuffed rabbit from the inside of his sleeping bag, making it dance like a puppeteer, accompanied by Sean's off-key but very on-heart version of the moldie oldie 'Still the One'.

Seeing the stuffed bunny dance and hearing Sean 'sing', made Michelle smile. But underneath it all, she was doing anything but smiling. Particularly when she saw blood on Sean's arm, and wrists, and blood staining the white fur on Prometheus. Yet, Michelle kept the smile on her face going, till Sean's weak arm gave way, then his legs. After a last ditch attempt to stand up on his own, he finally fell down on the cot, rescued by hitting the floor hard by Michelle's arms, which, for the moment were strong enough to not go into shakes like Sean's was.

“Pills in the cupboard,” Sean forced out of his shaking lips, pointing her to them to the best of his ability to them. “One under the mouth,” he instructed through broken breaths.

Michelle observed her hands move quicker than any energizer bunny's legs. With lightening speed, she opened the bottle, then stuck a pill into Sean's mouth. Two horrifying thoughts about him later, his breathing got more regular, then his body stopped shaking. Then Michelle's arms started to tremble, as she observed that her finger was still in Sean's mouth, feeling who he was. Feeling who she was. She pulled it out, noting that it was coated with Sean's blood. Fresh blood, mixed with putrid mucous.

“Here,” Sean said, bringing Prometheus' mouth closer to him. “Let Bunny make it good.”

“But maybe YOU'D like to make better, Sean?” Michelle asked Sean.

“Yes, if you want...better, Ellie,” Sean replied.

Michelle nodded a 'yes'. Sean took her hand, looked at it with an intense stare, then grabbed a towelette from the counter. “More sterile this way,” he said by way of explanation as he cleaned the blood off her finger. “Doctor's orders,” he continued as he dipped her finger in a jar of disinfectant, then dried it off with a paper towel. “My immune system is fucked. Anytime I expose myself to the world, I risk dying. Particularly after the new drugs they gave me today, which...maybe I won't take anymore.” He turned his back. “I just wanted to see you before I...ya know.”

“Yeah, I know,” Michelle said, hearing the tears about to come out of Sean's always stoic face. A structure that never let out tears, ever! Something built into his genetics, and code. Both of which were breaking down fast.

“It's a dumb question, but what can I do?” Michelle observed herself asking.

She waited for an answer. One sigh, then two, then three. Then, finally, “Sing something for me, Ellie,” he requested, his back still turned.

“What should I sing, Sean?”

“Not the Hearty Party, please!” Sean replied, turning around to her. “That pop tune that's making billions of dollars kills brain cells, and soul cells,” he smiled. “If you got a Ph.D. after getting your biology degree maybe you would have proved that so that the world would've been spared it being recorded, or heard.”

“Yeah, wouldv's and couldve's” Michelle noted, the life she could have had with Sean flashing before her life. A life filled with real music, and Life. Maybe in Montreal, assuming she could kidnap him and rescue him from a lifetime of samo samo in his beloved Manitoba. Or even if it was in Manitoba, a subsection of that flat in land as well

as tempement Province that had Montreal AND Europe transplanted into it. Michelle allowed herself to imagine a life where she would sing Sean hello in the morning, and dance him to bed at night. A song emerged from Michelle which she couldn't hold back.

“That's Rich Wagner ain't it?” Sean asked with a slow country drawl, pronouncing the W as a 'w', remembering the tune with a wide smile and bright Blissful eyes. Music the born and bred Manitoba farmer-under-any-suit-he-had-to-wear-at-work always appreciated but never studied, or really understood. “From Tristan and...Isabella, or, no, Isolde?”

Michelle nodded an affirmative 'yes' to the lyrics of the German opera in which Isolde pledged her eternal love to Tristan in this life, and beyond. In words that Sean didn't understand, but felt. A libretto that led to Michelle sitting Sean down on the cot when his legs started shaking again. Then letting him lean his weakened body next to hers. Then finishing with a final note in the opera in her Mind in which the two players laid next each other.

Sean seemed to hear nothing but Divine Silence of the Eternities for an hour. Michelle heard nothing except the clock on the wall ticking down the time to what might be her last moment of love with anyone, as she tried to feel the Eternal Now and extend it into a forever reality.

CHAPTER 5

“You'd think that someone with a biology honors degree could read a simple list,” Russell grumbled as he helped Michelle unpack the groceries she had picked up from the store and brought into the kitchen. “And what's this!?” he barked out, looking at the bag of carab-chip, naturally-sweetened, organic cookies. “I work my ass of at REAL work to bring home the bacon, and you bring me rabbit food!”

“You ARE diabetic,” Michelle reminded Russell with as much kindness as she could muster. “They were on sale, and gaining weight does decrease life span you know,” she smiled at him, accidently letting her eyes notice and focus on the waistline of his favorite after-work jeans, which he now had to wear with the top button undone.

“You would bring that up, you ungrateful spoiled brat,” he shot back while he took in a deep breath and tried desperately to make to stretch the waistline of his pants so that the snap in the middle would hold. But after three tries, it gave way gain, causing the zipper to become undone and lock into position around his scrotum. “You think it's easy being me, don't you!” he blasted back at her, doing his best to hide pain of mind, spirit and tendor male genetalia from her. “Keeping you, that piano, and those pipe dreams about you actually being able to make a living with it alive. And paying for the special diet that you think you'll actually be able to stay on,” he continued at full rant, opening up the brown bag from the EcoEarth Health Food Store before she could get to it. “All of this organically raised meat. And vegetables that you could have gotten for half

the price at Safeway. Even cheaper if you lowered yourself enough to go to the frozen food or canned section. And these nuts. Do you know how expensive these nuts are!!” he blasted out, grabbing a fistful of them in his sweat-soaked, shaking hands. “You DO know that if you ate normal food, you'd be in better health, and maybe fit into the normal world like all good Christians are supposed to do. What makes you think you're so special?! Huh?!”

“Because I discovered that I had a brain between my ears that I value more than the hole between my legs and the overrated prosthesis between your legs,” Michelle thought, but didn't say to his WASP white, clean cut, beet-red angry face and terrified eyes. “And I decided that I would live longer, and better, if I fed my brain instead of my belly,” she pondered, but kept inside of her, yet again. “Ya know, Rus, I do know what it's like to have to buy clothes one or two sizes bigger than everything you have. And it does suck, but a lot of people can't afford to buy any clothes for themselves,” she offered from her mouth with a warm smile, while extending her left palm to Russel's shaking shoulders.

He looked back at her, staring into her soul. “Do you know what you are, Michelle?” he asked with a wry smile.

Michelle felt all of her thoughts, feelings and actions for the day being exposed as easily as a gun going through an X-ray machine at an airport. A place she hadn't been at for two years when she made her last and, according to Russell, her final 'indulgent' vacation to see the autumn leaves in Montreal. She could feel Russell's eyes seeing everything she had done with Sean that day. Along with every other 'good Christian' who got off on condemning someone to hell or some kind of lifetime penance while still on Planet Earth.

Michelle's mind prepared a defense against the charges about to be laid upon her. “We were both fully clothed,” she thought and was prepared to say. Along with the rest of the reasons and rationales for what she did, said, and felt with Sean. “He's dying and all I did was maybe give him a reason to live. Yes, I got a little bit of pleasure from doing that, and yes, allowed myself to feel loved. And yes, for the first time in a long time I laughed with someone else instead of just by myself and the ghosts I HAVE to see when I play for Mister Bunny. And yes, it felt good to laugh. And to be with someone who knows who I was and maybe still am. And, yes, I feel guilty for wanting to take my clothes off. And doing a lot more with Sean. And wanting to be 18 again. And, yes I know, I'm going to pay for it. And that, according to what's imprinted in my brain, and maybe life, God doesn't want us to be happy. That the 'Good Lord' wants us to be miserable. Because we were born with original sin. But, according to the brain that God gave me, and I am trying to use in his service like Jesus did, it was Adam and Eve who ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, not us. And not me. And even if I was Eve, or Adam, in a past lifetime, there is, or should be, a statute of limitations for having a lapse of judgement for eating an apple and being conned by a talking snake into trying on a different construct of knowledge.” It made sense in Michelle's head, finally. But just as she was about to translate that Martian accomplishment into earthling speech, Russell spoke up, in 'Earthling'.

“So, you know what you are, Michelle, my dear wife of twenty long and trying years?” Russel asked his wife again, this time with a friendly grin.

“Someone who is trying to care for you more than you're willing to care for yourself?” she smiled back.

“You look into here and think about the question till I tell you the answer,” Russell said, putting a mirror in front of Michelle. One that she stared into asking herself, God and Jesus even more questions. Inquiries that got no answer, until Russell returned with a plastic bag filled with compost, used paper towels, coffee grounds and bits of plastic inhabited by happy bacteria. “You're this!” he said. “Garbage!” he yelled out. “Crap and garbage! Ungrateful, spoiled, daydreaming garbage!”

“No I'm not!” Michelle barked back at the top of her lungs. “I'm not garbage!” .

“If you really thought that, you would have stated it, not screamed it,” Russell smiled back at her with a calm voice. He reached into the drawer below the liquor cabinet the he only opened up for 'medicinal' purposes and pulled out a Bible. He opened it. “You should try reading this sometime.”

“You should try LIVING it,” Michelle shot back at the man who Pastor, and her parents, thought was the perfect match for her. The responsible choice she married, and thought she actually loved, even during the ceremony where her brother served as the best man. At a ceremony which Sean did attend, to sincerely wish her good luck, and meant it.

“There are consequences for all of our actions,” Russell said as he searched for the right passage to justify whatever accusation he was about to throw at Michelle next. Maybe an accusation that pertained to her reuniting with Sean. But by the calm demeanor in Russell's eyes, it was probably for her many past offenses of violating the codes of behavior required by Teens For Jesus and Young Women for Christ. “Such as losing something you value, and have not been able to turn into a profit,” he finally said looking up at her.

“Not the piano!” Michelle said, voicing her most horrific fear. “You said that the piano was a gift. And it does make some money,” she asserted. “It will soon,” she pledged, and prayed.

“So you'll play it in Church,” Russell said. “Like I want you to play it. The songs that are appropriate.”

“Sure,” Michelle pledged, anticipating her having to endure playing Onward Christian Soldiers with ultimate lifelessness, dedicating it to the Cause of keeping any Jew, Moslem, Pagan or Buddhist from establishing ANY kind of real business in Brandon. Or profiting from the ones they already established.

