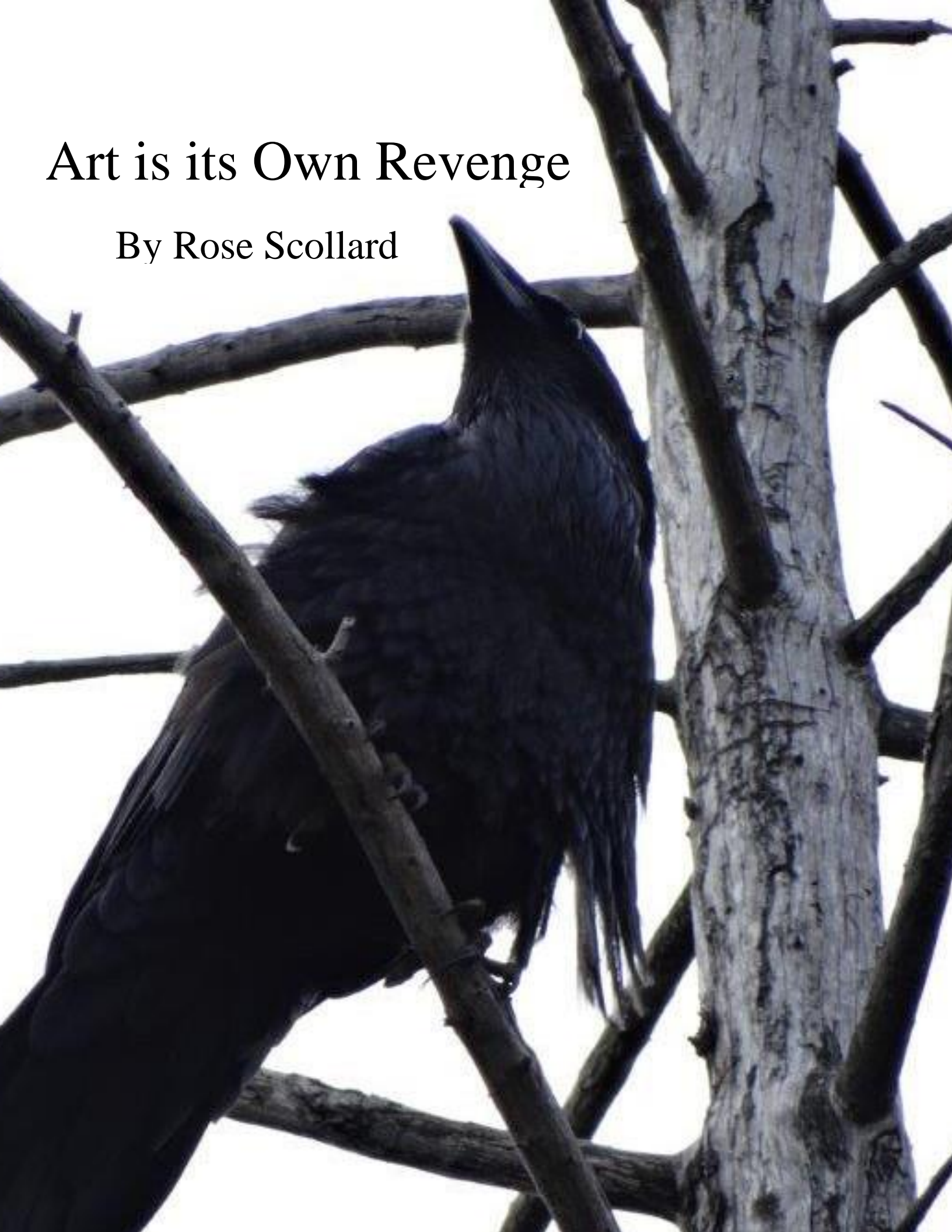


Art is its Own Revenge

By Rose Scollard



Art is its Own Revenge
and other stories
by Rose Scollard

Art is its Own Revenge	2
Luna.....	9
Kerby Dick Launches His Wife Mattie Onto The International Art Sea...	16
Choose any Dream	24
Love Story	31

Art is its Own Revenge

It seemed the most natural thing in the world to suspect Kenyon. Holed up in his second floor rooms days on end, only coming down to get milk and cigarettes. And paint. "I think he buys a lot of paint," she told them. "The smell of it down here is wicked, sometimes." The policewoman made a notation in her book while her companion, a bulky six-footer with a moustache, tried the door to Kenyon's upstairs flat.

"He keeps it locked." She told him and, saying those words, Maida wondered with a prickly feeling in her stomach why she hadn't thought of Kenyon right off. She'd gone all through the preliminary questions without giving him a thought, sitting there in the kitchen while the two constables manoeuvred through all her apologies about the state of the place to find out just when it was she had last seen her granddaughter.

When the questioning was done, they'd looked in at the empty bed where Kerry had been put down for her nap and made a quick search of the basement

and laundry room, examining the cupboards and crawl space. Maida expected any minute for Kerry to come popping out, even though she'd been through the house and up and down the street half a dozen times before she called the police.

From the basement they'd gone out to the back yard where Maida showed them the places where Kerry played and wondered what the woman could be putting down in her book, because there was nothing there, not a rock, not a thing growing, just the bare soil. Then they'd gone round to the front where Maida reconstructed the picture of herself coming home up the sidewalk, past the three stucco houses between her place and Seventeenth. She lingered hopefully on this portrait, as though there might be in it some of the glamour she was used to on the TV, but she couldn't get past the dreary reality of the scene – a thickened, slightly bent woman pushing a baby stroller across the lawn, the weeds growing against the front of the house, the cracks in the stucco, the paint peeling off the window frames.

The policewoman's pen hovered momentarily over the sulkiness of Kerry
“Oh, she was mad with me. I wouldn't let her have a Slurpee down at the Seven Eleven. They're full of caffeine those things. *And* sugar.”

“And Kerry was put out about it.”

“She can get real sulky when she doesn't get her way. Never mind she's only two-and-a-half.”

Uninterested in the exact way Maida had to tip the wheels of the carriage to get it up the steps, or the struggle she always had with the key, the policewoman instead had wormed out of her the place where her daughter Nina worked, the fact that Maida always had a nap after shopping and, even though she hadn't meant to let it out, that one or two lagers always ensured the security of this nap. It was the traffic on Seventeenth, Maida told her. The roar of it was wicked sometimes.

