

SEX and the Single Virus

A Collection of Short Stories



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Frontispiece: Raúl Ubac, 1939

MARSHA'S WAY



On New Year's Eve of 1999, when her parents were away for the evening, Marsha prepared a bowl of popcorn for us with the new-fangled electric corn popper that she'd gifted her mother for Christmas and smothered the puffy white kernels with melted butter, cayenne pepper and salt, her idea of cooking for effect. We were nestled on her family's overstuffed, faux leather sofa in front of their new 42" color television set, awaiting the countdown from New York's Time Square.

Experts had predicted an abrupt end of life as we knew it for precisely midnight, given that the world's communications servers and home computers and even cellular telephones were unprepared to click into a new millennium. Aircraft would drop from the skies. Nuclear tipped missiles would emerge from their silos to home in on random targets. The stock market would crash and burn. Bank balances and pension plans would be wiped out in a heartbeat.

The End of The World was at hand.

Munching popcorn and licking each other's salty fingers, one thing soon led to another.

I was struggling to unclasp Marsha's bra inside her pink cotton tee shirt when she tugged the garment over her head with a flourish and a wicked smile, then tossed it onto the floor like the discarded wrapper from a Mars Bar. We had arrived at a threshold that our Catholic school upbringing cautioned us never to cross. Lip kissing was okay and maybe a little French, but anything below the neck constituted a mortal sin that merited an eternity in Hell, that is, if the offender happened to die before 2 pm on Saturday. That's when Father Di Domenico sits down to hear confessions over in the chapel at Saint Agatha's. Eternity in Heaven or eternity in Hell, either way seems an awful long time when you're only sixteen.

Now she whispered in a hesitant but still eager voice that telegraphed shivers straight down my backside, "You know, I don't really think that pre-marshall sex is sinful. I think pre-marshall sex is all right if you're in love, you know? Like us, right? And anyway, the world is going to end in few minutes."

Without thinking, I replied, "It's not pre-marshall sex. The term is premarital sex."

Marsha disentangled our limbs then stood up to readjust her bra and pulled the pink tee shirt with the Catholic Girls League logo on the chest back over her head.

"Well!" she retorted in an angry voice, "You say it your way and I'll say it mine!"

Here I was at third base with the coach yelling for me to steal home plate and what did I do?

I'll tell you what I did.

We've been saying it Marsha's way ever since.

ADRIANA'S UNDERWEAR



Adriana's family occupied a two-story wood frame house in East Vancouver, across the lane and just far enough away that we needed binoculars to peer into her window.

Her family had changed its surname from Conelli to Connolly to better assimilate themselves in a Vancouver that was still predominantly Anglo-centric. Italian immigrants, they suddenly, at the stroke of a notary's pen, became Irishmen without having considered that in the British Empire scheme of things, Italy was at least an independent republic while Ireland herself was still immersed in "The Troubles." That was on top of Mister and Missus Connolly's thick Latin accents like those of our mother and father with whom they were both neighbours and friends.

No matter. By the time that the Connollys' only daughter had reached fifteen and my brother and I eleven and nine, we didn't care what language they spoke or what their surname might have once been. We enjoyed spying on Adriana each night, backlit against her shadeless bedroom window, especially when she undressed. It was our best-kept secret that we knew this girl more intimately than anyone might have expected, in a visual sense if not yet in the full-blown Biblical sense of the word.

Our mother and Mrs. Connolly were good friends, that is, as good friends as women can become. They shared a ritual afternoon coffee together at one or the other of the identical chrome and Formica-covered tables in each other's kitchen. These afternoon rites usually included daisy-shaped Salerno butter cookies arranged symmetrically on a plate. They would contemplate the rosette shapes, utter a short prayer for slimness, or maybe a more intimate and private wish *sotto voce*, then insert a fingertip into the cookie's center hole and dunk it into their coffees while discussing whatever it is that mothers discuss over soggy cookies. They scooped the last, sweet, gooey mouthfuls from their cups with teaspoons.

Sometimes Father Di Domenico of Saint Agatha's would join them and what they talked about then was anyone's guess. Father D had a reputation with the ladies. There was speculation about his relationship with Sister Magdalena, our elementary school principal, and wild rumours about goings-on over at the rectory. Whenever Dad found out that his wife and Mrs. Connolly had entertained Father D, his reaction was always, "What the hell does that *finocchio* want this time?" Being thought of as homosexual was the perfect cover, we thought.

Mom always replied, "He's helping us to become better Catholics. You could use a bit more religion yourself," to which Dad would roll his eyes. "*Froccio!*" he'd mutter. It was understood that Italian men attended church only to please their wives or mothers and many

would have agreed with Mussolini when he pointed out that “the history of the saints is mostly the history of insane people”.

My brother Danny had leaked to the neighbourhood that our family was related to Canadian hockey legend Gordie Howe, although how this could have been was never questioned or explained. Danny proved over and over again that if a story goes unchallenged long enough, no matter how absurd, it will become true by virtue of acceptance. The aura of greatness the lie imparted gave him an invisible edge in the endless street hockey games that went on year-round in our block. The regulation hard rubber puck used in ice hockey was replaced with a bruised and battered baseball that turned into an armoured projectile after its waterlogged cover became ice encrusted and froze solid in winter. Needless to say, we played without helmets, facemasks, or any other safety gear. The great Gordie had lost his front teeth this way and wore falsies for the camera. It was a condition to which every boy aspired.

Sadly, I proved a failure at street hockey and every other game from hopscotch to card playing, unlike my brother who even at age eleven excelled at competitive sports and was a genius at Poker, which he and Dad played obsessively together for pennies. I was always the last kid drafted when the neighbourhood took sides for an ad hoc ballgame in the parking lot of the union hall or on the baseball diamond over at Woodland Park. If it was street hockey, then I was stuck in goal, a convenient channel for the discharging of pent-up small-boy angst and a target for frozen baseballs.