“And, I have tickets to Montreal, with three weeks complimentary accomodations at the

hotel you love to stay at, with front row tickets to the opera and ballet, for you to go to...alone,” he said, as he took out an envelope, waving it in the air like a carrot in front of a starving horse, or hare. “And I bought you an audience too play to also, at the Winterpeg film festival,” he said. “With a recording contract though a client from Toronto, and a distributor who actually likes the CDs that you sent out for your fortieth birthday present,” he smiled. “All yours if you say one thing. No, if you SING it.”

“Name the song, I'll go along, for the short and long,” Michelle replied, her eyes beaming with a Vision of a new Life.

“It goes like this,” Russell said. “I am garbage, I am shit. I am untalented, lifeless boring crap,” he droned out, handing the libretto to Michelle.

Michelle read the lines to the song that she really did believe on a bad day, and fought against on a good one.

“I'm waiting,” Russell said as he poured himself a glass of Scotch, sipping it like a gentleman while thumbing the pages in the Bible, humming the tune that went with the lyrics.

Michelle oscillated between agendas and strategies. She was good at only one thing...doing the artistic work. Russell was a master at opening up doors for distribution in any business, or closing them down forever.

“But if you want to keep playing to rabbits coming to your window, or ghosts that sit on your piano which would qualify you for studio time in the funny farm in a locked ward for...”

Fearing that Russell would deliver on his periodically-made promise to get Michelle the best psych care possible so that she could live a happy, normal life, Michelle sung the tune, going through the motions on the ground so that her wings could get the fuck, not the fudge, out of Brandon, forever. “I am garbage, I'm a piece of shit. I should...die,” she said, then sang, then started to believe. Just in time for Russell to interrupt the demonic verse with the words...

“Then if you are garbage, a piece of shit, an untalented boring lifeless waste of oxygen, you won't be needing these,” he smiled. After which he put the envelopes into the garbage disposal and let it rip.

Michelle's perspectives came back to her once-again-thinking brain. “Yeah, maybe there were never any real tickets in there for the opera. And the deals hubby made for me with the big wig distributors were as real as the chance that the US would actually institute a Universal Health Care system on the basis of need rather than who can buy their way to the front of the line. Or that Donald Trump would meet the Dalia Llama and be converted to Buddhism, donating all of his always perfectly sculptured hair to Locks for Love,” she thought. “Or maybe I'm being set up for something. Like accidentally

meeting Sean on the other side of town after twenty years, co-incidentally when he got cancer and was at the most critical part of the treatment. And as for bunny....”

Michelle stopped her projected mental permutations in mid mind-rant. The 'real life' explanations that Russell, her family, and in his 'down to earth talks' Sean had for the world could not be all that there was to life. “Yes, Bunny HAS to be a real friend who came by to listen to me,” ran through her head, grasping onto the closest threat to Sanity she could find. She dared not even consider thinking that the only reason why he came bay was that someone may have put some mouth watering rabbit food in a hidden trough on the other side of the window, with the intention of keeping Michelle downstairs at her piano. No, one fairy tale had to go unexplained. For now, that sacred cow, or rather hare, was Bunny.

Chapter 6

Doctor Johnny Walker Red provided Russell a sound sleep. Michelle looked at his smiling face in the bed she was required to still share with him. In his sleep, he muttered her name with kindness. Saying those lines he had said to her when she was a tender and untested woman of 20. Sweet lines pledging that he would take care of her, and see that he would not let her get into any trouble. Like providing a comfortable roof over her head in the burbs. Steak rather than hamburger. Protection from the demons of hunger, cold and pain. Sheltering her from the pain of being creative as well of course. That most sadistic yet well meaning promise was evidenced by the message on Russell's answering machine that Michelle at inadvertantly intercepted. It was from a buyer who accepted the price Russell had offered to take Michelle's piano away. A message that she thought was meant for real at first. Then maybe planted. Or maybe was faked. As a master of deception at work, home and church, Russell was capable of almost anything. Most particularly deceiving himself.

Though Michelle was always more artistic than Russell, he was always more clever than she was. Clever enough to threaten to take away Michelle's piano, but never to do so. Michelle's knowledge of history told her that a smart king keeps his peasants hungry, but does not starve them out. Only starving peasants revolt against their masters. Hungry ones try to keep them as friends. Maybe out of cowardice, or maybe because of that most basic instinct which both sustains and tortures man and womankind---survival. And of course conscience.

While lying next to her husband, who usually woke up sane and courteous when he was sober, Michelle thought about death, yet again. Maybe because of the melody in her head that somehow filtered into a car commercial, the life affirming finale of Mozart's Requiem. But it was most probably because her father was one bottle of booze away from toasting the angels on the other side of the veil. And because of someone else she had cared about for twenty years in HER dreams, dreams that had been awakened into back reality. Dreams that her heart didn't yet share with her mind. Maybe Sean was one of those unopened Christmas presents that grew more magnificent every time you

didn't open it. But for better or worse, Christmas was coming soon, for Michelle anyway, whether she liked it or not.

The first gift from the Fates was a business trip that took Russell out of town for two days, then a week. Then five days a week for three weeks. Accompanying such were the special delivery packages that came to her door containing mint condition sheet music by Mozart, Scarlotti and Camorosa with a return address corresponding to the apartment where she had re-connected to an ailing Sean. The third were texts to her phone in the special language which Sean and Michelle used to communicate with each other with messages that, according to all available data and gut intuition, had never been figured out by anyone else. All of those messages said 'yes' to Michelle putting in some time at the piano at home, and more time with Sean in person.

Michelle's visits to Sean's apartment on the other side of town went completely unnoticed by anyone who knew her on her side of town. Everything seemed samo samo with regard to husband Russell, brother Daniel and her guilt-throwing mother. They all seemed to buy her stories about having to take on extra students, checking out newly arrived books in the University Library about Baroque composers, or putting in time at the gym according to doctor's orders.

Such was miraculous in a town as small as Brandon, no matter how many times she changed buses, glasses, hoodies, or wigs. Each time she went to visit Sean, she pretended to be someone else. Sometimes it was as an incarnation of a famous historical musician or painter. Sometimes as a composite character which incorporated into her totality everything interesting and nothing boring. All of those personas had some kind of accent, usually from the more Enlightened Eastern side of the Atlantic and sometimes from the colorfully (rather than blandly) ignorant south side of the 49th Parallell .

“Maybe I have stopped being Michelle, and have become someone else, in another universe,” she thought to herself on more than on occasion as she saw her reflection in glass walls of Sean's apartment building. She imagined herself somewhere else, doing something else, each time. It always something involving music, be it through her fingers on a keyboard or violin, or with that most ancient and heartfelt of instruments, the human voice. Yet, each time after she rang the doorbell and Sean answered, she became 'Ellie' again, the slender, tastefully-flirty, morality-grounded 'girl next door' who would never leave Brandon, and perhaps become a farm wife to Sean if he could ever find a way to re-finance the family farm HIS way.

It all seemed perfect, except for one thing at home. On the days when Michelle didn't visit Sean, bunny came by to hear her play the piano in her basement studio. Music that was fraught with pensive reflection and mixed feelings that were laid out with the notes, but never resolved in her mind. On those days when she did visit Sean, and came home happy or contented, free from the challenges of moral quandry or spiritual abiguities, bunny didn't show up. On each of those occasions she feared that bunny was converted into stew by big bro Daniel, or one of the landscape workers working at the neighbors houses who were collecting perhaps double wages from hubby Russell. A

husband who was so great at hiding his own secrets, including maybe the fact that he had developed what he thought was real feelings for a woman less brainy and more attractive than Michelle.

Thankfully, Russell nor Daniel found out anything about what was going on with Sean. And even when Bunny did show up, he seemed to be merely a rabbit to Michelle's perceptions as the weeks went by. As for the ghosts of Ludwig von Beethoven and the rest of the composers who Michelle had channeled into materializing by playing their music, they made only brief appearances, and didn't show up at all during the afternoon when Michelle had spent the mornings with Sean. Happy mornings when she didn't have to think about her failed attempts to become an established pianist. Or the obsession to become a brilliant musician for an audience of hares. Life seemed to be inviting Michelle to continue whatever was going on with Sean.

Yes, Michelle felt accomplished for the first time in a long time. She had convinced Sean that it was worth the effort to hold onto life instead of allowing the cancer to take him quietly into that dark, dark night where all the pain would be gone. There were more good medical days than bad, though every day was lived with both hope and caution as the doctors escalated the intensity of the fight against his cancer with new drugs and treatments. Sean allowed Michelle to be happy, and consider a life without having to struggle. A life that could be a gleeful grand ole ope instead of an angst-ridden Wagnerian opera.

Michelle's visits with Sean turned into a bucolic routine. She would surprise him with an exotic new identity, and an outfit to match. That outfit would be stripped off sometimes by her, sometimes by Sean, leaving her in her underwear, which never came off, by mutual arrangement. She would put organic brownies in the oven, warm up some homemade soup, cut up the veggies she bought at the market for a salad, and be sure that the rest of Sean's lunch would be completed by his taking ALL of the medications that doctor prescribed.

The conversation over lunch, which only Sean ate, involved Michelle reading to him from books that his eyes were unable to read due to his continued inability to focus on the print. Light reading about frivolous and flirtatious topics. After Sean's head and body was fed, it was 'discourse' time, at which they lay next to each other. Saying nothing but feeling everything. By 2 pm, according to the still loudly ticking clock on the wall, Sean would feel the need to fall asleep, perhaps for good, or perhaps just for a nap. But before nodding out, he said 'I love you, and always will, and will always be with you' to Michelle. Michelle would say the same back to him, secretly worrying about her ability to maintain the promise to be with him always later. He would then go to sleep with a wide smile on his face, his cold head nuzzled next to her warm and ominously electrified body. She would kiss him gently on the cheek, then slither out the door.

On an ominously warm but foggy Tuesday, Michelle, aka 'Natasha', approached Sean's door with a jar of raspberry jam marked 'Mooseberrys', and special crackers with which to share it with her 'Boris'. Under her arm was a video of the old Rocky and Bullwinkle

show which she and Sean always enjoyed watching. But when Sean opened the door, she was pulled into a nightmare that no cartoonist had ever put on the screen.

“What are you doing!” she screeched out as Sean pulled her by the collar of her 1962 vintage Natasha black dress. Then he pulled the hem of the dress up to her breasts. With bloodshot ugly eyes and demon possessed arms, he shut the door, then bolt-locked it. He eyed her panties with heavy breath and a drooling mouth. “This time, I'm going to be sure that you'll stay here after I go to sleep,” Sean, or whoever he was, grunted as he pushed her to the couch, then pulled off her panties, then pinned them to the wall. Then he pulled off Michelle's dress and pinned them next to the panties. He rapped a bedsheet sheet around her torso and loosely tied her to the couch. Then he gathered the bags of food she brought off the floor that had spilled on the floor and smelled their contents.