“But of course I never touch it until Kerry drops off. Kerry always goes to sleep first and gets up last.” *But not this time, not this time, not....* The reality of a Kerry missing, not dozing in her bed waiting to be wakened, made its first deep cut into Maida’s calm. Until now she’d been busy with it all, searching the place, calling the police, had even been proud of the way she’s handled it, as though in doing so she somehow established herself as a real person with a real problem, dealing with it in the accustomed manner. Until this moment fear had been warded off but now it was a tangible pain, jabbing into her side the way a knife would. Twisting. She wished she could sit down. She wondered if they’d let her have a beer. But that was when they’re looked up at the windows of the second floor flat and asked about Kenyon.

“He’s an artist. I don’t know what he does up there. A lot of strange comings and goings.”

“What do you mean?”

“He asked to use the washer and dryer when he moved in, but I refused. Who knows where those bed sheets of his have been, right? And I caught him once taking a tin out of the garbage.” The policewoman stopped writing. “It was one of them tea tins Mrs. Cox across the alley throws away. Kind of purplish with a brown lid.”

“Has Mr. Kenyon ever shown any interest in your granddaughter?”

The question took her aback. Knocked the speech right out of her! Perhaps it was her speechlessness that put a fire under them. It took them about thirty seconds to force Kenyon’s door and go tearing up the steps without bothering to knock or anything. Maida scrambled after them, wondering if she should mention Kenyon’s parties. They were strange parties, not noisy as you’d expect but real quiet, sending down only a subdued murmuring that suggested to Maida the image of people melting down, melting

into each other. It made her uneasy to think of those bodies, naked and wound about each other, slowly dissolving into one big puddle of flesh.

The top of the stairs was full of surprises. She couldn't get over how tidy it was and how empty. There seemed to be nothing in the flat but sunshine. Most surprising of all were the paintings. There were dozens of them, large, shimmering, all in soft pastel shades that called up a feeling of pearly excitement in Maida. They lined the walls of the hall and stood stacked against one another in the living room beyond.

A door opened and Kenyon blinked at them through wet hair. A little flit of surprise crossed his face. Without bothering to explain, the policeman handcuffed him, causing the towel to drop away from his body. Maida, turning away to spare herself, looked straight into the eyes of a woman with praying hands, only the hands weren't hands at all but fluttering doves, pinky white and feathery and comforting to look at.

Looking a little closer now at the canvases, Maida could see that the pictures were all like that, full of little twists and surprises and teasing comforts. For a moment she was so taken with them she forgot all about Kerry.

There was a woman with brimming yellow eyes, flanked at the cheeks by a black pageboy that looked at again was a pair of upside-down squirrels. Another woman drifted about in a white Cinderella gown that up close was a great swarm of mice all nestled one into the other. There were faces twisted to one side with other little faces twisted to one side peering out of their eyes.

And trees with odd fruit dangling from them – lopped off feet and hands and little bleeding crucifixes Most engaging of all to Maida was a woman she recognized as Nina walking off but glancing back over her shoulder. It was definitely Nina, even though her face was covered with frog shaped freckles and two cross-looking bulldogs snarled out at you from where her buttocks would normally be.

She found the police in the kitchen pulling open drawers and cupboards. The possessions of Kenyon – food, tins tubes of paint – spilled into the room like entrails. Kenyon, the towel pinched back in around his waist, stood against the wall and watched this disembowelment in silence. Maida saw the tea tin about the same time as the policewoman, the one he'd filched from Mrs. Cox's garbage. The label, white lettering on a violet background, said "TWININGS Tea men to connoisseurs for over 270 years BLACKCURRENT TEA." The policewoman picked it up and stuck her pencil under the lid to force it up.

"What's in here, I wonder?"

Maida was about to give her a good idea when the other constable who was looking out the window down into the alley gave a surprised grunt. Maida peered under his arm and there coming round the fence, holding an enormous coke Slurpee that dripped brown stains down the front of her shirt, was Kerry. Nina, weighed down with shopping bags was close behind.

"Your granddaughter?" The policewoman was right there to steady her and ease her into a chair. She set the tin on the table beside Maida and drew a glass of water for her at the sink. "Sip it slowly," she ordered.

Maida sipped, trying not to look at Kenyon with his hangdog look, hair flopping over his face, the towel pinched around him. The police would release him any minute now but the tin was right there beside her on the table. Maida knew what it would mean if they should decide to open it. When she went downstairs she would pick it up and slip it past them. It was the least she could do.

Nina was in the kitchen, already halfway through her second export. Maida shoved the tin under the sink and slammed the door on it.

"Where were you?" Nina asked.

“How could you take her like that? Without even telling me.”

“It’s early closing, remember? I came home and found her tearing round unsupervised so I took her shopping with me.

“I thought she was lost. Kidnapped or something. I had the police here.”

“Well maybe it’ll teach you to be more careful. Honestly, Ma. The way you’re off in dipso heaven half the time, anything could happen to the kid.”

Maida pulled out a Carlings from the fridge.

“See what I mean?” said Nina. “What’s for supper, anyway? I’m starving!”

Maida opened her beer in dignified silence. Nina turned away and started poking about in the food cupboard. She smacked canned peas and Kraft dinner on the counter and searched noisily in the drawer for the can opener. Maida took a long swallow from her bottle and studied Nina’s angry looking backside thinking Kenyon’s portrayal of her wasn’t far off the mark.

“What were you doing upstairs, anyway? Don’t tell me the police suspected Kenyon.”

They had to look somewhere, didn’t they?

Next morning, Kenyon was up before all of them, putting in a new lock. Unwilling to have the matter of Kerry lying between them Maida went out with a cup of tea.

“I’m sorry about the door.”

“No problem.”

“I’ve been thinking.... If it’s more convenient for you, that is...if you feel like you’d like to use the washer and dryer, it’s fine with me.

He smiled merrily and she retreated a little. “Well if there’s anything....Just let me know.”

“There is one thing.”

“Yes?”

“I’d like my tin back.”

The baldness of it! A lecture popped to Maida’s lips but she crushed it down and hurried into the kitchen for the tin. It was enough that she’d saved his skin. After that it was his own business. The tin rattled slightly as she handed it over. When he started prying off the lid the lecture rose up again and became a hard pill to swallow.

Kenyon shook the contents of the tin onto the porch steps.

“Buttons!” The word banged out of her, ricocheted up and down the block. Kenyon’s paint-stained finger poked through the assortment of buttons and junk that lay on the steps.

“I think there’s a screw here about the right size,” he said smiling up at her. The sun caught in the golden bristles of his cheek, blinding her slightly.

Then her vision cleared and she saw with a sinking of the heart that he was looking straight at her. Taken in by those wicked artist’s eyes Maida felt a need to wrap her arms about herself, to conceal some nakedness that had suddenly been uncovered. The son of a bitch had made a fool of her. And he’d make a worse one of her too, Maida had no doubts. She could already feel how her face would flatten out and tilt to one side. The mouth snaking about with a lifetime of things said and unsaid, would scrawl a lopsided curlicue under beaver nickel nostrils and her hair would billow up over her head in a glorious cloud of opened sardine tins, the key and rolled back metal of each tin making a shiny mock gold curls. Worst of all the front of her dress would fall away to show breasts that weren’t breasts at all but grinning heads, round and rosy and shrivelled up, for all the world like two little apple dolls. More than that she didn’t dare to imagine.