My attraction to books and a serious lack of aptitude for more manly pursuits was reflected in our father’s attitude toward his two sons and how he expressed it. My brother’s sports prowess was proclaimed to relatives and friends at the same time that his lackluster academic achievements were glossed over, ignoring the fact that Danny had been held back a grade, while I was promoted forward one year, with the consequence that we now shared the same classroom. Dad’s tolerance for me hinged on his respect for and fear of Mom, since he’d long ago convinced himself that I was an effeminate “Mama’s Boy” and would therefore never be good at anything worthy of his attention. Worse, like a foster child that’s been taken in under duress, I didn’t resemble my father in any discernable way. The connection to family then was only through our mother. It was a ticking time bomb in our parents’ marriage but I wouldn’t know that until it was already too late.

Even Mom herself seemed perplexed by the quite obvious differences between my older brother and I which became more marked as we grew, perhaps secretly fearing that while the one offspring did somehow resemble Gordie Howe, especially after losing his front teeth, the other was more like Father D, if not openly *finocchio*, nonetheless playing for the wrong team. There just wasn’t anything familiar about my brother and me. Danny was tall for his age and well built, with sandy hair and blue eyes. I was stunted and thin, with dark eyes, black hair, and a swarthy complexion.

One day Mrs. Connolly arrived for their afternoon coffee klatch carrying a cardboard banana box filled with Adriana’s cast-off items of clothing that she intended to drop off at the Salvation Army Thrift Store. Mom couldn’t help pawing her way through everything in the box and, not having a daughter of her own to pet and preen, revelled in the cute cotton sun dresses and silk blouses that her friend’s daughter had outgrown and discarded now that she was past puberty and resembled a woman more than a little girl. At the bottom of the box was a navy blue, woollen overcoat with attached hood and shell buttons down the front, what people used to call a ‘car coat’. When Mrs. Connolly left, she forgot her banana box, which Mom placed conveniently near the kitchen door, expecting it to be retrieved next day.

That night, after the house lights were dimmed and the family retired to bed, instead of staring sleeplessly at the ceiling while the others snored in a chorus that could be detected clear across the street, I descended the stairs to the kitchen for a glass of milk and what was left of the butter cookies. Switching on the light, I spied a cardboard box parked at the door.

I unfolded each item of clothing and held a pair of soft, silken panties and a smooth pink camisole to my face, inhaling their clean, faintly almond aroma that I afterwards always associated with Adriana and her naked image in our binoculars. Shedding my pyjamas, I donned the camisole panties, then the car coat over top. They felt so oddly sensual, as if Adriana herself had enfolded me warmly with her arms and thighs. Replacing my pyjamas then, I carefully folded these purloined treasures into a bulky rectangle with the car coat, switched off the ceiling light and hurried upstairs to the bedroom I shared with Danny who still lay snoring in the upper bunk. Not even a nuclear explosion could have awakened him. I listened for a moment to our father's deep-throated tones coming from the room across the hall, then crawled beneath the warm covers, still clutching the car coat to my chest and fell into a deep and restful sleep.

Afterwards, I hid these purloined treasures behind a removable slat in the pine wainscoting that was known only to me, and retrieved them whenever I felt depressed after being rebuked by our parents for some real or imagined transgression of the family code or bullied by my brother for not being more like him. At those times, I would sneak upstairs to slip into the camisole and panties then clutch the car coat to myself until, over time, it's almond fragrance changed to the sour odour of old wood which is what almost everything in our household smelled like.

One day Mom announced that she and our father would be stepping out the following evening and that Adriana Connolly was coming over to babysit my brother and me. Danny received the news with an impish grin splashed across his broad face. Later in bed, he described to me in minute detail just what it was he planned to do with the babysitter once our parents had disappeared out the door. We retrieved the binoculars from the wooden toy box and stealthily crept toward the window.

Danny was, to say the least, precocious for his age and had an almost photographic recollection of anything he'd ever seen or heard that might be considered in poor taste or even pornographic. In these matters, he was the best-informed eleven-year-old in the entire neighbourhood. Other boys looked to him for guidance and inspiration. Under my brother's mattress he kept several Playboy magazines he'd swiped from our father who, in his turn, kept the most recent issue tucked away in the bottom of his dresser drawer under his socks, as if Mom wouldn't think to look under a pile of stockings that she herself laundered to find that month's centerfold.

To our surprise and shock, Adriana turned out to be an experienced and capable babysitter, humouring us with her sharp comebacks then ordering us to bed in a no-nonsense sergeant-major voice. Danny turned out to be all smoke and no fire, obediently delivering himself upstairs where he immediately nodded off, oblivious to the notion that a fifteen-year-old girl was watching television and munching potato chips downstairs, the same girl we'd spied innumerable times prancing naked about her bedroom.

Lying there sleepless in the bottom bunk, I soon detected the doorbell and, overwhelmed with curiosity, crawled like an Indian scout from my mattress to the top of the stairs, listening. I could just make out Adriana's footsteps approaching the front door, then a hushed male voice coming from the hall. It seemed a long time before I heard the door swing

shut again and two sets of feet quietly padding up the carpeted stairs. I scrambled back into bed and drew the covers to my chin, pretending sleep. I could hear their whispers outside on the landing before our parents' bedroom door clicked shut. Then I tiptoed out again to remove the loose plank from the wainscoting and retrieve the underwear and car coat, and carried them back to bed.

Next day was Saturday and about as cold as a December afternoon in Vancouver can get. The streets were coated with black ice. Danny came bounding upstairs to where I was ploughing a furrow through the extra math homework that Sister Cloretta had assigned our class simply because my brother couldn't keep his mouth shut for two minutes before the Friday dismissal bell rang. Later, I would copy the figures to a separate sheet for Danny to scribble his own name at the top. A street hockey game was underway outside in the lane and they needed a goalie. It wasn't a request. It was a direct order: "Grab your toque and get down there."