“Just what I thought!” he growled. “You're trying to poison me with these 'goodies'. But I won't tell the Cops on you, and give you back your clothes, as long as you tell me WHY! Why are you poisoning me?”

Michelle didn't know what to say. The man in front of her wasn't Sean. Or maybe he was, she pondered.

“Tell me why you're trying to poison me!” he demanded to know, again and again as he grabbed hold of Michelle's neck with one emaciated hand, strap of her bra with the other hand, which had no lack of strength in it.

“Sean, I love you,” she found herself saying.

“And that's why your poisoning me?” he pushed out of a mouth reeking of something demonic. “You want to poison me and you at the same time! Good then. We'll die together. Together...Together...”

By the third 'together', Sean's eyes turned away from Michelle's terrified ocular portholes. They were diverted to something in the wall behind him.

“I love you,” Sean screamed, then muttered.

By some miracle, Michelle was able to push Sean away from her. He rolled on the floor, his chemo and radiation infested body rolling onto a wall. He cursed and blessed Michelle as he struggled to get up. Michelle made her way to the dress and the panties, put both with her fingers faster than those digits ever performed the Minute Waltz, and ran out the door, making a mad dash down the red carpeted hallway. Hearing the approaching footsteps the monster the medications and cancer had turned Sean into, or perhaps the love-sick desperado he was all along, Michelle pressed the up button on the elevator, then rushed down the stairs. The demon inside of Sean was wise to her tricks. But the body it inhabited fell down the first flight of stairs as Michelle made her way to the ground floor.

“I love you, and always loved you, Ellie!” Sean ranted, pleaded and pledged. In the same voice that he bellowed out the day she broke up with him twenty years ago. When Michelle realized that the only life he would accept with her would be one spent in Brandon Manitoba as Manitobans. A life in which Michelle would have to give up her pipe-dream of being a concert pianist, or anything Creatively Artistic, anywhere else.

Chapter 7

There were lots of things messed up with Michelle that day when she got back home. After taking a long shower to wash away the blood and cleanse out the pain after her visit with Sean, her eyes were caught by the mirror yet again. It was her hair that held her consciousness hostage this time. “Maybe I should cut it,” she thought to herself as she grabbed hold of the mane that had grown down to her breasts, tucking it under her ears, the corners of her eyes noting a scissors that smiled 'let me transform you, dear'. “Or maybe go cueball,” she found herself thinking, as her glance was captivated by Russell's electric clippers. “Or maybe a trim an inch below the scalp?” his straight razor conveyed in an alluring voice that she could actually hear.

“Sure, why the fuck not,” she said as she grabbed hold of the razor with one hand, her long awaited flowing lockes with the other. “It beats cutting up my arms, or wrists,” she said to the reflection in the mirror. “So, what do ya say, is it unanimous?”

“No,” Michelle heard from the window, in a loud squeak. Clearing the fog off of it, she saw Bunny nuzzling something with her nose in Rabbit Speak that she could somehow understand, if she was a mystic. Or something she was imagining, if she was just plain crazy. But either way, the message was clear from the rabbit. “Beethoven, now! I be hungry for brain food and you be the brain doctor, Ellie.”

Michelle wondered why Bunny, this figment of her imagination or messenger from someplace described in any geography book or psychology text, had now called her 'Ellie'. But rabbit was hungry for a concert. He scurried off away from the mound of dirt beside bathroom window, towards his season balcony seat in front of the large glass window on the lower level of the mansion that was too big to ever feel comfortably expansive in. “We'll deal with this latter,” Michelle said to her reflection in the mirror as she lay down the implements of follicular destruction like an alcoholic putting down a full bottle of booze. “Just what I need now,” she said to herself regarding that nearly very close shave. “An alluring addiction just like dear old Dad has to firewater and cigarettes, and Mom has for mediocrity and soul-killing stability,” Michelle thought to herself as she cleaned up the bathroom, then gathered all of her artistic garb into a private laundry bag destined for the trunk in the attic. A room where Russell never entered, to her knowledge anyway.

At the piano, Michelle opened the concert for Bunny and her tribute to the God that saved her so many times from OBVIOUS destructions. It seemed appropriate to start with Beethoven. One of the brooding sonatas the old but never outdated Maestro dedicated to his historically-still unidentified 'immortal beloved', which she accompanied with her

own Glen Gould like humming. Humming that got louder, then evolved into singing in operatic voice. With a libretto that started off in French, then evolved into the language of 'Sean-Elliese', the tongue she and her now functionally-departed first love had sung to each other to the tune of top forty hits years ago. Tears of joy for having known Sean when he was Sean came to her cheeks, followed by those of sorrow. Then tears of terror, as she didn't know what she was feeling. That feeling turned into anger when her ears heard laughter from atop of the piano.

“What are you laughing at, Uncle Ludwig?” Michelle inquired of the ghost of Beethoven, his old face smiling and laughing, a gesture never portrayed on any portrait or bust of the old Master who seemed to know everything behind his Blissful eyes. “What the fuck are you laughing at!?” Michelle demanded, as she stopped playing.

“Us,” the always-played but never-really-listened-to composer replied with somber wisdom that transcended happy and sad, as well pleasure and pain of all elements of the body, mind and spirit. “Wanting is better than having, something that is illogical, but true,” he related to her.

“That's all you can tell me after being away for so long!” Michelle shot back at her Mentor, and freind. “A rip off of an old Star Trek episode about Spock having to move on to his Calling as a Science Officer after figuring out that it wouldn't work out with the woman he got the hots for when he back to Vulcan for a 'let's see if I can be what I used to be' visit?”

“I was never a great librettist,” Ludwig confessed. “Did you ever see MY name on the lyrics to any symphony, choral work, or opera I wrote, Ellie?”

“No,” Michelle replied. “And why are you calling me 'Ellie' instead of 'Michelle'?” she inquired.

“To which I reply, 'music is your only friend, until the end'.” Old Ludwig answered.

“From Jim Morrison. The Doors,” Michelle shot back. “And why do I have a feeling that there's something else from deep inside of you that you need to say to me?”

“There is,” Ludwig said, stroking his chin. “You have in your own way through your own conscious and unconscious mind inoculated yourself with the diseases of life, so that you can become the cure. A cure that all of us need. Including me, my Immortal Beloved.”

“I'm flattered,” she said, “But I know you had a real flesh and blood Immortal Beloved. I'm not asking who she was, because she probably was married. Or maybe gay. Or had something or someone else going on that would have been toxic for you if you went along with the ride on her terms...Or his, if that Immortal Beloved was a guy in a dress who wanted boobs, or---”

“----What happened to me is none of your business, or the historians'!” Onkle Ludwig shot back. “But, please keep playing what I wrote in music, and what you feel in your fingers. Variations on my themes, or replacements of them. We both need the solutions that will come out of your fingers, Soul and mind.”

“And heart?” Michelle asked.

“SOUL!” Ludwig insisted as he sat back, then puffed on his pipe, which emitted smoke into the air that Michelle could now smell as well as see. A strange, undefinable aroma containing multiple smells which penetrated into every part of her brain after she took in the first deep breath. After which that 'smoke' penetrated down her arms, electrifying her illuminated fingers.

Michelle played like she never had before. Realizations came into her mind which felt real but which she could not define. At the end of the work, which was part Ludwig's, and part her own, she looked up, having felt to be accomplished. Old Ludwig was gone. The only observer she felt or saw was Bunny, who wiggled 'more please' with his nose. He nuzzled the glass door like it was his Immortal Beloved. In this case, Michelle. Who never felt more informed about Life, but never more disconnected from the fellow humanoids with whom she had the pleasure, and pain, of sharing the planet.

Michelle felt the chronically-present walls of self-inhibition that tried to shut her down finally crumbling. Then, after bashing through those barriers of sterility, she felt herself weighing nothing at all. Then becoming Light. Then becoming the music. Then hearing Bunny squeak with here. Then Ludwig singing. Then herself singing. Then a hand tapping her on her shoulder. From a doctor she recognized from her childhood.

“Your family is worried about you,” said the ghost of Doc Robertson, Manitoban-bred and born GP who was infested with Dull Out Virus his entire life and didn't even know it.

“I feel fine,” Michelle said with exhausted arms, hands drenched in sweat, and a big smile. “So does Onkle Ludwig,” she Passionately continued, motioning the visitor's attention with her her head to the other ghost on top of the piano. “Join in if you want, Comrade Doc. The only thing you have to lose are your chains...The ones around your Soul that still is resurrectable. Like mine maybe is, and---”

Before Michelle could describe the patho-physiology of dull out disease in her mother, father, brother, husband and Sean, the ghosts came to life. The one bearing Doc Robertson's voice and image anyway.

“What are you doing?” Michelle said as a very real life Doc Robertson injected the full contents of a syringe into her left arm. Very real syringe that made her arm hurt, then caused her fingers to loose connection with her mind, and soul. “Leave me alone!” she blasted at the two tall, bulky men behind the small framed, hunch-backed Doctor.

“This is for your own good,” husband Russell informed her with paternal assurance.

“So you won't follow through with the suicide threats you wrote in your cyber-journal.”

“The one I had to hack into, for your own good,” brother Daniel added.

“This is bullshit!” Michelle protested as her hands shook, then went limp. “I don't even have a cyber-journal,” she said from a mouth that went limp on one side, spewing out more drool than air.

“Yes, you do,” Daniel said, showing a portable tablet with warped and erotic likeness of Beethoven on it to Russell, Doc Robertson, then Michelle.

“That's not mine!” Michelle mouthed, but was unable to say in audible words. As she was dragged away, she looked towards Bunny. He grew bigger, then merged into a flash of light, then disappeared, leaving behind a fuzzy back yard where everything green had turned to black. And everything bearing any vitality-infused color turned dull grey. Which led to the world spinning upside down, then ending.

Chapter 8

Michelle woke up in a room that was very white. Very clean. Very private. Everything was provided for her in 'the hotel'. The best linen on the bed. The best network television cable plan obtainable. The best food available down the hall three times a day for meals, along with a snack bar that featured giant organic cookies and brownies that, paradoxically, were even better than the ones she baked for Sean. The best clothing from home moved into the closet, neatly arranged, cleaned and ironed. Everything needed for her 'recovery', except for one thing, which was not to be seen or had in her room or anywhere else within the hallways, glass-enclosed gardens or and recreational chambers on her side of the very locked doors.