Luna

They're talking about the war and GST but all Curtis can think about is his mother. The question of his mother has been taking over more and more lately. It is becoming almost impossible for Curtis to enter a building or walk along a street, anywhere that a stranger might approach, without wondering. In the Devonian Gardens, steamed up all winter with the earthy mildewed smell of plants and tepid water, he looks with apprehension on the prowling middle aged lunch crowd. Any one of those women could be her. When Curtis, tucked out of sight behind the bronze deer, unwraps his cheese and tomato submarine he rarely manages more than a few bites. He doesn't trust anyone over forty not to be his mother.

He often feels like vomiting.

Even now, sitting in Fry Palace with Anne Marie, George and Luna, even with his friends, he doesn't feel safe any more.

Take Anne Marie - comfortably plump, middle aged, graying - she could be his mother.

And Luna, big silver rings in her ears and blue chalk on her lids, raising a morsel of beef to her lips.

I can help you find her, she says. Curtis keeps his face blank. Your mother, Curtis.

Is she lost? George asks. Anne Marie digs George with her elbow.

Curtis was adopted, George.

I know a woman who was fifty and she found her mother. It was one of those agencies. I'll find out the number for you

No need, George. Luna's going to tell him.

The thing that would scare me, says George, is what if I fell in love with a married woman, right? And I loved her so much I murdered her husband to get her? And then of course I find out she's really my mother and it was my Dad I killed. This is after we have children and everything.

Give it a rest, George. Anne Marie's elbow finds its target again. Curtis feels ill. It could be the MSG, or Luna's swimming eyes. He makes it to the bathroom in time. but the overheated cubicle does nothing for his equilibrium. Blue paint has been slapped on the walls over dirt, flies, scraps of paper, and over the window which doesn't open. The pipes, painted magenta, are optically unsettling. Curtis splashes water on his face. There is no towel.

He looks at himself in the steamy mirror. I want to know who I look like, he says aloud. His words wobble in the little room, magenta on blue.

Luna's place is over a barber shop. The living room is large and white with plants hanging on braided ropes. Painted carvings of birds and animals line the window sills. Tigers, blue jays, bears, crocodiles. Something musky and penetrating is burning in a brass dish.

Curtis is supposed to make himself at home while Luna makes tea. He lowers himself into a cushion filled couch. On the end table beside him is a large wooden flower tightly closed up. George has told him about this flower. There is a little spring on the stem that releases the petals. When George touched it there was a snake inside the flower that lunged forward so realistically that George thought it was going to bite him. When Anne Marie

pressed the catch a large pink penis was revealed that had an erection as she watched. At least, that's what George said.

Curtis finds the catch and presses it. There is a tinny, cranking sound and the petals of the flower, yellow with blue spots, jerk slowly open in a rather mechanical fashion. Inside is a tiny wooden mask with closed eyes. The lids are chalky blue. It's rather clumsily carved and Curtis feels disappointed.

Luna, wearing a loose grey top with black pants, brings tea in cups shaped like cabbage leaves. Her face is placid and peaceful like a sleepwalker, like a drugged spirit. As always, the lids of her eyes are bright turquoise. She makes Curtis come to the table and sit across from her. Luna is fat and old, sixty at least. Her hair is braided into big oily plaits that she coils on top of her head like a crown. There is a large wart on the left side of her face, near her chin.

Except for Luna's soft asthmatic wheeze, the room is silent. They drink their tea without speaking. Then Luna reaches out for his hand and places it palm down in front of her. Holding it firmly on the table she quickly outlines it with a small pointed brush. Curtis is aware of her hand, warm and firm on his, and the tickling of the brush as it traces each finger. When she lifts his hand the outline of it remains. It is filled with swirling liquid, red and oily as blood. It rainbows in the light like gasoline in a puddle.

How did you do that? What *is* that stuff?

Luna doesn't answer. She leans over and studies the swirls of the liquid. Suddenly it turns black. Then she speaks.

I must know if you want to find her.

I wouldn't be here.

But if she isn't what you want to find. Do you still . . .?

Yes.

She's not what you want to find.

I don't care. I want to know who she is, so I can be sure of who she isn't.
Yes. Luna nods. Yes, that's good.

She rises and leaves. Curtis can hear her moving about in the room beyond. Something jangles harshly, followed by a sound of protest, a cat, or a bird, a single startling squawk that is not repeated. Curtis feels uneasy and then understands why. Across the room, the eyes of the flower face mask have popped open and are looking at him.

Behind him, Luna speaks again.

You must look for her at night.

It must be when the moon is full, or almost full. The calendar should be consulted. The waxing moon. If it's on the wane you must not go.

You must walk always on the right side of the street and follow the moon. But only on clear nights with little cloud and no threat of rain.

It is best that you do not speak to those you encounter on the way.

He turns. Luna's hair is unbound. She has changed into a blue and silver gown that flows like water. She takes his hand and places it firmly back onto the black liquid. He is suddenly aware of how hot his head is.

Next day there's a phone call from the agency George spoke of. The voice that speaks to him is light and sensible. Her name is Phyllis an airy, cool name fresh as a pink-cheeked shepherdess. Phyllis has been searching for her father for three years and knows the ropes. She can look things up for him. Follow leads.

Phyllis is younger than Curtis. Her father walked out when she was a baby. She wants to find him and ask him why.

At least you know who you are, says Curtis.

They meet every day. Phyllis says it's good to have support in these kinds of endeavours. But Curtis knows there is more to it than that. They go to

everything together – free films at the library, theatre sports, environmental demonstrations – they like the same things.

But the calendar is at work. Two days before the full moon Curtis remembers Luna's instructions. He begins on the island and heads out along the path overlooking the river. The gleaming black water below, the illuminated office towers on the opposite bank fill him with fears of strange encounters. But he meets no one. Speaks to no one.

He calls Phyllis the next morning. He is sorry for standing her up the night before, but he doesn't explain. That evening it rains so he doesn't carry on the pursuit. Phyllis meets him for dinner and, while they wait for their spaghetti, gives him a manila envelope. It's his birth certificate.

He was born Henry Abbot Taylor. His mother's name was Yvonne Cecilia. No father was recorded.

Now you have a name. It's often easy when there's a name to go on. We can start tomorrow.

There's something I have to do first.

Yes. She nods. It's not always straightforward.