We passed Dad and Uncle Tony slumped at the kitchen table staring down six empty cans of Old Style. They stopped talking when they saw us, perhaps feeling guilty for being caught drinking beer in the middle of an afternoon, especially on Saturday when Uncle Tony was usually needed at the delicatessen. He'd left Jimmy the Corpse in charge, a fellow who even in the best of times was untrustworthy and whose wife, Serafina, had recently passed away under mysterious circumstances. Adults were strange. You could never figure out what they might be thinking.

"Hey, Gordie" Uncle Tony called out, "How about them Red Wings, eh?" My brother was already through the door. I just turned and shrugged my shoulders as the two drunken men broke out laughing.

On the way out, we grabbed the weather-beaten hockey sticks that were kept in the mudroom outside the kitchen door. Their oak blades were reduced to slivers from repeated sweeping across the course pavement. In the back lane, Danny and his friends had set up two wooden saw horses borrowed from a construction site, each horse sheathed along its back and sides with cardboard and placed about fifty feet apart on the gravelled surface. They were dribbling a couple of frozen baseballs back and forth with their sticks and trying out their slap shots. Whenever a car appeared in the lane, the game ground to a halt while we dragged the improvised nets off to one side then back again. I took my usual position in goal.

After missing shot after shot and causing my brother, who was naturally on the opposing team, to cheer for his side at the same time hurling insults at me for being such a wimpy goaltender, I spied our father and Uncle Tony staggering out the kitchen door and through the backyard toward the lane and our game. Danny would allow me an occasional save, then show off to his friends how easily he could deek a goalie, notwithstanding the fact that our team might have fared equally well without anyone actually tending goal.

In the corner of my eye, I caught a fleeting glimpse of Adriana in her upstairs window, watching the proceedings in the lane. I felt the cling of her smooth silk camisole and panties, which I'd earlier donned under my own clothing, and thought fondly of the blue car coat then returned her gaze as another frozen base ball sailed past my shoulder and into the net.

Dad and Uncle Tony parked their beer cans along the top rail of our backyard fence then each snatched a hockey stick out of a boy's hands, just as if they'd politely asked to participate although they hadn't. It was a matter of size. The big boys were taking over. They

started chasing the baseball-puck to and fro, down the lane then back again, laughing and gesticulating wildly to each other.

Suddenly Dad stopped to face me, rooted to the spot and staring as if he were confronted with an enormous decision. The light in his pale eyes was suddenly the most frightening thing I had ever seen. He raised his stick for a shot.

Unable to move a muscle, I stared speechlessly at the rock-hard ball on its high-velocity collision course with my face. The impact was that of an express train, the same train I'd listened to night after night building up steam in the bedroom just across the hall. The force of Dad's slap shot threw me backward against the sawhorse that collapsed with its legs high in the air, just like a dead horse might do. A boy yelled out, "He shoots, he scores!"

My brother screamed, "Get up, ya wimp, he scored on ya".

FIFTY SHADES OF GRAPE



Click on the image to view trailer

Mildred dropped the last sparkling dinner plate into its appointed slot in the stainless-steel drain board, peeled away her yellow vinyl gloves and dabbed at her sweaty palms with a wine-stained dishtowel. She slipped out of her cheery, cotton print apron then caught a ghostly image of herself reflected in the narrow, hinged window above the sink, the one with the triple panes that reduced her heating bill and dampened down the sound of a chain saw issuing now from the lane, the elderly neighbour dismembering an old cherry tree for the fireplace.

As a small girl, she'd once climbed into the welcoming branches of the ancient tree to collect fruit at the very top where its owners couldn't reach with their poles and where only the birds feasted, the sweet, blood-red liquor seeping from her young lips. Things were a lot simpler then; a few scrapes and a bruise or two for her efforts, but worth the thrill. She focused again on her reflection in the glass, stretching back her lips to reveal two rows of gleaming, perfectly white teeth, her reward for having endured the torture of the silver wires. She pushed back an errant lock of auburn hair that seemed to become sparser each day. Mildred reminded herself that she was still attractive, maturing like a good Bordeaux or Rioja Gran Reserva, as opposed to aging which had negative connotations, leading to the fate of the old cherry outside. Switching off the kitchen light, she retired to the living room to search out her reading glasses.

Mildred collapsed into her favourite armchair where she opened Grey to the place a grocery receipt said she'd left him, that is, in the boudoir hovering over Miss Anastasia Steele, yet undefiled by page one hundred twelve. She fantasizes what it must be like for the girl, securely bound hand and foot by silk handkerchiefs to the four compass points of a tall mahogany poster bed, stark naked and spread eagled on the mattress, her forehead and cheeks flushed, long pale limbs trembling with anticipation, her maidenhead up for grabs. Mildred has waited all day, trembling in anticipation of this moment.

With her own heart racing and a heady pulse throbbing in her temples, Mildred moistens one nervous finger to turn the page when a small boy climbs onto his Mummy's lap and whispers something into her ear. The child's moist lips and warm breath send shivers up and down Mildred's spine; she struggles to respond, her heart still pounding, her eyesight blurred for a brief instant; she loses her place in the book that tumbles like a dead thing to the floor.

Turning to confront the smirking child, she wrinkles her brow into a small 'v' then replies in a controlled voice, "No, Christian. You may not flog the cat. Not now. Not ever!"

SEX AND THE SINGLE VIRUS



Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. (canned applause)

I'm your host, Guillian Barré, and our guest here tonight is the H1N1 virus. Good evening, sir. Or is it madam? (ha-ha, lol, hiccup) And thank you for joining us here on CBC Radio.

Why, thank you, Guillian. It's certainly a pleasure to be on your show. Sir or Madam? Neither will do well. You see, we viruses are gender neutral. We don't indulge in the terrible protocols that humanoids throw up around their sexual identities. But hey, why don't you just call me H1N1. Sounds like that sweet little robot from Star Wars, what w-a-a-as his name, now? R2D2? Yes, that's it! R2D2. Hmm, could be the name of your next pandemic if you ask me. Well, fame doesn't last very long, does it?