“Are you sure there isn't a piano here?” Michelle asked the Nurse clad in a flowery blouse while sitting in 'the greenhouse' after having experienced her first 'high calorie, bubba-belly-creating if you let it be' lunch in the facility that she recognized as being the location where Sean's mother had been a resident for a while, after nearly killing herself as penance for her other son having thrown himself in front of a train due to causes that only he and his Creator would ever know. “Music is very healing, you know, Nurse Lynda,” she said to the Soccer Mom woman with kind eyes and an open heart.

“Not according to your doctors,” Nurse Lynda, spelt with a y of course, related with a sad smile. She looked at the clipboard on her lap. “They would evoke ideations that, well...”

“---Are imaginations in my own head. That I imagine, and don't really see, ya know,” Michelle interjected. “I'm not crazy...I'm not delusional. I'm just an artist who, on occasion has a brain that channels visual information into the auditory cortex, and vice versa, ya know. Which lets me see sounds, and hear sights. And feel smells. A

multimodality thalamus that sort of mixes the senses. Something Tesla had. I am definitely not crazy. I'm just Alive, big A, or trying to be, anyway, ya know.”

“I know,” Nurse Lynda replied, putting down her clipboard. She looked up at Michelle with warm smile on her lips, and a firm hand on the keys strapped to her waist. “But approvals for release are up to the doctors.”

“Who are soul dead themselves and don't even know it,” Michelle shot back at Lynda. “Who consider a medical success someone who fits into the bell shaped curve. Someone who accepts life as it is assigned to him, or her. Someone who enjoys nothing more than 'chilaxing' in mindless happiness and comfort. Spared from the pain of discovery. The agony of innovative accomplishment. And the joy of struggle.”

Something Michelle said registered with Nurse Lynda. By the way she pursed her lips and looked behind her eyes for answers to the challenges Michelle had offered her, maybe Nurse Lynda with a y was alive. One of the few other living Souls from Michelle's home planet who was also stranded on planet earth. A soul who knew the virtue and the price of having an intelligent, expansive brain and a compassionate, active conscience.

“So, you'll let me burrow those keys, or in the meantime, put the piano back into the tv room that probably was taken away the night I was brought in here?” Michelle smiled, recalling the scuff marks on the floor and the loose pedals from something with 88 keys that clearly indicated a piano of some sort had been there until recently. “Maybe you and me could compose an album together, or I could teach your kids how to play Mozart so brilliantly that it will wow any of her Goth, Heavy Metal, or Country friends? Mozart makes you not only smarter, but wiser, ya know,” Michelle proposed to her perhaps new galpal Lydna, who wore a likeness of a Gibson guitar on her blouse.

Nurse Lydna's smile widened as she seemed to be listening to the Silence in the glass enclosed garden. After processing everything Michelle meant, and said, and knew, about the anatomy of the human brain as well as the psychology of the species that was supposed to be using it, she finally looked up to the birds on the other side of the glass. “You are a colorful and interesting patient, Michelle,” she said with a gleam in her eye. “But, you are still an involuntary one,” she continued, staring at Michelle in a clinical manner, void of any animosity, or understanding.

“Involuntary for how long?” Michelle asked, terrified of the thoughts entering her head.

“That's up to the doctors, and you,” Lydia smiled back, her bright blue eyes turning grey. The flowers on her Nurse blouse seeming to be dried up weeds. Feeling the beeper in her pocket go off, she got up, checking the display. She texted something that revealed that she now was, once again, as lifeless as the program on her phone. Linear sequential binomial programs that Michelle's brother Daniel was very comfortable and happy with.

But Nurse Lydia was courteous with Michelle as she made her way back to the main

ward. "If you need anything, let the floor nurse know. We'll do our best to help you."

"Help me to be as normal, lifeless and soul-less as the shitheads and idiots who put me in here," Michelle thought, but realized that she should not say.

Michelle felt alone, isolated from everyone, most especially herself. Until a bird appeared on the other side of the glass. Feeling the bird's song in its eyes and hearing it with her still intense ability to hear low volumes of sound and frequencies most humans couldn't, Michelle thought it best to sing to the bird. Something from Mozart, perhaps. The Magic Flute aria. But when she opened her mouth to give voice to it, Michelle discovered that the drugs she had been given had dried out her mouth, paralyzing the muscles she needed to sing. Still, she pushed a melody out of her parched mouth and closed off throat to the best of her ability. The bird heard her, then flew towards Michelle. It crashed into the glass window, then fell to the ground, dead as Michelle's hopes of ever seeing what was on the other side of that windowed barrier again as herself.

Michelle silently sang a Requiem to the bird who braved the barrier to visit her. At the same time, she knew that she would have to somehow break through the barrier from her side of the wall. Or find a tunnel out, somehow. Fear overtook Michelle as the idea of spending the rest of her life 'chilaxing' in a music-less environment. Then anger at those who put her here won out, for now. "I'll get out of here, and set all of this right, somehow," she pledged to the ghosts of Beethoven, Mozart, Debussy and of course Bunny. Life forms she could not see but could still feel, for now anyway.

Chapter 9

Michelle was able to make calls going out from the phone on the walls between the dining room, which were monitored closely from behind turned backs at the nearby nursing station using a special calling card obtainable by cooperative patients. She left messages for her piano students that she was sick, and that she would be there next week. Most of the mothers were okay with such. VERY okay. Maybe they and their daughters preferred to go to the mall in their matching Mom and Daughter outfits, the only thing distinguishing who was who is who whips out the credit card at the retail outlet till. No mention was made of their daughters going with Miss Woo, the new really smart Asian piano teacher in town, who was very cleverly promoting herself on facebook while her girlfriends planted disparaging remarks about Michelle on twitter. As for Frau Morgenstern, fourth generation Manitoban farm-bitch with a 50 word German vocabulary who told tall tales about her run ins with Alfred Brendel and Alicia Delarocia at the Berlin Conservatory, no mention was made of her taking over Michelle's teaching and performance gigs. Few wanted the performance gigs that Michelle had taken on anyway, or even fewer would think about creating them.

Upon hanging up the phone in the dining hall, and looking at the armada of depressed, angry and disoriented patients being escorted in, Michelle recalled her most favorite musical gig. It was during the twelve very non-magical months after getting her

Honors Biology degree at the Medical School, which qualified her to draw blood and put into machines that the doctors would read at Manitoba General. On occasion, blood would come in from the patients in the psyche ward, special attention paid to the blood cortisol levels. It was part of one of those studies by MD docs who needed to get published like the post-docs and Ph.D. students at the University who used ten times more of their brains, twenty time energy and got their name on the paper only if they busted their balls and sweat blood for their over-tenured mentors.

The study that Michelle's division of the lab was assigned to dealt with assessing levels of cortisol, the 'stress' hormone, in mental patients. Correlations were made between levels of this naturally-occurring substance released from the adrenal gland during times of life challenge, and the 'mental stability' index of the patients sampled. Drugs were considered useful in treating mental disease if they lowered cortisol of course. Michelle had been offered to have her name put on the paper along with 10 other authors because she had drawn blood on the patients, but she declined. Yet, she did take note of where those patients were sequestered (aka, caged), and decided to initiate her own brand of medicinals to treat their souls. It was administered during the lunch breaks when Michelle's know that all bosses from the lab and her ass-kissing co-workers went out to lunch, in a group, as was the unstated requirement for maintaining any kind of future in the hospital.

The medicine Michelle administered went through the auditory nerve, and the Pacinian corpuscles that could pick up vibrations from the belly and souls of the feet. The nurses and patients were eternally grateful for then 22 year old technician in the Candy stripper uniform with the long pony tail playing the piano in the mental ward's dining room during lunch hour. The doctors enjoyed young Michelle's playing too, though never admitted it to the hospital administrators. Blood cortisol levels went UP in the patients Michelle played for, as did their vitality index. One of the researchers from the University, a senior investigator with a lab which he ran by himself, asked Michelle if she wanted to play for the rodents he had conditioned with 'learned helplessness', a model of human depression. She would get co-authorship with him once he got the sufficient n values and verified statistics for his new hormonal hypotheses, but alas, the rouge and underfunded Professor had a jealous wife, who had a girlfriend in the administrative wing of the hospital, who found sufficient reason to lay Michelle off from her job at the lab, and then bar her from entry into the mental wards because she was a 'disruptive influence to the staff and patients'. No legal charges were laid, due to the discrete intervention of Russell's family.

But that was then, and this was now, a week into her internment in the very locked ward, which had windows that allowed you to see the world you could be indefinitely disallowed re-entry to. Michelle was now the one wearing a patient bracelet on her wrist along with a GPS on her ankle, instead of the hospital staff ID on her white lab coat. In a place with no piano, and no visitors. "Part of your required therapy, my love, for your own good," Russell had said to her when he came by to drop off her final batch of clothes, along with a copy of a Bible, describing it as "the book that has all the solutions you need in it to get better again." Accompanying him had been Daniel, who assured

his kid sister that “Mom is looking after Dad, and I'm looking after Mom, and the doctors will be looking after you, part of the Lord's Plan.” As for Michelle's mother, when Michelle had asked her 'earthly maternal unit' how her father is doing, begging her to not let him keep drinking, as he would live in pain and die confused, “It's in the Lord's hands now, and since your father is a good Christian, he will be taken care of,” was the only response that came out of dear old, deluded Mom's mouth. “Pray for him, and do what the doctors say, so we can all pray together as a Christian family.” was Mom's final request, and command.

Thinking about what to do with the last of the five calls a day she was allowed to make, Michelle lingered at the phone, searching her thankfully-still functional memory for the most important number in the roladex between her ears. She still could recall the numbers, the rhythm and the sound of them. “BBF-BARF” she recalled, muttering the letters that corresponded to the numbers on Sean's private phone. She dialed the first 6 letters, then delayed pressing the last one on the wall-connected phone that still displayed numbers and letters. Something stopped her from making the call. Maybe because he hadn't answered it the last five times she left a message on the machine which he was always in ear range of. Or because maybe it was wiser to not contact him at all.

The panties and dress being pinned to the wall still frightened Michelle, maybe the result of the cancer and medications for such turning Sean into someone else. But even when Sean was not a paranoid, destructive monster whose ematiated body acquired super-human strength to do harm anyone who got too close to him, Sean was still Sean. A hockey obsessed, rurally-raised Manitoban who spoke three times slower than Michelle and with vocabulary five times simpler, and ten times more 'contented'. A man who wanted nothing more than to have a happy, contented, and chilaxing life with the woman he loved that would start, continue, and end in Brandon. The love-starved part of Michelle wanted to be that woman, but the Creative Mind that she had become knew there was no future in it. Still, Michelle missed Sean more than her piano. More than Bunny. And even more than Onkle Ludwig.