How do you mean?

Sometimes you have to look on more than one level. Phyllis pushes her knife about on the table cloth and then places it crosswise on her fork. The truth is, I found my father two years ago. I just haven't been able . . . Well I really don't understand myself. Curtis notices for the first time that her eyes have little golden flecks in them. He wonders what she would see in Luna's flower.

When he walks her home Phyllis invites him in. Another first.

That night he dreamed he was at Luna's. George was there lying face down on the couch, mother naked. Perched on the back of the couch, looking

on, were four leghorn chickens, anatomically correct except they had women's breasts -- snowy white with bright red nipples. Luna came in with a dish of blue paint. One by one the chickens stepped into the paint and then onto George's back where they strutted up and down leaving bright blue tracks wherever they went.

The night of the full moon there wasn't a cloud in the sky. Curtis walked for hours, aimlessly but with a feeling of being drawn. A young man with a striped toque approached him for change but he pushed by him without answering. His neck and face burned. The palms of his hands were sweaty and cold.

At last, on the east side of town, he came to a tavern, The Roxy Arms. It was a place he thought had closed down years ago. An old man slept in the door way clutching a torn brown bag. In the foyer cigarette butts and leaves and scraps of paper littered the floor. The beverage room was smoky and grim, a monument to the days when such places were planned to be ugly and shabby, a deliberate reminder to those who chose to drink there of spiritual dissolution.

She was sitting alone

Without understanding how, Curtis knew she was the one. He moved across the room reluctantly. He didn't really like the looks of her. Then she saw him.

Come over here, she yelled. Let's have a look at you. And when he got close. Give us a kiss!

Her wiry arms, surprisingly strong, imprisoned him. Her breath reeked of stale beer, tobacco. And worse. She pushed him into a chair and keeping a fierce grip on his arm sat down across from him.

Well, aren't you sight for sore eyes.

She was wearing green rayon slacks and a see-through blue shirt. Her hair was frizzled and skimpy, dyed bright red. Her front teeth were missing and there was an open sore on her chin. She was cheerfully dissolute.

You look like you could do with a drink. She let go of Curtis and reached for her cigarettes. Want one?

Released from her grip, Curtis lifted up his hand from the table. Underneath was a swirling, blood-red pool with rainbow glints in it. He felt himself slipping to the floor. The last thing he can remember was her face leaning over him, and a wet, beery kiss planted on his lips.

He can't remember how he got home. Later he was to drive over to the Roxy with Phyllis to find it boarded up, boarded up, by the look of things, for years.

A month or so after, he received a letter from Amelia Jane Taylor, his mother's sister. His mother, the letter explained, was dead, had been dead for many years. A picture was enclosed of Yvonne Cecilia, a plump smiling woman not unlike his adoptive mother. It was clear that beer and tobacco had never touched those lips.

Curtis is glad to have the letter. He keeps it and the photograph of Yvonne Cecilia in a folder with his birth certificate. Phyllis and he will write to Aunt Amelia. Her presence at the wedding will be cherished, her gaunt, ladylike person gracing his side of the church along with Luna, Anne Marie and George. He will write to her, telling her how her letter and the photo of his mother brought a sense of completion to his life and a release from doubt.

And if the real release came weeks before in the smoky beverage room of the Roxy? Aunt Amelia Jane doesn't have to know.

Kerby Dick Launches His Wife Mattie Onto The International Art Sea

Lawrence, Mattie Dick's first, was born the thirty first of March 1949, the day they joined up with the mainland. She'd gone the full nine months without a cramp or a missed heartbeat, but the little fellow had come out dead anyway.

It wasn't until later that night, lonely for the armful that should have been cuddling up to her, that she cried.

"We'll have another one," said Kerby, fitting his knees into the backs of hers and threading his arms carefully about the ruins of her stomach. "Don't you worry."

But Patrick, their second, emerged without a pang of warning, as reposed in his expression as a marble cherub. And the third, Arlette, at about the middle

of the seventh month pitched about suddenly and leapt forth in a way that had Mattie laid up for six weeks in her bed.

Two months before the fourth child was due the doctor ordered Mattie into the hospital in St. Johns and six weeks later delivered her of Angus, a bouncing squalling boy with Kerby's nose and Mattie's carrot hair. Angus lived for all of three hours.

This was the way it went for fifteen years. For most of that time Mattie was pregnant with not a living child to show for it. After Isaac their twelfth child emerged blue and breathless one November morning, Mattie and Kerby made a pact to let that be the finish of it.

"Lawrence would have been fourteen years old last Monday", said Kerby, and Mattie had a sudden vision of Lawrence's face, pinched in at each temple like the top of a heart turned sideways. This picture was in the manner of a small revelation to Mattie and it could have been then that, having abandoned medical science as a means of realizing her hopes, she made a resolution to turn to art.

In the spring, an evening course in painting was offered at the new central high school. Mattie enrolled and one Tuesday evening went off for the first lesson. Kerby never said a word about it and was there in his chair when she got home, sucking comfortably on his pipe. But out back, the overturned sods humping about the garden showed the extent of his loneliness.

"Did they teach you anything?" he asked.

"We won't be learning much till we get the paints."

The instructor had, in fact, shown them the way to draw a head, sketching an oval and dividing it down the centre with a line from top to bottom and

then crossing it with another a third of the way down. But the face, when he was finished with it, was nothing at all like Lawrence.

Mattie said nothing of her reservations to Kerby. She went into town with him the next Saturday and bought the brushes she was told, the palette and two kinds of paint.

For the second lesson the instructor had them paint a small scene from a model he pinned on the board. But the instructors examples were nothing at all like the pictures in Mattie's head. She threw her scene out when she got home and put the paints away in the drawer.

That might have been the end of it, but that Sunday, with Kerby out digging aimlessly in the yard, the sun falling on the flowered oilcloth reminded her of Lawrence. She took out the paints, squeezed out what she wanted on the palette and, working on a bare patch of wall between the back door and the window, made a bold pinched in circle. From there it was the easiest thing in the world to add the rosy cheeks and the smile, dimpled, saucy, yet somehow grave, as befitted an eldest child.

Kerby came in and looked with respect at this freshly risen apparition of their eldest. "It's a fine piece of work," he said. "It fills an empty corner of the heart."

It took her several hours to finish Lawrence. As a final touch she gave him a walking cane that had belonged to her grandfather. The next morning while eating her porridge Mattie studied the cane, a gentle sort of stick in spite of the two snakes twining up it, and decided that what it needed was a dog jumping over it.

After the breakfast dishes were put away and things put to order in the house she went to work on the dog. At first she had no idea how it would be

and let her hand wander with the brush but by the time Kerby came back from the plant for lunch its eager little body was established in mid leap over the stick.