H1N1, can you describe to our radio audience what it's like to be hated and feared by the entire human race?

Well, actually it doesn't bother us in the slightest. On the contrary. We love the attention because, after all, humans are no threat to us viruses whatsoever. In fact, we respiratory viruses aren't even a disease of humans. It's only when we accidentally get into a human population that things get messy because we can't survive in a human population. It's a great misfortune for us. Chalk it up to rogue genetic anomalies, those occasional random mutations that drive our species into the evolutionary cul-de-sac. You see, virus strains like myself only become 'disease'— to use a rather ugly term of yours — when we enter the human organism. We're the natural cohabiter of ducks and pigs, not of humans.

Ducks and pigs?

Why, yes. Ducks and pigs. Normally we survive quite happily inside the intestinal tracts of ducks as they paddle around their muddy little ponds. We colonize their colons but do them no harm. We live and reproduce peacefully in the stagnant water flowing in and out of their rectums. Harmless. Duckie doesn't even know we're there.

Occasionally, we'll make our way up a pig's butt. The piggies like to wallow in the same mucky pool where the duck swims. Well, that's when the trouble starts, you see? Those pig farmers — disgusting, worse than swine themselves, really. They start bumping and grinding with the sows as soon as the farm wife glances the other way, so it's inevitable that a few of our genetically deviant relatives are going to make the leap from ducks and pigs into humans. When that happens, we become a so-called disease of the respiratory tract, not just

something that floats harmlessly into and out of a duck's ass. It's your own fault really. And don't go blaming the pigs either. Yuk!

Now that's a pretty stiff accusation, don't you think? According to the WHO, there's a pandemic going on in the world caused by the H1N1 virus (dons surgical mask).

You know, the H1N1 family has been around for most of this century except for a brief period between 1957 and 1976 when we went on vacation. So, what's with this big pandemic thing of yours, anyway? You guys figured out a way to make lots of money for yourselves by bad mouthing poor, helpless, fragile, single celled creatures. Why, we're not even fully authorized cells, really. We're just strings of DNA, hovering between the living and the non-living. I guess the truth is too powerful for your fickle species to handle so you need to surround it with a cordon of lies and propaganda. You've got this so-called World Health Organization but it's just a misinformation machine to make people fearful and create wealth for health care mega-corporations that are just another form of virus. Disease - it means not to be at ease, not relaxed. How can anyone stay relaxed when they're always paranoid and fearful? The WHO is promoting ill-health by keeping people in a state of fear. It should be called the "Boo-Hoo".

What about last year's bird flu? The government had to kill thousands of otherwise healthy chickens so that a bird virus wouldn't have a chance to mutate and get into the human population.

Bird flu? You must be joking. Another hoax. You massacred all those poor helpless chicks for one reason: to boost the price of meat in the supermarket while the taxpayers foot the bill for the killing spree. Double profit. Greed. Blood sports. People are imbeciles. They'll believe anything and stoop to the worst kind of trickery to make others believe it.

H1N1, in your opinion, why is it that human knowledge and ingenuity cannot wipe out influenza like we once did with small pox and polio?

That's easy. We're immortal. Humans exchanged immortality for the thrill of sex and look where it got them.

Excuse me, but could you expand on that for our audience?

Of course. You see, for us simpler organisms, reproduction is something more basic and also more profound. We can just split in half and each go its own separate way. Or single cell organisms can put their epidermises together, merge their nuclei, scramble their RNA and reset their biological clocks. That's the real beauty of it. When the merger is over, we simply separate again and say bye-bye. The only way we can die is by suicide, which is what happens when we accidentally infect a human population. When our human host dies, we die too, which doesn't make a lot of sense from an evolutionary standpoint now, does it? Or sometimes the pond dries up, which is more or less the same thing.

Let's take some calls from our radio audience now, shall we? Line One. What would you like to ask the H1N1 virus this evening?

HEH DUDE I JUST WANNA SAY I THINK YOU'RE ONE BAD MUTHAFUCKA.

Sheesh! Enough of that. Line Two, please?

Hi. I wanted to ask what it feels like to merge your epidermises and become as one with another cell? Sounds so romantic. So for-e-ver. And just to think that it rejuvenates and makes you younger each time. Could you please comment on this? Thank you.

Well, I tell you that frankly, over the last five hundred million years, my sex life never became predictable or dull. I mean, I don't have to worry if I'm going to have an orgasm or not this time. Immortality isn't nearly as boring as it's cracked up to be if you keep things simple. I'm only a few segments of RNA, after all.

Line Three. Your question for the H1N1?

Yes. I'm wondering if I should get a flu shot or not? Are there any negative side effects or anything like that? I'm afraid of needles.

H1N1, your answer to the lady's concerns about the vaccine?

Hey, I'm not qualified to answer that question because I'm not a doctor but if I was a doctor I'd tell you to get three shots, one in each arm and a third in your fat butt. The health care industry gets rich by selling services. Giving useless shots to stupid people who believe anything they hear is certainly a good way to do it. But hey, seriously. Aside from possible neurological damage and paralysis, I don't think you need to worry. It's next year you're going to have a real problem because legislation will make the shots mandatory. You're going to face a thousand dollar fine for every day you don't take the shot. And guess what they'll be putting into the vaccine...Any other questions?

Line Four. H1N1 is here for your question.

Oh, hello. Yeah. Uh, I heard there are some kinds of flu that can kill a person in only a few minutes. Can you comment on that?