“So, are you going to use the phone or not?” Michelle heard from a harsh, male voice with an accent that reeked of Quebequa French. “There are other people waiting!” he growled at her with a head tilted to the left, and a clenched fist with a thumb pointing to three patients behind her with happy, cheery, carefree faces. All of them with Nurses accompanying them as they didn't seem to be able to carry on a conversation themselves.

“Excuse moi, si vous plait,” Michelle said to the Quebecer in Paresian French as she handed the receiver over to him.

“Snob!” the forty-going-on-sixty seven-fingered deposed Woodworking Class teacher growled at Michelle as she proceeded to the lunch line to access the fare of food allowed to patients who were ambulatory. Michelle was thankful for being ambulatory, for the moment.

“I have to get out of here!” Michelle said to herself, as silently as possible, as she picked

up a tray and slid it along the railing in front of the offerings for lunch. She was particularly repulsed by the macaroni and cheese, fat-soaked ham, over-buttered grey 'green beans' and double-chip chocolate cake that all fit so neatly into the tv dinner tray that was put in front of her by a white-coated orderly wearing a hair net whose tired eyes never met the people who he was serving. "You don't have anything else?" she politely asked the orderly. "I can't...no won't eat this."

"It's this or a feeding tube down your throat," he advised.

The other patients nodded 'yes' to the orderly's claim. As did Doctor McDonald, the kindly blue-eyed, balding gentleman fresh from the University of Saskatoon who Michelle recognizes as the main doc that did a neurological exam on her upon admission, then having a 'good old boy' conversation with his old school chum, Doc Robertson while she was being wheeled down the hall in a semi-drugged state.

Michelle took her plate of lunch, smiled like a 'nice girl' to the kindly gentleman and moved on to an empty table at the back of the dining room. The window was open, a set of bars between her and a set of bushes outside. "Now, if there was only a dog under this table I could give this weight-gaining toxic slop to," she said to herself, looking under the table. There was nothing but feet of patients in slippers. And her own hindlimb appendages in the same. But outside, she heard squeaking. "Herr Bunny!" she observed herself saying, seeing a large crow on the other side of the bars, imagining it growing fur and big ears. Which they did, in her forced imagination. "You look hungry," she said as she sneaked a small bite of the food outside, which the Crow ate.

Three more discretely pushed out morsels of offering to her Spirit Helper, perhaps, resulted in the Crow saying something back to her. "Hearty Party", it seemed to say. The song that was a hit in Saskatchewan in every country bar in town. A top forty tune that Sean liked as well, and every one of Michelle's students wanted to learn how play. A dangerously-addictive melody with even more soul-numbing lyrics that Michelle tried to convince everyone was toxic. A tune that came over the loud speaker in the dining room, which got the most drugged out patients to tap their feet to. And got Doctor McDonald singing to.

"His favorite song, and if you play him that on the piano I can lead you to, and tell him everything else he wants to hear, you'll get out of here faster than I can regrow big furry ears," Michelle seemed to hear from the Crow. Or maybe it was from the still-active and clearly thinking voice inside her own head. Or the Mind trying to regain control of brain and body. Whatever it was, Michelle looked at the fine feathered black creature, wondering if he, or she had anything else to say. After cawing out the first four notes of Beethoven's fifth the avian visitor flew up into the bright, blue sky. Leaving Michelle with an escalating sense of urgency. And the conviction that the only way out of imprisonment in the real world of the loony tune factory was to trust in the madness in the realms she could feel. BEFORE being administered anti-angst medication, used to be able to see.

Chapter 10

Special requirements for Michelle's care involved her not having access to a piano. But other forms of artistic expression were actively encouraged by the both Nurse Lynda and Doctor McDonald. "When I take a brush in my hand, more painting happens on my palms than on the paper," Michelle informed the Orderly in the Arts and Crafts room. "Or in my mouth, or maybe my eyes." she smiled whimsically at Lynda, moving the loaded brush to her face.

"Then maybe you want to do a sculpture," Lynda sighed out while taking the brush and paints away from Michelle, trying her best to restrain the anger that happened to even the most disciplined psych nurse while doing a double shift. "What kind of clay do you want to use?" she said as she opened the cabinet in a room where everyone except Michelle was absorbed in doing some kind of art that kept them busy or could reveal some secret they were still hiding in their minds from themselves, or the docs. "And what color clay, Michelle?" Lydia pushed through a forced smile.

"Beethovenian black, Bartok beige or Baroque blue," Michelle answered with a lyrical rhyme to her voice and swagger.

"Which we don't have," Lydia replied, turning both official and secretive. All according to Michelle's plans of course.

"Then what about me building something? With, ya know, metal and nails, and, like, a little bit of glue?" Michelle suggested, with a chilaxed Manitoban Valley Girl country drawl. "Or if you don't have any of those, maybe wood and rubber bands?"

"Fine!" Lynda barked. She proceeded to a large cabinet just under a painted over window and pulled out all of the wood within it. Then opened a draw and grabbed hold of a small pack of rubber bands and a small vial of Elmers glue.

"I need big rubber bands, sheets of wood, and better glue, or some duct tape, please?" Michelle asked like a little girl, complete with both hands behind her back and a big, wide smile.

"To build what?" Lynda demanded with an 'I've had it with you, everyone else and even me' eyeroll that Michelle saw through the reflections in the cabinet glass. "What do you want to build, that would be calming for your mind, or indicative of what's buried inside of it?" she continued with her last ounce of self control.

"I don't know yet, but it will be..instructive," Michelle answered as she skip-danced across the floor. "But like, ya know, it would help if I could get into the woodshop on the other side of the door, which I promise not to set on fire, and if I chop off any of my fingers, I promise to clean up the mess, and---"

“---Fine!” Nurse Lynda blasted out, after which she unlocked the door to the adjacent room. “You!” she commanded one of the orderlies in the room, a twenty-five year old Behemith whose build and sloping forehead seemed to make him better suited for laying bricks for a new ward than watching the patients in this reconditioned one. “Assist Michelle in the woodshop room.”

“You got it, doc” the smiling grunt in the clean white coat said as he opened the door, allowing Michelle to enter the adjacent room.

“And remember you're the one responsible for whatever happens in there,” Michelle could hear Lynda tell the Orderly. “While I go home in twenty minutes where I don't have to be responsible to anyone, even myself,” Michelle heard the overworked and probably underpaid nurse whisper to herself, in French. The language Michelle muttered when talking to herself, and the energy pockets around her where she felt but still could not see Onkle Ludwig, Onkle Wolfgang et al.

“Maybe I should have expressed myself in another language,” Michelle thought to herself silently as she entered the woodshop, just flashing on to the possibility that Nurse Lynda really did eaves drop into her private conversations with Onkle Ludwig et al. But the plan was in motion, and it could not be stopped.

“You draw out on paper what you want to build, and I'll cut the parts for you,” the Orderly said with a courtly bow to Michelle as he took out a large sheet of paper and pencil, setting them down in the general purpose workshop room. “Working around saws can be very dangerous,” he continued.

“Working around and with the wrong people can do that too,” Michelle replied, pointing to a light ring of flesh where an engagement ring had been on the Orderly's strong, blistered and cut-covered hands. “Do you miss her?” she inquired.

“We're not supposed to talk about our personal problems our patients, Miss,” the Orderly answered.

“I'm not your patient,” Michelle replied as she took the pencil and paper in hand and started to sketch out her request. “I'm you're, musical accompanist,” she smiled back at him, after which she presented him a two dimensional image of what she wanted to materialize in the three dimensional material plane. “Who wants to build...hmmm.”

“This?” he said, looking at the drawing Michelle had put onto paper. “A guitar?”

“Yeah, with rubber band and wood, unless you can build me a...” Michelle's jaw dropped to the ground when she saw what was on the other side of the room, under a paint-stained tattered tarp.

“Piano?” the orderly said, regarding the instrument which Michelle thought she saw upon entry to the hospital which had disappeared as soon as she was admitted. “If I did,

it would a damn sight better than that one which used to be in the general purpose room. Which a suit with a bubba belly bought for twenty times more than it's worth. . Some sort of antique he says he wants to give his girlfriend. The hospital needs money, this pussy-whipped CEO has the cash and---

“--When did they offer you the money for this antique?” Michelle interjected as she played a flowing progressive minor chord starting with middle C. “And did this guy have a name?” she continued, quietly playing a set of rapid scales going up the keyboard on the warped but still functional wall model Yamaha. Then she went down the keyboard with twelve note scales more like a passage from Debussy's exercise book than Cherny's, noting where the un-workably out of tune keys were.

“Sometime last week, and if I gave you his name, even if I knew it, the bosses here would give me a pink slip.” the Orderly replied.

“An honest and practical answer,” Michelle replied as she twinkled a few measures from the kinetic and firey portion of Beethoven's Pathateque, noting that one of the broken-off pedals under her feet really did work.

“That's Mosart, ain't it?” the Orderly replied with a wide open grin.

Normally Michelle would diplomatically correct someone who confused Cousin Amadeus and Onkle Ludwig's pieces. And blast anyone who pronounced Mozarts name with an s rather than a z, even Sean. Clearly the Orderly was someone used to a steady four four beat to his music. Something he could tap his feet to when he was tired. Dance to when he was happy. Fornicate to when he was horny. Like Sean. Someone who all of a sudden, Michelle felt responsible for but didn't miss. But before that opera commenced, she would have to play her way out of this Grand Ole Opre.

“Ya'll know the Heart Party?” Michelle asked the Orderly with a Dixie smile and southern belle list in her voice.

“Everyone who I ever partied with does, darlin’,” he replied with a big time country grin, missing everything except a cowboy hat on top of his shorn head to hide the lobotomy scars inflicted when bashing beer cans on his forehead. “Can ya play it?”

“For the right company,” Michelle replied wiggling her ass like a real life belt buckle rodeo bunny. “Can I burrow yer phone?”

“As long as I can burrow yer heart afterwards?” he smiled, handing over the devise from his pocket. “And you allow me the honor of building that guitar made of wood panels at the shop here with real strings on it instead of rubber bands,” he said, after which he pulled out several guitar strings from is pocket. “I can always get more.”

Two more miracles had happened, followed by a third. The call log on the Orderly's phone had the name of the person who Michelle needed to play to most. Just as she was

about to dial in the person who needed to hear it most, the image of Onkle Ludwig appeared on the display.