"It's Kip!" cried Kerby. "Good old Kippy. Wasn't that little black and white devil the bane of my mother's life?"

The next Tuesday, Mattie might possibly have gone to her class, but that afternoon they were going by Presley's farm and she had Kerby stop the car.

"Now what's that old horse got to do with anything?" grumbled Kerby, following her across the ditch to the fence.

"I was thinking he's just the kind of horse the children would like to ride." She poked some grass through to the elderly, chestnut draw-horse that browsed by the fence.

"Wouldn't they go for something with more spirit?" said Kerby.

Mattie knew he was right, something like Anson's Sailor was more that they'd like in a horse. But seeing them in her imagination bucked and tossed about, her mother's fear got in the way of reason. she settled for this placid saw backed creature in Presley's field.

He's a nice colour, she argued, a good rich chestnut. All the way back to the house she was wondering how she'd manage the glossy shine of his flanks.

By supper time she had it figured out and then was too engrossed to think of going to class. She worked all evening on the horse, making it shaggier and bulkier than life, increasing its centre of gravity till she felt it was ready for the children.

The children went on the next day, Gerald at the back, a sober, smooth-haired little boy. As his dependability became more and more evident, Mattie felt justified in making him the anchor for the group.

Jean went on next and was almost finished by the time Kerby came home for his lunch. Eight-year-old Jean was an amazement to Kerby who hadn't imagined they could turn out such a beauty.

She kept on all that afternoon. In front of Jean went Casey, Marie, and then Suzette who held on to two-year-old Arnold. Arnold was the chubbiest and most daring of the riders. He looked, when Mattie put the final touch to him, about to make a boisterous somersault head first to the ground. She couldn't help feeling a pang of fear for Arnold's adventurous ways and was glad to see that Suzette had a good grip on him.

Mattie had done this painting in the bedroom so it would be the first thing she and Kerby saw when they woke up. But the horse and its riders took up only a small bit of the wall. In the days that followed she extended the field behind the children with lots of flowers for them to pick, forget-me-nots, daisies, celandine, and golden rod, never minding about the seasons, just putting what she knew they'd like. Then, cautiously, not wishing to deprive them entirely of adventure, she painted Sailor, bucking and snorting like anything but safely fenced in, with the older boys Lawrence, Patrick and Angus looking on. Arlette was with them, a madcap, tomboy slip of girl that made Mattie's heart leap with fear and hope as she emerged under the brush, carrotty haired and wickedly skinny, already climbing the fence.

"What about Flora?" said Kerby. "You don't want to be leaving her out. And little Isaac?" But even before he asked, Mattie had planned their inclusion, the baby spread-eagled like little Jesus in the crèche, with his sister beside him making daisy chains.

"Now that's something worth having," said Kerby coming in for a break from the gardening. "A fine way of filling up an empty wall."

The day after she finished the painting, the two of them by way of a celebration, had breakfast in bed. They snuggled together under the blue eiderdown half the morning, sipping tea with buttery fingers and discussing the family.

"She's a cheeky little piece, that Arlette.

"She's going to break her neck, one of these days, and that's no lie," said Mattie.

"Arnold's another one."

"He'll need watching," she agreed.

After that there was no stopping Mattie. There was nothing she wouldn't paint. Fires on bonfire night. The neighbours' houses, their maids and lads and even their pets.

Every animal in the area enjoyed an alter existence on the walls of the Dick home. And a pleasant existence it was too, with permanent blue sky and sunshine, plenty of green grass to munch, big meaty bones to gnaw, and balls of bright wool to get tangled in.

She did the boats too, inshore and offshore, the pitching dories, the nets, the lobster pots, the men in their oilskins and thigh high boots, the drying flakes and the fish plant where Kerby worked.

The little chapel of St. Ignatius and St. Simeon went on the wall of the parlour. Mattie took special pleasure in it's white-painted boards and thought that they shed some of their daisy brightness into the dingy little room.

She left out the cemetery, but she did the people, Father Martin first, in a new gown with shoes peeping out beneath the skirt as black and shiny as a dance hall man's. She had him talking to Mrs. McCall. Mattie, who was amazed and a little ashamed to see how well she had caught Mrs. McCall's

forbidding presence, gave her a blue dress painted over with daffodils to offset the sternness of her legs. Besides these two she put the Presley boys tumbling down the church steps; Jesse Minter's new baby in it's pram, swaddled from top to toe in pink knitting; and Arthur and Ethel Paskill gossiping with Mrs. Delisle.

There came a day at last when there simply was no more wall for Mattie to paint, not so much as a thumbnail's width of space where she could set her brush. She moped about looking out on the neat rows of Kerby's garden, her fingers itching to paint their orderly patterns. The sworls of the cabbage and the frondy gaiety of the carrot tops were allurements worse than anything Father Martin ever scolded against.

She tried walking out, down the road by the Bay and along the sea shore, but the birds running along the beach made her heart ache. Every shell, every sea worn bit of crockery glinting up at her added it's own pain. And that's how it was Everything she saw became a picture in her mind and her head filled with pictures till she thought it would burst.

I heard about this lady in Fogo Bay who painted pictures of the outside of her house," Kerby said. But for Mattie, the idea of any painting of hers out in the wind and weather was thought too painful to entertain. "It would be like putting your children out."

One day Kerby went off to town without her. Except for going to the plant each morning he had never done such a thing and Mattie couldn't keep a little loneliness from mixing in with the general misery she was feeling. Returning an hour or two later with a number of white-wrapped parcels, he came into the house, set down the packages, and cleared his throat.

When he spoke, Kerby's voice was loud and somewhat ringing, the way he might have spoken at a public meeting, if he'd been inclined to such a thing.

Seeing how the pictures are building up inside you there, and seeing as putting on a twenty- room addition would take care of the painting for a while but would totally squeeze out the gardening. . . . It seems to me there should be a change of thinking about your technique." He blushed a moment over the unfamiliar word. "Well what I'm trying to say is I heard of this International Art Sea on the radio and I don't see why you shouldn't get yourself out on it.

Carefully he unwrapped the biggest of the parcels revealing an easel of polished pine with fine brass hinges. On it, after rustling about in one of the other packages, he set a canvas which gleamed, to Mattie's hungry eye, as white and tempting as a wedding cake.

At first the canvas intimidated her. It seemed such a small bit of space after the walls. But she started with something easy -- a fine big picture of Kerby with his pirate grin and his ears all aflap. In his hands she put a little blue ship with white sails and herself sitting in it, looking out solemnly at the International Sea that was about to receive her.

Choose any Dream

“I don’t dream,” she told the man in the bar.

“Everybody dreams.”