It's all scare talk. One of the ways that leaders control their human populations is to make them fearful. Viruses are the perfect boogeyman, if you know what I mean. Sure. A few of us will act nastily from time to time. Take Ebola for instance. Not nasty from our standpoint, though. We think Ebola is borderline retarded, really. It jumps in every time with eyes wide shut. Ebola causes humans to die rather quickly but remember what I said? When the host dies, the virus dies too. For us, it's like a bad car accident. Road Kill. Suicide bomber. Game over. Kaputski.

Line Five. Go ahead.

Yes. This is Bert on the Sunshine Coast and I wanted to tell your audience that we all need to live and let live. You viruses stay over there in your duck ponds and pig farms and we won't need any flu vaccines over here, right?

Line Six? Hello, Line Six? Are you there, caller?

Hello? Hello? Hi, I'm an epidemiologist. That's a doctor. Trust me. I'm a doctor. Did I say that already? Anyway, I'm going to wipe you viruses off the face of this Earth just as soon as I can find a way to mess up your sex lives. I'll take all the earth's water and run it through a huge ultraviolet purifier machine that will damage your RNA so badly you'll never F#&K again. Your little bio-clocks are going to run out, Baby. Time's up. End Game, see? Then I'll get the Nobel Prize.

Hmm. Interesting. It's true that another way to control people is to interfere with their sex impulse and thereby limit population growth. "Sexual Puritanism" is one of the themes of author George Orwell's novel '1984', as you may know. Through the creation of paranoia and fear, governments promote hatred and a lunatic credulity among the people. They do it by bottling up a powerful instinct and reshaping it into a driving force for destruction. Sound familiar?

Citizens of 1984 had to assemble each morning to chant and scream hatred for the supposed traitor Emmanuel Goldstein. Now they assemble for scare talks on the H1N1 pandemic. Common sense is suspended. The whole human race is running on a single brain cell. And you didn't think a string of RNA could read?

But it's a false premise because you can't really commit mass genocide by interfering with the sex impulse, even among simple life forms like myself. When humans don't have other humans threatening their physical borders, they need to create imaginary enemies like Goldstein to keep the war-fever at an acceptable pitch. When there aren't any real barbarians at the gates, they pick on the least of God's creatures, ones like myself. Poor H1N1. I'm a martyr, really.

We have time for just one last caller. Line Seven? A quick one for our guest, the H1N1 virus?

Yes. I'd like to know the name of next year's pandemic so I can prepare myself in advance.

Let's see, now. Hmmm. There's already been the Asian Flu, the Avian Flu, the Hong Kong Flu, the Swine Flu, H3N2, H3N3, H5N1, A/H5N1, and so many others that I've lost track. All except the Spanish Flu of 1919, which was inspired by Flamenco dancing, had something to do with Asia because that's where a lot of ducks and pigs are farmed. So maybe the next will be called the Kim Il Song Flu and your leaders can use it as an excuse to nuke North Korea.

I'm sorry but we've run out of time. Well, H1N1, this has certainly been a very enjoyable and instructive evening. Thank you for coming down to our studios.

Thank you, Guillian, and thank you to all the folks out there who were listening. Peace... Goodnight...

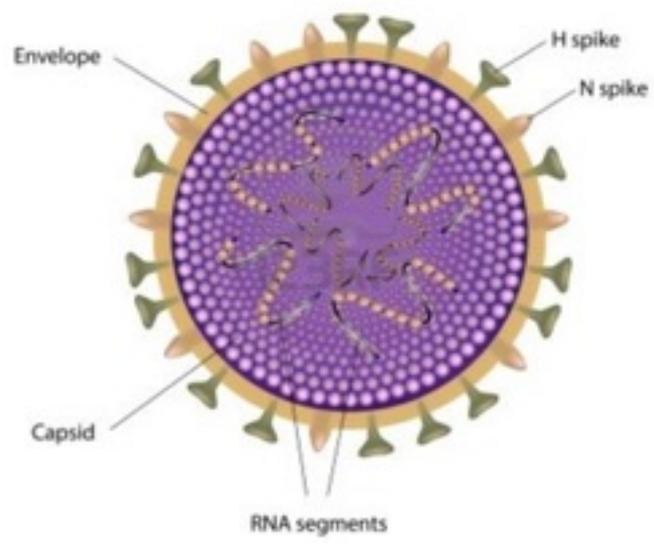
Later in the studio. Darkness.

Shit! I can't open the door. Hey! Anybody hear me? F#&K!!!! They've all gone home. These stupid security doors with their scanners!

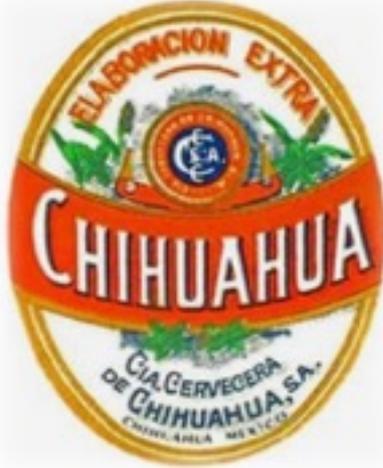
What's the matter, Guillian? Your sub-cutaneous implanted access chip not working?

Oh. Hello H1N1. Still hanging around, are you?

Actually, I was just slipping away on a current of air when I heard your screams for help. Looks like you've picked up a nasty computer virus. Well, I suppose you'll just need to wait for the IT geeks to get here tomorrow. Too bad they can't trust you with a key.



CHIHUAHUA



Chihuahuas? Yeah, Chihuahuas. A whole freakin' pack of 'em. Them angry little critters got teeth. Sharp, spiky teeth. Like cactus needles. And they're quick too. They can tear a girl to shreds faster than a school of hungry, meth-fueled piranhas.