“I know, if someone played my Apassionata for Vladimir Lenin in 1918, his Bolshevik revolution would have been a lot kinder to Mother Russia,” Ludwig advised. “But sometimes you have to play and compose what the audience wants, not needs. So they won't chop off your hands, or head. off.”

“But what if you play them what they NEED?” Michelle asked Ludwig in French while the Orderly, whose name she had not yet asked, sang the words to the Hearty Party in very 'Cuntry' American while he cut out the pieces of a functional guitar in 'rekerd tayme'. “You played music that was great instead of popular for the kings, queens and emporers,” Michelle pointed out to Onkle Ludwig.

“Which is why maybe I lost my hearing,” the Old Master who never aged replied. “And if you're thinking of playing something of substance for Emperor McDonald, he'll do a lot worse to you than put toxic herbs in your beer that fuck up your ear's ability to hear. Go with the original plan. Play dumb, because right now it's smart and necessary.”

“Okay, Onkle Ludwig,” Michelle replied. “The original plan. But first you have to tell me what pieces you composed for the beer drinking slob, sloth-loving, no-mind masses, and which ones you composed for people like me, and you.”

“Some other time,” Ludwig promised with a permiscuous smile. “And only if you promise to not tell any of the historians about it. They got so much wrong already. For now, you have to connect to any Martian within the earthings that YOU are assigned to working with, and for.”

“It's ready!” The Orderly interjected, right on Life's clue. “As am I!” he declared, holding up an unlaquered guitar, the door from the closet he retrieved it from slightly open. He strummed the dusty guitar, finding the third and fourth strings painfully out of tune.

While the Orderly with few brains but a willing heart set right the strings on the guitar, Michelle noted how many instruments were in the closet behind him. “A whole orchestra,” she said to herself, then appended her train of thought when she saw 'sold' signs on all of them. “Wonder who the buyer of those were also,” she pondered, wondering if it was brother Daniel or hubby Russell who decided that 'maniac' Michelle be could trained to dance to their lifeless tunes if she was denied the ability to play music.

But that would have to wait for later. For now, Michelle played the first chord of the Hearty Party in the piano, allowing the Orderly to join in for the second in the guitar. One measure after they both provided music to sound, she discretely put the Orderly's phone on, connecting to Doctor McDonald's line of secretaries. While the Orderly whaled away the yodally into to the top forty tune, Michelle bluffed her through the first gatekeeper as a Russian pharmacuetical representative with a new medication for PTSD,

then as a terribly Upper Caste British editor of the journal every shrink wanted to publish in. Finally, McDonald himself answered. After his third and angriest 'who is this?' she broke out into song with the lyrics to that dreaded anthem of popular 'happy' with the Orderly, from the top.

*I saw you standing at bar you really looked hot
I told myself, this gal for me, she's gonna get got,
Me and her, and her and me, is what the world needs,
Natural as the buzzing of the birds and the bees,
From my mouth, and from my heart, no way I'm bein' farty,
We'll blow this town, no need for frowns, our special Hearty Party*

*Happy is what I like and I know you like it too,
No struggle, pain or work in anything for me and you,
Just smiling, laughing, singin' bout how happy we be,
Arm in arm, and hand in hand, in front of our tv,
So what if with those life Goals we're the one's who are so tardy
We're whooping it up and getting down, our happy Hearty Party,*

*Chorus: (needs melody)
Don't be tardy, stop bein' farty, join the Hearty Party...Hearty Party...Hearty Party.*

Cowboy Hank's version of the song when he opens up to Roberta:

*I saw you with the inner eye, you opened a lot,
Told me who I was, could be and who I was not,
You and me, I hope can be, ourselves to the end,
Above all else I want to be a your trusted new friend,
Horizons we can show each other, then starts the work,
For you to soar above the clouds, and me stop being a jerk.*

*It won't be easy, then again nothing worth while really is,
Not happy, breezy, sleezy but then again we'll have Bliss
What you got between the ears makes be better than what I am,
I hope I can do the same for you, and that's our grand slam,
Hit the ball out of the park, yeah that would be fine,
Sharing every moment like it's Eternal Time.*

Don't be tardy, we CAN be farty, keep the heart in Party

The dead silence of the hospital and the loud ticking of the clock on the wall was overcome by the four four beat of the pop tune that had made a comeback several times. A marching tune for those who danced to the beat of 'the man's' drummer and never their own. A catchy tune that started people in the hallway singing. Luring in Doctor McDonald, who unlocked the door to the woodshop room, locked it shut, grabbed the

guitar from the Orderly, dismissed him from the room, locked the door behind him, and then..sang along, insisting that Michelle keep playing.

Michelle didn't know what to think, or thank, regarding a Doc who probably never even farted out a colorful or irregularly-shaped piece of shit whaling out a country tune with as much enthusiasm as young colt who just discovered he leg can run. Or a young stallion who just figured out what that projection between his two hindlimbs was for.

Ludwig appeared as big as life atop the piano and spoke to Michelle, relating particulars about McDonald's life. Everything from the fifth Generation 100% Canadian WASP's taste in food to his fantasies regarding women, and men. Maybe it was reliable intel. Or maybe it was just Michelle's projecting to her brain what her mind surmised through her physical senses having observed the always immaculate and never expressive Doctor when he wandered around patients and talked to them in the cafeteria. When the song finally ended, Michelle decided to gamble on the assumption that Ludwig's dossier on McDonald was real, and correct, keeping it as a template as McDonald initiated conversation with her.

“So, you DO have musical talent, Mrs. Schmitt-Wilson,” McDonald said.

“As do you, Herr Full Professor Doctor McDonald,” Michelle replied as a Bavarian maiden, with courtly bow complete mit 'happy to be compliant' Heidi accent.

“Not Full Professor yet,” he replied. “The committee is still making up their minds.”

“You are in the wrong continent, ya?” Michelle replied, playing the next card in her carefully planned hand. “A MAN like you should be in Austria, or Switzerland. With a woman who appreciates who you are. And what you are,” she smiled, adding a little French flair into her Swiss German diction.

“And what are you?” McDonald asked Michelle, back to being a big fish Toronto-trained shrink exiled to small pond Manitoba.

Michelle looked to Ludwig, just behind McDonald. He motioned with a flick of his hand for her to go ahead with the plan they had 'discussed'.

“Who are you talking to?” McDonald inquired.

“Just thinking,” Michelle answered, in the plainest, most compliant Manitoban diction she could muster. “I've been putting too much importance on this pipe dream of being a pianist in Europe. All those fancy places that are for other people, not me. The only people I should be playing, and living for, is my husband, my brother, my mother and my father, who...” She stopped, allowing her eyes to well up, a choke to come into her throat.

“Your father who what?” McDonald asked, a caring father.

“My father who needs me to be with him, and who needs me to be the God fearing, Christian daughter he worked so hard to make me, that I swear to be, and never stray from again,” Michelle said with a bowed head, waiting for McDonald's reply.

“Praise the Lord!” the stoic Psychiatrist proclaimed as he got up, put his hand on Michelle's shaking shoulder. “Praise the Lord Almighty Jesus who hast cast the demon out of this child!” he continued in an even louder voice. He pulled out the cross which he had worn around his neck and kissed it.

Michelle looked at Onkle Ludwig again as she felt “secret Pastor” McDonald's hand pressing on her shoulders, pushing her down onto her knees.

“I told you it would work, Ellie,” Ludwig said with his eyes. “McDonald will release you for sure now. But of course you should realize that it's dangerous for your biological survival to tell him or ANYone else who's been 'saved by the Lord' that the image they have of Jesus has nothing to do with WHAT that ethereal spirit beyond any human form really is. And that God has an active sense of humor, yearning above else for someone to share a good laugh with. I tried to tell the world that through my music, and its time for you to do the same. Between the notes, of course.”

“And the lines on the libretto I'm dedicated to you, Onkle Ludwig,” Michelle smiled back to the Energy she could feel, and as a result of the mis-wiring in her brain that connected too much of everything, see.

“Wir sind alle in diese zussamen!” he replied.

“We are all in this together,” she smiled back, translating those words into musical notes in her head which she was determined more than ever to put on paper, and play for whoever would listen to it. And those with closed off ears as well.

Chapter 11

Within two days, Michelle was released from the ward, thanks to the mixture of real-world application of brain power, the undefinable human attribute of courage that happens to some people, and the intervention of Divine influences. Her inner compassion was still active, and she even considered going into the wards as a visitor to console and perhaps advise Doctor McDonald once it was discovered that there was a side to him that was fanatically Christian and erratic with regard to his expressions of that conviction. No doubt that if McDonald ever revealed that he was more fulfilled talking with the Lord in Heaven more than people on earth, he would be a patient in his own ward. But that would have to wait for later.

From a payphone NOT monitored by the Nursing Station, Michelle patched a call in to Sean, leaving a message as to where to pick her up, as he was the only one whose Soul

she could trusts. He texted her and said he would be there, on time, with Esmeralda. But either Sean's mind or physical condition, or perhaps a veterinary emergency with Esmeralda, prevented him from arriving on time. Then when she texted him again, she got no answer. Michelle stood on the pavement of the pick up area at the hospital, all of her belongings intact. But not all of her senses. Her feet shook, but they still met ground. Her hands started to shake, for reasons she could not determine, but for the moment, she could still keep those appendages hidden inside her oversized coat sleeves.

She looked around the bushes to see if Bunny, Crow or Oncle Ludwig would give her a ride to the Beyond Dimension, or at least to the no-frills and always confidential Belview Hotel. But they weren't there. Michelle had the good sense to not call out to them, or even sing to them in French, German or broken Italian. But singing opera, particularly expressively, would be a sure fire ticket back into the wards. Feeling the need to sing something, she gave voice the Happy Heart Party song, smiling a 'how ya'll doin' at the various 'simple folk' who passed her by. Human life forms that she felt no connection of Mind or Soul to. Humans who seemed to have no juice or fire behind their eyes. Humans who seemed to love procedure and stability, who walked at the pace, tempo and rhythm identical to those around them, or perhaps the Hearty Party song that Michelle pretended as hard as she could to like, in case McDonald of Nurse Lydna were watching her out a window to see if she was really faking her conversion to 'normality'.

Those humans, and the ones whose synchronized feet and non-struggling eyes had never had the blessing of facing the abyss, and the luck to survive it, had been a source of constant irrelevancy to her. They were now a potential source of fear, for many reasons. But Michelle had one tool to fend off being invited into clubs where she knew it was inappropriate to be a member. Though her ten day stay at 'mental health camp' had taught her better how to act like the person she was not, inside she had become less likable. Something she felt very intensely, as she felt another panic attack coming on. Panic attacks she NEVER got BEFORE she entered the hospital. She dared not show that panic to anyone of course. Due divine intervention working through human vectors, she didn't have to.