“Not me.” Confident of her black and easy nights, Verne started a fresh glass of beer.

The man fumbled through his pockets with fingers as thick as braunschweigers. Finding what he was looking for, he stretched his hand across the table and dropped three walnuts on the terrycloth cover.

“What’s this, the old shell game routine?”

“You might say that. One of them holds your version of the universe.”

“Must be a tight fit.” She picked up a nut and turned it about. It was just an ordinary looking walnut but it had a hinge on one edge and a tiny golden clasp on the other.

“Not to be opened till bedtime.” The suggestiveness of this set of a slight flutter of alarm in Verne but the man was already rising to go, taller than she’d thought, hair flopping unpleasantly over his eyes. *Remind yourself to stop picking up guys in bars.* [Not that she’d made the first move. She’d been sitting there minding her own when he’d plopped himself down at her table.....summoned the waiter sausage fingers a cluster of braun...unhealthy tan

“You may reject only two of them.”

“Two of what?” He was definitely an off putting specimen. Something to do with his manner.

“One must be claimed.”

That disturbing abjectness that men had sometimes. The suggestion of danger, smouldering, waiting its chance.

“Listen fella, I’m rejecting them right now. All of them. You can take them back. The waiter paunchy and asthmatic, hardly the stuff that dreams were made of, pressed damply against her arm. Wiping his hands on the rag at his waist he moved glasses of urine-coloured draft from his tray to her table. By the time she’d paid him the man was gone.

She picked up one of the walnuts and pried angrily at the little catch. When it wouldn’t give, she swept all three nuts into her pocket and out of her mind. That night when she undressed for bed she had another go at them but the clasps wouldn’t budge. It was some stupid kind of party trick, she decided. Placing the nuts in a row on her dresser she recalled the stubby hands of the man in the bar, the lustreless voice. *One must be claimed.* What a line! What had he expected to get for it anyway? Tomorrow she’d take them to the office, it would be food for a laugh.

She slipped into bed and, satisfied with the feel of her flesh against the sheet the satiny line of her thigh under the coverlet, tumbled into a grey dishwater world where hordes of beings moved without passion and without apparent destination.

Verne moved too, quickly, anxiously, through one dusty street after another, past buildings that towered over her cutting out what little light and air there was. Overburdened just with moving and breathing, she came to an unpaved square, littered with horse dung and scraps of paper, with a fountain of concrete and green tile at its heart. An animal with patchy fur and torn ears lay half in half out of the water.

The city got cleaner as she moved out of it, the lethargy less extreme. She passed through uniformly tidy streets where the houses were shabby but the lawns were well kept and the people rocked on the porches uncritical of her passing.

At the edge of town the sky seemed bluer. She even saw a pond with clear green water and a duck swimming about. But he was to Verne's mind a colourless creature, a sober quack less paddler. She was soon out of the town, walking by fields that ere sparse but well cultivated. People in overalls moved busily about the barns and sheds, and behind mended fences cows munched and chickens scratched at the earth. There was a kind of dreary pleasantness to it all, Verne had to admit, but there was nothing you could fasten on to, unless it was work and orderliness.

At a fork in the road a horse browsing by the fence, a grey dappled animal with an intelligent face, whinnied softly as she approached. Plucking a handful of grass she thrust it through the barbed wire. The horse ignored the grass but nibbled a little at her hand.

"Will you accept this version of your reality?" it asked her.

"*My* reality! Not likely!"

The horse nipped her leaving a red welt on her wrist.

"One must be claimed."

"Well it won't be this one."

"No," said the horse thoughtfully. His forelock drooped unpleasantly over his eye. "But remember. There can be no going back."

The world she woke to was even greyer than the one she'd left. For a moment she shrank into the covers willing herself back to the joyless fields and puritan order of her dream, but then the sun came up red and jolly, melting away her panic. On the dresser one of the walnuts had popped open. It's lining was dam and warm as though something living had just abandoned it.

At work someone mentioned the welt on her wrist and brought the night back in a rush. Verne made herself a cup of sweetened coffee and soon got herself back to normal. It was ridiculous to put so much weight in such a dreary little dream. But there was definitely a niggling feeling that the dream

represented an opportunity missed. But what opportunity? A dreary grey world with total lack of passion and excitement, surely life held better things in store for her than that. Not that she particularly wanted to know what the other two dreams might hold. Something in the way the horse had suddenly turned judgemental on her. The sinister flip of his mane. Anyway, she told herself, she wasn't likely to dream twice in a row. Not after so many dreamless years. She went shopping after work just to get the whole thing out of her head.

That night it was a beach.

She walked along the shore under a hot and glaring and empty sky. It was like a brochure of Bermuda, blinding white sand, lush green vegetation with a tropical look to it. At first it was clear going, then things got in the way, straggling ropes of seaweed, globby mounds of jelly crusting at the edges. She almost stepped on a starfish. It was lying there in the sand, spread-eagled, crayon blue, like a kid's picture, the sort of thing you just had to pick up. But when she reached down it melted into putrid rivulets. Uneasy, she turned back but the beach continued to deteriorate. The sand darkened, shifted treacherously underfoot.

The sun was sinking rapidly now. The dunes, thick with horse grass and beach willow, reached right to the water's edge. Scrambling over a steep mound she came unexpectedly on a beach party. The women were nude and beautiful in the firelight, the flames sending little tongues of light onto their bodies, putting a red sheen on their hair. Seeing the tranquility of their faces Verne longed to join them. Something about the men held her back.

One of them noticed her and broke from the group.

"This is the last beach." His body was thick, well knit, covered with a curly mat of black hair that made her want to touch him.

The last beach. His voice burned, roused in her a riot of longings. Her eyes dropped to the dark thatch curling up over the front of his briefs, not

men's briefs, women's, red, satiny, edged with black rosettes. His face was heavily rouged and powdered.

"Do you accept this interpretation of your reality?" His body was perfect, unmarred, delectable, but under the makeup he was heavily scarred, his nose almost eaten away. She looked past the dunes into the fringe of stunted trees, back to the shore where the water was awash with flies and twigs and dirty foam, back to the cleansing light of the fire.

"No. Not this," she murmured ashamed in the presence of his body of her fear. The sun slipped into the water in a swirl of neon – green, pink, poisonous yellow.

He looked pityingly at her. "There isn't a better one."

"I can't," she whimpered, and fled, not stopping, not daring to turn until the revelers were far behind her and the fire a mere pinpoint of light in the darkness of the beach. She stood on a promontory of rock watching the clouds swell and mushroom about the sky. His last words, shouted after her as she fled along the beach seemed to still be there in the wind. *One must be claimed.*

When she finally woke it was day, a sunny blue and gold day.