This is what Hilary is telling herself as she fingers the snub-nose .38 revolver hidden in her voluminous coat. She knew she could take out a German shepherd or a Doberman or maybe even a Pit Bull, but not that menacing pack of lap dogs barking and howling and barely their little teeth as she approaches the towering gate of the hacienda. She didn't have that many bullets and this bunch of dodgy little ankle biters would make very difficult targets. The animals smelled her coming, knew something wasn't right, set off the alarm, made her back off. She'd thought the guy wasn't very intelligent but hadn't counted on his cleverness. She wouldn't be meeting up with Raul today, not with that nasty squad of Chihuahuas patrolling the grounds. He was safe for now.

The flattening desert sky groaned with rainclouds. Hilary trudged back to her tiny rental car and inserted the key into the ignition then switched on the wipers. She needed time to think. As soon as the storm cleared, she'd visit the nearest meat market to pick up some cow bones and a sack of entrails. She hadn't chased that mesa rat halfway across Sonora only to be turned back by a committee of miniature puppy dogs.

Her mind was fixated on the broken-down laptop, the one with all her writing in it, the one that so-and-so Raul had stolen from her hotel room while she was cleaning up in the shower. She'd thought it was herself he wanted, or at least it's what he'd sworn to in that rundown Mexicali bar over six tequila sunrises and a gin tonic. Now she knew the truth.

All he really wanted were her stories.

THE 39TH MOON OF JUPITER



Marsha is trotting down Richards Street toward Waterfront Station, weaving her crooked route to left and right around other commuters and shoppers, hoping and praying to catch a ferry that's already slipping out of its berth, still a couple of hundred meters away. When she dashes through a busy intersection against the advice of a flashing orange 'Don't Walk' signal, a smelly diesel bus blares its angry horn as the driver tosses her a one-finger salute. Marsha doesn't know it yet, but she's headed for a fall, and not just one.

The corner of West Hastings and Richard Streets was once called the Sears Tower before Walmart came along and bullied other retailers into playing by Mary Kay's rules. Sears & Roebuck are gone now. In its place, the newly christened Harbour Centre hosts a Simon Fraser University extension that peddles MBA's to young urban professional wannabes. Its northeast sidewalk is flanked by the school's reading room where display windows that once announced women's clothing sales now show off the extension's collection of books and periodicals arranged, corporate style, along faux rosewood shelving.

A couple of business school students have settled themselves into an overstuffed, faux leather armchair in the library window, like Amsterdam's Red Light District where the city's whores display their merchandise in shop fronts. The girl is seated spoon fashion in the boy's lap, her face buried in a textbook and her voluminous skirt covering their conjoined midriffs. The passing tableaux flashes in the corner of Marsha's eye. Is the girl actually reading the book or just faking it? The boy maintains a discrete – after all, this is a library – syncopated rhythm beneath her, resting his head against the upholstery, while his partner contemplates bell curves and pie charts and analysts' reports on the dwindling Canadian economy. When he notices Marsha staring from the other side of the glass, he throws her a wink and a conspiratorial grin.

It's a low-level act of rebellion they're engaging in, Marsha is thinking.

An impulse to linger throws Marsha off her pace. She loses her footing, trips and tumbles onto the sloping sidewalk, her mind still fixated on the silhouettes in the library window. Both knees of her new business slacks are now ripped and there's a painful abrasion along the heel of her right hand where she'd instinctively reached forward to break her fall. She thinks the wrist may even be broken. Blood percolates to the surface of a wound that's beginning to resemble freshly ground hamburger meat. Her black dress shoes are ruined. Her briefcase has soared past the curb and into the traffic stream. A cold and desultory rain is beginning to fall.

"Hey, you okay lady?" It's a male voice coming from above her, a young god calling down to her through the parted clouds.

But from her vantage point on the rough sidewalk, all Marsha perceives are a couple of filthy running shoes with their laces undone and the ragged bottoms of a pair of camouflage pants. An unfamiliar hand inserts itself into Marsha's armpit and lifts her to her feet. Its owner is gripping her briefcase in his other paw as if maybe he's going to ask if she'd like to buy it back. The man is tall and dishevelled. A three-day growth of beard suggests he could benefit from a bath. But his youthful skin and liquid blue eyes are saying that he might also be a student, an art student perhaps, playing the Bohemian, with wealthy parents over in the Shaughnessy district footing the bill. That's unlikely. Marsha decides that after all this must be a street person. At least his smell is better than the diesel bus.

"Yes, I'm okay. Thanks for asking. I'm quite okay now."

Thank heavens she'd kept a firm grip on her Gucci handbag. She digs inside for a couple of Loonies then presses the two yellow coins into the fellow's palm, reclaiming her briefcase. He in turn glances down at the money in his open palm, then back at Marsha. She does buy it back after all, a shrewd bargain at only two bucks. Though humiliated and slightly wounded, Marsha likes to think she's still in control, a winner. She makes eye contact with the man, to appear more assertive, as if to tell him that two bucks is all any beggar is going to get from her.

There's something vaguely familiar about this street person. She recalls the night some years ago when she was sitting in the parlour of their little yellow cottage in Vancouver's East End and heard the clatter of dishes coming from the kitchen. Must be the cat, she'd thought. Dominic had gone to bed and forgotten to put him out again. Then she heard the rattling sound of pots and pans and the shuffling of feet on the linoleum. A chill arose from her thighs and spread through her shoulders and neck. She felt her sphincter muscle involuntarily contract. An intruder? In her kitchen? With her new Wilhelm Puck carving knife in his murderous hand?

The best defense is always an offense, Marsha reminded herself. She laid aside the Harlequin Romance she'd been thumbing and tiptoed toward the kitchen. She placed a trembling hand on the knob then slowly swung the squealing door open. Dominic would need to oil those hinges first thing tomorrow. Meanwhile, a tall young man with wild hair who looked like he could use a shave and some new clothes was arranging food on a plate.

"Hey!" Marsha shouted. "What do you think you're doing in my kitchen?" She wasn't frightened anymore. After all, how can anyone fear even a total stranger when he's preparing a nutritious meal in your own kitchen? There isn't any junk food in Marsha's pantry. She was on the verge of a decision to go Vegan.