“Are you, Loretta?” the cab driver called out from the taxi that pulled up in front of her. The turboned, olive-skinned man in the long beard asked again in a very East Indian accent as he looked at his clipboard, in a very dignified gentlemanly manner.

From the corner of her eye, Michelle could see the very White Manitobans sneer at the gentleman with the 'fereign' head gear, skin and accent, repulsed by the brilliant sitar music coming from his CD player. Michelle could sense in his eyes a man who was trying to give those around them what their Souls needed rather than what their tragically simplistic upbringing made them want.

“Loretta Williams-Smith?” the only non-White driver in the Yellow Cab company Michelle had ever seen asked, checking once again his neatly arranged clipboard that lay next to a paperback copies of “The Last Temptation of Christ” and “Grapes of Wrath”.

How Michelle wanted and needed to connect to someone of such mixed cultures, or of SOME cultures! But time was a wastin', and there were many people who she needed to see, pronto. "I indeed am Loretta," she said in a Texan accent as proud as anyone from the Lone Star State. The driver opened the door for her, bowing his head. "Loretta Williams, sans the Smith. Gotta take out the trash when it starts pluggin' up the thinking parts of yer brain box, right?" she continued as she sat her thankfully not fattened-up-again ass into the back seat.

"Of course, Madamme. Where to?" the driver asked, with a subtle 'I've been there too' smile on his face that she saw through the rear view mirror. A smile he delivered to someone else. Perhaps the ghosts of Ravi Shankar and George Harrison sitting on the hood of his cab.

Michelle opened up her purse, checked how much money she had, and modified the request appropriately. Both for monetary and practical means. Thinking and knowing that before seeing if Sean had become someone worth connecting to, she had to disconnect from many others.

Chapter 12

Michelle requested that the Seek driver drop her off three houses away from her legal residence. A place she had not called home for the last 15 years, as she self-observed the 'life' she had been existing in, she considered on the 100 yard walk to the house carrying a duffle bag with the belongings that Russell and Daniel left her with in her left hand, the crucifix that had hung around her neck for her entire life in her shaking right. Panic tried to edge its way into apprehension as she greeted the neighbors walking their California-trim dogs decked out in the latest canine Kardasian fashion gear, or jogging around their overfed bodies clad in skin-tight Jaylo stretch pants while pop tunes pumped their their earbuds.

Those souls seemed to more superficial than ever to Michelle. But instead of hating them for the happiness they seemed to have as non-struggling humanoids and sharing as little as they needed to with anyone else, Michelle self-observed herself pitying them. When Michelle saw through them in this way, she was less likable to all of them. Not one of the neighbors whose names she forgot from one cocktail party to the next smiled back at her. In fact, they looked at her like she was a defective piece of meat. And given the fact that her deflector shields were down, or maybe had been her entire life, Michelle absorbed each of their condescending judgments, whether they looked at her or not. Her rational mind said that those people were down on themselves and life in general, fearing more than looking down on anyone not inside their own small, threatened social circles. But the Mental Health Holiday Camp had weakened Michelle. At the time when she needed all the strength she could get. Particularly when she took the key out of her pocketbook to open the front door, and found that it didn't work.

Michelle knocked on the front door corresponding to the legal address on her outdated

driver's licence, thinking that maybe it was the wrong key and knowing that she had to take a piss real badly. A woman answered the door, a spitting image of Michelle when she was 20 years younger. But with a few small differences once Michelle's two biological eyes sent impulses to her brain that short circuited the imaginations made possible by the third eye in the middle of her forehead.

The woman answering the door had curly black hair, cut in a fashionable shagged long bob, rather than than straight as a metronome, long and stringy naturally blonde mane. Her breasts were a firm B cup rather than an a dangling D. Her lips were thick rather than thin. Her skin was exotic olive brown rather than Germanic pale white.

“You must be Michelle,” said the Barbie doll clad in a low cut 'lawyer who knows how to be seductive but not slutty for the judge' black dress complimented by a fur coat that had the scent of rabbit fur on it. “Russell has told me so much about you,” she smiled.

“And told me nothing about you,” Michelle found herself bold enough to say, finding the discipline to hold back her anger when she noted the bling around the Barbie' fingers, neck and wrist. “And your name is---”

“---Veronica,” Russell said through a 'zipidy do da' smile as he came into the room, giving the 'lady lawyer' a file of papers with his right hand, an affectionate hug around the waist with his left arm. “The sharpest legal mind in Brandon.”

“That's like saying the best interpreter of JS Bach's Goldberg Variations and orator of Plato's Allegory of the Cave at Cactus Joe's at 11 pm when the drinking stops getting social and starts getting ugly,” Michelle felt like saying, but didn't. Her stare at and into 'Councilor Veronica' evoked a response from Russell. An honest one. Maybe the first honest words the model of family Christian values had said to Michelle when he was sober in a decade or more.

“I didn't expect you to be home from the hospital so soon,” he said, both fearful and surprised. “You didn't escape from there before the doctors could give you all you need to get well. That would be highly---”

“---Unexpected of you, and Veronica. I know,” Michelle said as she walked into the hallway. She prepared to blast Veronica and Russell for plotting against her with her fight or flight instinct. But somewhere inside, she was grateful for what happened. Finally, she had the opportunity to leave Russell. Assuming of course she could find a hottie woman lawyer who could out-Barbie Barracouda with old but still refusing to step down Judge Ralph, who was known to hide a woody under his robes on more than one occasion. Or hire a bisexual boy-toy from Winnipeg and work things so that new Judge in Brandon, rumored to be very gay, would take favor on Michelle. But either way, Michelle knew now that she was liberated from any guilt she felt for Russell. No more would she feel responsible for his addiction to booze, or his voluntary bad health habits that made him more obese and diabetic every year, along with self esteem that was lower than he ever imagined, but which Michelle could always see.

Yes, Michelle felt liberated to do whatever she wanted, with whoever she wanted. Until she spotted a picture of her father on the table underneath the hallway mirror. A new picture of him as a younger man, with a big, bold, confident smile. And under it, the date of his death. "He died four days ago!" Michelle muttered from her disbelieving mouth. "And no one told me!" she blasted back at Russell.

"Russell and the rest of the family thought it best for your health to not know about it," Veronica replied, very procedurally, not an ounce of emotion in her voice.

"There wasn't anything you could do about it anyway," Russell reminded Michelle. "He was on his way out anyway. Life provided him a mercy killing from his pain, depression and--"

"----Who gave him the liquor and cigarettes that did him in!" Michelle blasted back.

Veronica and Russell looked at each other, wondering who should answer.

"Was it my Mom, because he wanted to make her husband comfortable? My brother Daniel so he would continue pleasing him. Or maybe one of you, so he would die faster, richer, and the money would go to----"

"---A trust fund that is for you, even though you don't deserve it. Which that I and Veronica, and Danielle will administrate for you responsibly 'Ellie'" Russell blasted at Michelle, hurt and angry at the same time.

"So, getting me committed to the hospital with a stamp on my health record was getting back at me for trying to help an old friend who's dying." Michelle replied with blood shot eyes, welling up with tears of grief that she tried to hold back. "And giving him a reason to live. When EVERYONE of his other friends couldn't handle looking after him or turned their back on him."

"While you turned something else towards him?" Michelle heard from a baritoned voice of a corpulent man who entered the room. "You should have not opened the window to let light into the room when you, ya know," Daniel continued as he showed his sister a video of her with Sean, during one of the visits when she was naked, or naked enough to make her look guilty of adultery in any court of law. "Technology had disabled anyone from hiding anything."

"But hadn't stopped anyone from being dishonorable, or boring, or non-creative, procedural and lifeless," Michelle blasted at her brother, preparing the next barb to hit him where it would hurt most, for maybe the first time in her life, or his. "Being a technology whiz hasn't stopped you from never experiencing ANY love. Be it Eros, Agape, or Phillos!"

"Eros, Agape and Phillos? Daniel replied, with as much emotion as the computers that

had taken over his life, and whatever capacity he had to be human. “What are they?”

“Greek gods and goddesses in Michelle's imagination, I suppose,” Russell replied.
“That get activated when she plays the piano.”

“Who I will talk to now because they are the only people who matter anymore to me. The only people who, according to the only cliché you soul-less idiots understand, 'get me',” Michelle replied. Her defense of the beings in the metaphysical realm that enabled her to handle the world of 'hard reality' where held hostage when she looked down toward the basement where the piano was, seeing in its place a fooseball machine and billiards table.

“We had to sold your piano,” Russell said to her. “To pay for some emergency funeral expenses. And so---”

“---You could buy it back for me if I'm a good corporate wife and let Veronica here visit anytime she wants,” Michelle blasted at Russell. “And stay as long as it pleases HIM,” she said to Veronica hoping to see some humanity behind her eyes.

But the only thing in Russell's new Barbie Baracuda's eyes Michelle could see was an eyeroll. Which she could feel down to her core.

“I need to deliver my last respects,” Michelle said as she turned from the most recent victim of Russell's new mark, and co-conspirator in crimes of the heart to Russell and Daniel.

“Where's Mom?”

“Away,” Veronica replied.

“With her sister in Winterpeg,” Russell replied.

“Who, with the doctors at her disposal, will see that she gets the care she needs,” Daniel said.

“And the carING she wants!” Michelle demanded of both of her male 'protectors'.

None of them gave her an answer. Neither did Veronica.

Michelle let her tired legs carry her downstairs to the piano-less, toy-filled coffin that had been her musical sanctuary. She looked the walls in each of the four directions for Onkle Ludwig to give her an answer as to what happened, and what to do. But he wasn't there. Then she ventured outside the glass window, noting the footsteps in the slushy dirt, leading away towards the street. Wide-strided prints that had along side of them footprints from human hiking boots from a pursuer who had fallen several times, until Bunny's footprints stopped abruptly.

“No reason for me to stick around here, or anywhere else,” Michelle pondered. “The rest of life is just closing up affairs with anyone on this death-promoting planet.

Chapter 13

Michelle didn't know why stopping off at the cemetery where she knew that her father requested to be buried, along with the other Schmitts who were born, existed, then died without their consciousness every leaving Manitoba. Maybe because it was on the way to Sean's place. Or maybe she felt that she had to pay her respects to the once young man who fathered her with fairy tales and trinkets as a young girl. And to blast out at the old fart he had become, a dead soul who wanted everyone around him to be deader, more boring, and more lifeless than the burnt out defeatist he had become. The 'Wunderdad' who adorned her with cute girlie dresses, musical instruments, then Bible stories about Jesus' love when she was a child singing songs of praise that she didn't understand. Then did his best to discourage her daughter from being a musical genius, and a prematurely intelligent soul who thought about what she was singing and playing.