"This is crazy," she laughed. "I should be taking notes." She made a jaunty leap from the bed and dressed quickly for work. When she saw the second walnut lying unclasped on the dresser she scoffed at herself and tossed it with the remaining nut into the waste basket. The inside of the opened shell, she noticed, was as silky as a newly hatched egg.

She walked to the office, the morning was brilliant and fresh with a hint of clover in the air, and once there plunged into her work determined not to give in to any stupid ideas. But all day her eyes were drawn to the window, the blue sky, the popcorn clouds. She couldn't rid herself of the notion that it was some kind of reprieve.

Even after sunset it was lovely, a light and breezy evening, and yet Verne, sitting on the porch steps sipping a cold Millers, had the distinct feeling there was a storm brewing. She tried letting the beer and the breeze refresh her but it was no use. There as a constriction in her chest and a little rasping throb at her temple.

“It’s that damned nut,” she thought. You’re afraid of it.” Bracing herself, preparing for battle, she went upstairs to the bedroom and turned on the dresser light. The third walnut was still there in the basket with the two empty shells. It seemed as slightly locked up as ever, the tiny clasp glittering in the lamplight. It’ companions looked quite normal now. Not silky inside at all but dry and wizened like any other shell.

Hurrying downstairs to the kitchen she poked them all into the disposal unit of the sink and turned on the switch. There was a whine and a protesting rasp from the machine but it soon found its grip and with a ratcheting crunch processed the nuts as cleanly as egg shells. Satisfied, Verne washed away the debris with hot water leaving the tap on full while she cracked open another millers.

Her chest was better after that. She watched some television and had a few more beers. When she finally went upstairs the lamp lit bedroom held no terrors, the bed with its mauve and brown coverlet was the usual bed of her dreamless nights. She slipped under the covers feeling sure of a good rest and soothed by the gentle rustling in the curtains and the flickering leaf shadows on the ceiling she fell into a light and easy sleep;

When she dropped awake, a heart stopping fall, the breeze had stopped and the leaf patterns overhead were rigid as etchings she was gripped in unnamable panic.

“Don’t be crazy,” she said aloud. “It’s nothing.” The sound of her words startled her, a little succession of crackers in the stillness. After that, for an endless time, there was no sound but her own strained breathing.

Then she heard it, far away at first, a groaning and shuddering, distant but rapidly approaching. She tried to judge the acceleration, for a quick lightheaded moment had the idea of jumping from the window, of yelling for help, but it was coming much too fast. She could only lie there afloat in the acrid stench she recognized as her own fear, wracked by the jolting throb of her arteries as the contents of the third shell came roaring up to her through the guts of the house.

Love Story

I like an unexpected window. It's the novelty of looking out where you shouldn't be able to, a small if temporary victory over fate and the irresistible encroachment of rational structure on environment.

I once had a friend whose window looked out on a triangle of space bounded by itself and two brick walls that almost met. Very little light filtered down through the grimy panes. My friend pronounced the window sordid and non-functional. He covered it with the same orange burlap he had already draped over his bed, his couch, and three of his four lampshades. I helped him paint his table and the remaining lampshade glossy black and as a housewarming present gave him four outsized black candles and a print of Gauguin's "Yellow Christ". But sometimes after he fell asleep I would pull aside the burlap to study that triangular column of space on the chance it might have fathomless secrets to reveal. But there was never anything there, only the occasional sleeping pigeon who would flap distractedly and make a muttering erratic break for the three cornered patch of night sky overhead. No fathomless secrets.

It was a window that was my chief reason for shopping at Persky's Corner Drug. I worked seven blocks away and there were more convenient places for purchasing the Benson and Hedges cigarettes and Vogue Magazines I was addicted to at that time. Persky's and the store next to it, Aaronson's Kosher

Chicken, were the only establishments left on what had been a thriving market street. The other stores on the street all were vacant, out of business. It is true that the windows of one were piled floor to ceiling with dusty and misshapen second hand boots, another with rotting mattresses. But their doors were padlocked like the others and there was no sign of any business being done. I shopped at Persky's But it was Aaronson's I was really interested in. A star of David was engraved on the window which invariably displayed a row of chickens *au natural* strung up by their necks for public viewing. Within the dark interior of the shop could be seen two or three old men with bushy gray beards and black top hats. It was a place of infinite mystery, of old times and lost customs, where flesh was not killed hastily but with prayers and supplications and thoughtful consideration of the task. I longed to enter that store, to buy a chicken from the bare-armed man at the counter, get a closer look at those enigmatic hatted men. But I never did so. I could more easily have stepped into the Turkish bath house on Revelry Street, whose red neon "Men Only" glowed 24 hours a day.

Instead I went to Persky's next door. It was comfortably modern and no different to any of the drugstores of my experience except it was smaller, cleaner, and the wristwatches, alarm clocks and the cellophane-wrapped bath cosmetics were slightly more expensive. It was a true drug store and Abe Persky a licensed druggist. He dispensed at the back of the store from a tiny glassed-in booth that concealed the mysteries of his trade and all of Abe except his gleaming papery skull.

Hanna Persky worked with her husband in the store. She was slender and erect with a bold darting gaze. Only her ankles swelling shapelessly above her slippers as she moved carefully about the display cases suggested that the years had in any way dulled her birdlike capacities.

They both talked constantly. In a brassy haranguing manner Abe would cut away at Hannah, insulting her cooking, her child rearing methods, the items she allowed the salesmen to talk her into stocking, the way she arranged the items in the glass cases, her world view in general. Hannah retaliated curtly, nagging Abe about his waistline, his inefficient work habits, the way he dealt with customers and the weather for which it seemed Abe was personally responsible. Neither ever seemed to care in the least about what the other said but went about their tasks outwardly impervious to the rain of aspersions until it was their turn to speak.

If a customer, a regular customer that is, entered the store, Abe would loudly redirect the stream of his insult to them which they returned in kind. Hanna would lapse into stony watchfulness and station herself at the cash register. If it was a stranger that came in, the watchfulness was mutual. I fitted into the stranger category, though I had been coming into the Persky's for two years. One didn't achieve "regular" status for at least twenty, I was sure. I always braced myself at the door for the dashing moment of pure silence that would greet my entry.

The regard to which I was subjected at those moments was embarrassingly acute. I was treated no differently than the children who came in to spend their sticky dimes and nickels, or the toothless winos who wandered in and immediately forgot why. One and all we had the same lesson drilled into us by that relentless gaze. You couldn't put one over on Abe or Hanna Persky.

But I learned that the watchfulness had a limit, that sooner or later the irresistible need to harangue each other would reassert itself in the old couple. First Abe would drop one or two jibes into the stillness. Hannah would parry with some acid remark or another and before long there would be a storm of assaults flying back and forth under which I could peacefully peruse the magazines and get to look now and then out the back window.