“I’m fixing myself a sandwich. I was waiting for the bus and got hungry so I dropped in for a bite to eat.” The fellow was handsome in an artsy-fartsy kind of way. Marsha noticed the kitchen door had been left open; Dominic again, he forgets everything. She made a mental note to reprimand him about this.

“Well, alright then. What’s your name?”

“I don’t ask people their names,” the boy replied, this time with a cutting edge to his voice, a voice that had found the Wilhelm Puck carver. He dropped the plate onto the counter and dashed back out the kitchen door. Marsha was wondering if this might have been a phantom, the product of her overly active imagination, but an uneaten Ontario cheddar cheese sandwich stared accusingly at her from the plate, tomato slices and crisp leaves of organic iceberg lettuce between the two slices of her expensive Pugliese bread, some carrot sticks and a garnish of parsley parked neatly alongside.

“You look like you need some assistance,” her rescuer remarks. “Can I help you to the bus?”

“Well, yes. I think so. That would be very kind of you.” Marsha is still stunned by her fall and has forgotten all about the pair in the library window.

“I was rushing to the Seabus but it’s too late now. I’ve missed the boat. It’s the story of my life if you really care to know. It’ll be another hour before I can get over to North Vancouver. Oh! My knee hurts so. And my hand!”

The knee joint is becoming stiff and spikes of pain radiate upward into Marsha’s thigh. For sure, she’s dislocated the cartilage in her knee. The briefcase handle sticks to her bloodied palm. Worse, what started out as a drizzle has by now turned into a raging downpour.

“Then perhaps I could offer you a ride? I live on the North Shore myself. I’ll drive you there.”

Drive? Do even street people own cars these days? Well, after all, this is Vancouver, isn’t it? A place of free-food line-ups, free clothing, free shelter, generous commuters handing out cash, and cheap drugs sold in the open. Street bums like him won’t freeze to death. So, when you think about it, why shouldn’t they own automobiles? They’re better off than some other people who work for a living. When he isn’t panhandling downtown, does he ever drop in for salami sandwiches in people’s kitchens?

The fellow reaches over to take her briefcase again. Marsha feels an overwhelming urge to place her arm into his, to lean her head on this scruffy Good Samaritan’s shoulder. What an odd couple they must seem, she thinks. Her eyes are beginning to tear but she resists the impulse to cry. She isn’t usually one to succumb to kindnesses, not even small ones. Maybe she will this time, but only this once, with the rivulets of rain coursing down her cheeks.

“Yes. I’d appreciate a ride. That is, if it wouldn’t be out of your way.”

Marsha hobbles down the sidewalk now on the arm of a total stranger. When they reach the corner of Richards and Cordova Streets, he casually asks what kind of car she likes. It’s a harmless enough question, just making idle conversation. Who cares what kind of car? She needs to get herself home.

“Well,” she replies, a bit too sarcastically, “I suppose I like the BMW 580i. It’s got class.”

“Okay then,” he says, “Wait here on the corner a minute while I duck into the parking lot. I’ll pick you up at curb side like your own personal chauffeur.” He raises his knitted toque and flashes a conspiratorial smile, like Clyde did to Bonnie before he robbed the bank. A few minutes later and Marsha is stepping into the passenger seat of a black BMW 580i sedan.

“Oh, my God,” she cries, “You’re a magician. You’ve gone and put an idea into my head. I never imagined I’d be riding home in a 580i. This is my dream car.” Now Marsha is rethinking the street person bit and decides that her rescuer is really an eccentric art student after all but with very rich parents, probably from the British Properties. They exit Melville Street into the traffic stream heading north on Georgia Boulevard with the car’s windshield wipers sweeping frantically left to right and back again, struggling to penetrate the wall of water. They enter the causeway through Stanley Park then quietly zoom across the Lion’s Gate Bridge. When the car turns into Taylor Way on its journey to the British Properties, all Marsha’s suspicions are confirmed.

“Why don’t you come up for a drink and we’ll dry out those wet clothes of yours?” Without waiting for her answer, he guns the BMW’s engine as the car races effortlessly up the hill. Marsha says nothing. It’s just too unreal. Another one of those days, she thinks to herself, so why fight it? Everyone has them. Just go with the flow.

“I don’t know your name,” is all she can manage.

“I don’t ask people their names.” The response strikes her as hostile but he flashes that Clyde Barrow smile again. “Does it matter to you?”

“Uh, no. But I’m always surprised when a panhandler owns such a nice car and resides in the British Properties. It isn’t like I meet one every day.” Marsha stops herself when she realizes this is probably not the right thing to have said. The guy could very well be a rapist wanted on a Canada-wide warrant or a merciless serial killer. With two injured knees, she won’t be running very fast or very far.

When they reach the end of the road, the view over Burrard Inlet steals her breath away, almost as good as the gondola ride at Grouse Mountain where people pay twenty dollars just to enjoy the panorama. Dark, low hanging clouds, pregnant with rain, are starting to break as a yellow ribbon of sunlight exposes itself along a Turner-esque horizon. The night sky will be clear. A few empty freighters pull at their anchors off lower Caulfield, awaiting their chance to berth at the grain elevators or the container terminal while the orange mercury vapour lights of the city are beginning to twinkle in the background.

They abandon the car at what appears to be an open field although in the gathering twilight it’s hard to tell if there might be some mansions tucked away behind the trees or just the other side of the ridge. Her Good Samaritan – Marsha thinks she’ll call him Sam – slips his arm under hers again and they hobble a good two blocks together until they reach a huge West Coast style, split level home perched on a small rise above the road.

“Couldn’t we have just parked in the driveway?” Marsha asks the logical question. Her legs are aching and the blood has clotted in hard clumps on her kneecaps that signal their displeasure with every painful step.

“That would be kind of obvious now, wouldn’t it?” Sam replies, tossing back her question.

“But what if someone steals your car?”