So many things she wanted and needed to say to the man who she loved, and hated. The one who blasted out more hurt at her than anyone else in the family, particularly when it was MICHELLE who tried to doctor her father's body by using her own hard-earned money to buy herbs she carefully researched that could benefit him. And refusing to spend any of the money he gave him to buy the cigarettes that were destroying his lungs and the liquor that was pickling his brain AND liver. And it was MICHELLE, NOT Pastor, who tried to negotiate the unsettled business between God and her earthly father when the latter knew that no matter what any doctors could do, all of his better days were behind him, with only worse ones ahead.

After a long stare at the gravestone bearing her father's name, and an even longer look inward to her own Mind, and Soul, Michelle carefully and boldly started the speech. Which had to start on the right note so the rest of the music would make sense, and be effective. “So, Gerald,” she said, having never addressed her father by his first name to him. Or for that matter to anyone else except in an official capacity to various clerks and hospital administrative staff when they needed to know particulars about him. “There's a lot to say, relate and share,” she said. “I always wanted what was best for you, but if logic, reason and good sense, all of which the GOOD, not fire and Brimstone, Lord gave me, said that for me to serve you best, I had to be me. Whatever that 'me' is.”

She listened to the wind, the animals, and the flowing water in the creek for some kind of answers. None came. Indeed she felt alone, for the first time in her life. As if she was and always has been from a different planet, with no one from her Om planet anywhere in Brandon, or Manitoba. Or maybe anywhere else. But, even a Martian amongst earthlings has to relate to something in everyone to make life Purposeful, and bearable. “How to start this dialog, Gerald?” she said to her father in accentless Canadian English. “What language will make you feel what I think, or seek, to understand?” she continued in French, the tongue she taught herself, and had few others to share it with unless it was

on those golden now unaffordable 3 day autumn leave Pilgrimage trips once a year to Montreal. "I must make you understand something about what I really feel about you, and that I always wanted to help you, even though you stopped helping me because you didn't know how to!" she continued with tears of Agape and Phillos in her eyes, in French that emerged into the ancestral German that everyone else in the Schmitt family had actively forgotten and forsaken after they came to Canada.

The answer was in a song. Delivered to all of her Immortal Beloveds, which now included every human being, Martian or Earthling, she had ever met. To the Divine Spirit within the Soils of her friends, enemies, and everyone in between. Michelle never heard her voice sing the Finale to Tristan und Isolde more musically. She felt it as well. She felt herself singing a prayer of love, in all of its expressions, to not only the father who could show none of that etherial and essential requirement for Life. But to all of the departed souls in the cemetery. Then to those still enduring their life shift on earth, be it as Earthlings of Martians. It was...enough, for now. And maybe later. The cake was finally baked, ready to ingest. But before breathing in the first breath of satisfaction in a long, long time, icing appeared on the cake, in the form of a very off-key singer who struggled as best as he could to push the words, and the feelings out of his mouth.

Sean did his best to imitate the Aria Michelle had sung, originally intended for Isolde to give voice to, but not her very male beloved Tristan. But he gave it his best shot, first in the language of the original composer, 'Rick Wagner' (pronounced as W) then in the English translation of the libretto, with the appropriate words that made it sound manly rather than gay. He smiled a cautious and warm hello, then handed Michelle a card.

"I'm sorry" she read said as she opened the gift card that emitted Beethoven's Fifth done to a disco beat. "I wasn't myself that day, but I think I'm myself now. And hope that that self can co-exist with who who you are."

Most of the words were mis-spelt, some of the letter were inverted, but the meaning was clear, the sincerity felt trustable. And joyful when Michelle heard a familiar chirp from a rabbit, most specifically Bunny, who Sean took out of his satchel.

"I went to your house to give you this card, the only Beethoven they had," Sean said with an apologetic smile in a voice now five, rather than his usual (even in good health) three times slower than Michelle's speaking and thinking pace. "And this rabbit greeted me, and made friends with me as I was trying to see where you were," he regarding the bunny. "My hockey legs are barely able to do shouffle-board now, so I stumbled a lot when I tried to pick him up, but---"

"---You're still the strongest man I know," Michelle said as she laid her small hands over his big bones arms, appendages which had more flab in them now than muscle. "No one else has ever carried me from the doorway to the couch or anywhere else I wanted to go for---"

"---You lost a lot of weight, and you supported yourself on the walls to make my carrying

easier, Ellie,” Sean interjected. “I appreciate a lot that you're trying to make me feel good about myself, but I hope you love me enough to not bullshit me about the limp bag of bones I've become.”

“ALIVE bag of bones that, even if he doesn't get his body bulked up again so he can be king of the oil rigs, and captain of the hockey team, has muscles between his ears.”

“That barely graduated high school, Ellie,” he confessed, looking downward. “And couldn't figure out how to become a master Machevichi who can screw people out of their money, or self respect, like Russell did. Like I warned you about 20 years ago. Or tried to anyway.”

“Yeah, you can spot the bad in people better than I can,” Michelle related, in a slow 'largo' tempo that matched Sean's slow but impassioned speech, overcoming the reflex to correct him on the spelling of the Italian Renaissance Master of human psychology who wrote “The Prince.” “And you appreciate the good in people too, even when they can't see it themselves,” Michelle continued, nuzzling up to him, feeling to be a small kitten under the protection and care of a large dog. “I may know books, but you know about people who those books are written about,” she said.

“But not always the people who WRITE the books,” Bunny said to Michelle, in the voice of Onkle Ludwig. “You and me, we ARE rare and endangered species who connect the Unseen to the seeable. Creators and destroyers, depending on whether we're channeling a new Composition into the World, or satirizing ones that need to be tossed out on their ear, including our own works when they get stale.”

“That sounds...complicated.” Michelle replied to the rabbit. In SPOKEN words this time. “Maybe Sean here, who is a maintainer, can elucidate and expand that, Onkle Ludwig?”

“Onkle Ludwig?” Sean said. “That's an interesting name for a rabbit. A rabbit that you talk to? And does he answer back?”

“Tell this magnificent and invaluable Earthling that I answer back in rabbit talk,” Onkle Ludwig voiced, materializing to Michelle as a miniature Beethoven composing his Metaphysical Movements to his next Symphony within the confines of Sean's satchel. “And that you interpret that in notes.”

“Er werde das ich bin fertigmachen,” Michelle replied to Lillipution Beethovan, in German.

“I know he will think you are crazy, because you are! As am I!” Beethoven Bunny replied. “But as Frank Zappa said, who is the incarnation of Nicola Tesla, not me, you are what you are and you is who you is.”

“And I am?” Michelle asked Bunny.

“Someone who I want to let be whoever you want and need to be, even if that involves not being with me,” Sean delivered into Michelle's mind then heart. “Someone who may not understand rabbit talk, or interpreting that into music, but someone who Agape's, Phillos' and Eros' you, 'Ellie'. Who wants to understand you, but maybe can't.”

“Which is ok,” Onkle Ludwig replied as he put onto paper the last note of the symphony he was humming, then started to sprout large rabbit ears over the deaf humanoid ones hidden under his bushy, windblown hair. “The world as it is will never understand souls like you and me, Ellie. But they need us. Just like we need to as someone to serve, and try to love, with any combination of Agape, Phillos or Eros that works.” With that, Maestro Rabbit turned into Bugs Bunny, lifted out a carrot sticking out of Sean's pocket without being seen or heard by the unemployable warrior against cancer who was broke in wallet but rich in aspirations. “Thatt'ss all folks, for now,” Onkle Ludwig said to Michelle as to the accompaniment of his new Loony Tunes Trio, which included elements of Wagner, Mozart, Zappa and riffs from the original, non-commercial version of the Hearty Party that never made it on the radio.

Michelle broke out into mad laughter as Onkle Ludwig flew out of the satchel as Bugs, whizzed around the trees like a Bliss drunk banchee, then came back into the satchel and settled into body of Bunny again, just before Sean stoked the back of his heat again.

“So, me, you and Bunny makes three?” Sean asked.

“I'm still married, and always will be,” Michelle realized, and confessed. “Indentured to that jealous, possessive and embracing tighter than anyone else lover.”

“To your music, and the need to connect it to the world,” Sean related. “I know. A woman of artistic spirit whose spirit can never be happy in Manitoba.”

“And you're a Manitoban farm MAN of real, down to earth values, who sings songs of truth,” she sighed out. “Even if he can't carry a musical tune to save your life.”

“A hard life, which you made possible again,” Sean said, sinking down into that reclusive depression Michelle had seen in him 20 years ago, as well as now.

“Sorry,” Michelle replied. “Did I do wrong by you to give you a reason to live?” she continued. “I hope I didn't promise anything I can't deliver. And if it doesn't work out between us, are you going to go die on me to punish me!” she self observed herself blasting out. “Or punish yourself by jumping in front of a train like your brother did!”

“I don't know,” Sean replied. “I'm build...weird.”

“As am I,” Michelle confessed, as her body, mind and spirit converted her into a small starfish, gravitating to and merging with the big, kind and always watching out for her in his own way half-blind Manitoban octopus. “There are a lots of particulars we have to

work out, the where's, the how's and the why's," Michelle said. "But with enough commonalities of the 'who's'...."

Sean answered Michelle's hard earned question with a song. One that sounded not so off-key to her ears. "I'd like to be, under the sea, in an octopus' garden, with you," he sang.

"We would be warm, beneath the storm...": Michelle sang back.

The starfish and octopus sang, and danced their way out of the graveyard, and into a new Life, big L. Put to music with the broken down piano from the Loony Bin that Sean bought from the facility. With welding arms converted into carpentry fingers, he converted it a functional, Life-emitting instrument played by Michelle with the presence of Bunny visibly on stage with her when permitted, stashed in a satchel when the Health Inspectors got anal or the janitors protested having to cleaning up a few rabbit turds. That multi-genred Music gave provided Insight, Vitality and Humor to audiences throughout Brandon, then in Winterpeg, then Montreal, then New York, then on the Eastern Shore of the Pond, with a special performance in Bonn, birthplace of Beethoven long before he became an Onkle. It was as good a place as any for Bunny to finally expire, so he could reincarnated his soul into the womb of none other than Michelle, to reveal his identity at the appropriate time.