The window was set at a forty-five degree angle to the back and side walls of the shop. It looked out, not on Persky's back yard, for the building continued on beyond the actual store, but on Aaronson's yard next door. It was this window that drew me again and again to the drug store for I always hoped it might reveal to me some of the mysteries of Kosher ritual. But whatever rituals Aaronson's practised occurred within the four walls of their establishment, there was never anything in their yard but stacks of chicken crates – some empty, some stocked with bedraggled hopeless leghorns – and a few dusty scraps of wood and paper.

In the summer sometimes I would see the old men sunning themselves in the yard. One had a cane but otherwise they were indistinguishable. Once, a leghorn that moments before had been carried into the shop by the bare armed man came running back in a wobbly bid for freedom. Head low, wings bent down it steered itself stupidly and ineffectively between the chairs of the old men and jammed itself into a corner behind the crates.

One day I came into the store to find Mr. Persky struggling out of the basement stairwell with a large cardboard carton. He balanced it on a countertop near the magazine corner and pulled out a huge white handkerchief and rubbed at the papery surface of his head. It was bright pink with the effort of his exertions and he mopped at it feebly. I had already reached the magazines and was in effect the captive of Mr. Persky. For the first time in my experience I was addressed by him directly

“You're looking for something to read?” He fumbled at the box somewhat breathlessly. “Let me give you something good. A best seller.” The opened box revealed many copies of Erich Segal's *Love Story* and I wasn't quick enough to hide my scorn. “You don't like love stories.”

“Well yes,” I said reluctantly, “but real ones not tear jerkers. Love stories should be happy and comic. Not sad.” I hardly need to point out that sophistication wasn’t my strong suit.

He looked at me reflectively and then began filling the rack with the new books. I thought that was it and that maybe I should make an exit. But then he said, “I’ll tell you a love story.”

“A happy one?”

“It’s the story of how I fell in love with my wife.”

I struggled not to look surprised. Given his constant haranguing it had never occurred to me that Mr. Persky was in love with his wife.

“Hannah and I, unlike the custom of today, did not fall in love and get married. We had what you would call an arranged marriage.”

“With a matchmaker?” My interest in folk practices must have been too apparent for he looked at me sideways.

“I suppose you think I’m a museum piece?”

“No, no!” I said hastily.

“In this case not with a matchmaker. Our parents were old friends and came to an understanding with each other. Unfortunately the friendship did not extend to the second generation. We hated each other, Hannah and I.

“But we were dutiful children. *Honour thy father and thy mother*, was a direct command from God, not one that could be lightly tossed aside for frivolous romantic reasons. Not that I didn’t put up a fight. I begged my parents to reconsider. But they were unshakeable. The deal had been struck many years before. They were not going to change their minds.

“‘Start with respect,’ my mother advised. ‘Love will come later.’”

“‘How much later?’ I wanted to know.

“‘It might take a while,’ she admitted.

“The wedding was a nightmare. We kept our composure through the vows but as soon as the ceremony was over we were at each other like a couple of wild dogs. The guests backed away from us and left early. My mother kept the wedding photo in a drawer. We quarrelled every night for two years. We had a child. How I'm not quite sure. We must have had a truce one night, but if so I can't remember. Things got worse. Money was tight.

“Finally I went to my parents. Enough was enough I wanted out.

“They argued. Pleaded. But I was immovable.

“And her cooking is lousy,’ I added.

“Get her mother to teach her,’ said my father.

“You know what a cook Maisie is,’ said my mother. ‘No offense, she's my best friend, but it's no wonder. I shall teach Hannah cooking.’

“Start with borscht. How could you hate anyone who makes good borscht’

“The next day comes the final blow. Mr. Feinstein who is my boss lets me go. Like everywhere in the thirties, business was lousy.

“I go home. I consider committing suicide on the way up to our flat. We fight over nothing; *This* is fodder for Armageddon. I go into the apartment. It's above a store like this, a dump and she keeps it like a dump. Today, though, maybe my mother had been there. The baby in his high chair spotless, the table scrubbed, the whole place clean and sparkling. Then Hannah turns around and I actually step back in shock. She is covered all over with bits of beets and juice. She's like something out of a blood bath.

“You're early!” she screams. ‘Why today, of all days? Ten nights a week you're late! Supper burns! But today, early!’ The way she looks, the way she shouts. I can't help myself, I laugh.

“For a split second she glowers at me, a half second really. I'm laughing like an idiot and the next I know she's picked up the pot of borscht and hurled the whole thing over me. Thank God it was cold. She gets not only me, head to toe

I'm dripping in blood red soup, but the whole place was drenched, the table, the floor, the walls, the ceilings. Even the baby is bright howling pink.

"Well naturally in that split second, I fell in love with her. That thunderous and dark split second when she chose our fate: to throw or not to throw. She threw and I fell. Look, let me show you." Mr. Persky pulled out his wallet hands. His hands shaking slightly he opened it up and pulled out something thin and pale brown. It was a tiny sock, flattened and ancient.

"Mossie's sock," he said. "The baby that's now the lawyer. Pink from head to toe. Believe it or not we even found pieces of beet in his diapers. This is his sock you can still see the stains.

"Since then a beetroot has never been allowed to cross our threshold. And she never learned to cook." He laughed. Put the sock back carefully in the wallet. Laughed some more. "You're right." He patted the box. "What does Eric Segal know that I don't?"

He laughed again, convulsed in a helpless chuckle, spluttering pink and infectious. Hanna chose this moment to return. Her sharp eye fell on the open box of Love Storys, not omitting to sear me in its passage. "You carried it up," she said accusingly. "You aren't supposed to carry!"

"It was nothing. A little box of books."

"If you kill yourself, don't blame me." Her glare fixes on me. It's obvious who is to blame for not seeing to his safety.

But Mr. Persky was not to kill himself that day. He lived on for another 8 years. I dropped in from time to time even after I gave up smoking and Vogue magazine. Even after the window I loved gave way to store renovations. I treated myself every couple of weeks to a copy of the New Yorker or Vanity Fair. Over the years The Perskey's constant stream of insults never lagged. I can't exactly say I moved out of my "stranger" status but I noticed the pause between my entrance and the continuation of battle was definitely lessening. At

last one day on the way from work I saw the sign that Hannah had expected for so long. A small 3 by 5 inch card regretted that the store was closed due to the death of Mr. Abe Perskey. His funeral would be the following day. It saddened me that there would be no more outrageous verbal skirmishes amidst the drugs and bath salts and I wondered How Hannah would fare without them. I also wondered what thoughts she would have when she discovered the little sock in his wallet.

the end