He shrugs his shoulders as if to imply, “Then I’d just have to steal another one.”

A carefully manicured lawn flanks the house and there’s a spacious red cedar deck with stackable white plastic chairs arranged around something that looks like it might be an anti-aircraft battery. A huge kidney shaped swimming pool surrounded by a high wrought iron fence dominates the yard. They negotiate a gate in the fence and enter the kitchen through a rear door. Sam disarms the alarm system at a tiny wall station inside then he walks straight over to an elaborately carved walnut sideboard and extracts a bottle and two goblets.

“Here. Try this. Hennessy 1974. It’ll warm you up.”

Marsha accepts the glass and peers down into the amber liquid. She married Dominic in 1974, a good serviceable husband. Not adventurous, but he’d learned to take orders and follow her instructions, if somewhat absentmindedly. She’ll call and tell him about her accident, making sure he has their dinner on the table and the laundry in the drier then catch a taxi home. He’ll need to survive without her, at least for a little while.

“My name’s Marsha,” she blurts out. She isn’t going to explain that her real name is Marescialla, which means ‘bossy’ in Italian. “I’m going to call you Sam.”

“Okay,” Sam replies, “Cheers, then.” He downs the cognac in a single gulp. Marsha is nursing her drink. The amber liquor is smooth but still it burns a swath down her throat.

“Can I hang my wet jacket someplace? I’m soaked to the skin and my knees ache. Get me some ice, will you?” Now that she’s settled into somebody’s kitchen, she feels better and her bossy streak is starting to reveal itself.

Sam turns to the double refrigerator and extracts an ice tray from the freezer compartment then bangs it twice on the rim of the sink. He tips a dozen cubes from the tray into a plastic sandwich bag and secures it with a wire twist tie. “The bathroom is there off the hall. You can hang your wet clothes over the shower rod.”

Marsha positions her glass on the kitchen table and presses the ice bag first against one knee, then the other while Sam begins emptying the pockets of his cargo pants. A small mountain of coins, mostly Loonies and quarters with a few Toonies and blue five-dollar bills clatter onto the smoked glass tabletop. There’s even a ten spot amongst the lot. Sam sits down to count out the day’s take.

“A little shy of three hundred dollars,” he murmurs, “Well, it was a short day. Had to do someone a good deed.” He glances sideways at Marsha, awaiting her confirmation.

“That’s a lot of money just for panhandling. Are you going to declare it on your income tax return?”

Sam throws her the smile again, “Like panhandlers pay taxes? What are you, Revenue Canada?” Marsha doesn’t answer.

He makes as if he's deep in thought for a moment then, "Yes. Actually, I do pay taxes. One way or another, everyone gives Ottawa its pound of flesh. All of this here is tax-free though; a lot more than I used to earn at my day job."

"And what job was that?"

"I was a research scientist working at the Triumph Research Laboratory for particle and nuclear physics."

Marsha raises her eyebrows at this latest revelation.

"Okay. So, here's the story of my life, since you're about to ask. My father was a well-known West Vancouver physician. That's where the Hennessey comes from. He stuffed the cellar with it, called it his retirement fund. There's enough liquor there for me to retire on as well.

"Mom died when I was very young. I grew up in this house alone with Dad before he too passed away. After earning my doctorate in physics and crunching equations for a few years, I decided I might become a medical doctor like my father. Making a dollar and a half an hour as a researcher, I'd never be able to maintain this lifestyle whereas I could be earning hundreds of thousands more pushing pills."

"So now you're going to tell me you're a physician, right?"

"Not right. I applied to the University of British Columbia's medical school but was rejected. My academic credentials and West Vancouver pedigree looked fine on paper, but the admissions board objected that I was a little bit, shall we say, odd? Freakish is what they wrote. I wasn't a mainstream, ultra-conservative clone like themselves. To enter the medical profession, you need to first be accepted into their silly old boys' club.

"In protest, I quit my scientist job at Triumph. There was an opening for a janitor in the same facility and I applied for the position. It was my own form of low-level rebellion. But I couldn't even get a job cleaning toilets. It went to another physicist, a recent immigrant from Pakistan who'd grown up a beggar. Then I switched places with him and became a beggar myself."

"Thanks for the bio," Marsha replies, "I feel a lot better knowing you're not a serial killer. That is, if what you're telling me is true."

She looks at Sam like she sometimes does her husband, trying to decide if he's lying. The ice pack on her knee is making her shiver. She glances over to the hall where the bathroom is supposed to be located.

"I think I'll shed some of this wet clothing."

After she shuts the door and throws the wall switch in the bathroom, first thing Marsha notices is her image in the wall-to-wall, brightly lit mirror. She looks all of her forty-two years now, no mistake about it. Her dyed black hair is damp and matted and the dark, fleshy bags are starting to reappear beneath her tired eyes like they do every evening around this time, the result of studying other people's tax returns at her desk in the Revenue Canada office. She throws her wet jacket over the shower rod and begins to unbutton her blouse. Maybe there's a hair dryer here somewhere that she can use to quickly dry everything out. Even her panties are soaked. She spies a snow-white terrycloth bathrobe dangling from a

hook at the back of the door then lifts the garment from its mooring and throws it over her shoulders. Then, one item at a time, she removes the rest of her clothing. Her scraped knees are hidden beneath the level of the sink so that the only evidence of her accident is a swollen right hand, encrusted with what now looks like burnt Mozzarella cheese.

I'm not so bad looking, Marsha remarks to herself as she pivots to sideways, studying her figure in the mirror. Her breasts are still firm even after nursing two children. Her tummy is no longer flat and there's some extra material around the hips but it doesn't show so much when they're covered. Dominic never comments about her shape, like he doesn't notice or even care what she looks like anymore. Their very occasional lovemaking has long since reverted to the meat and potatoes variety. She slips her arms into the robe then folds it around her middle and ties the sash in front. She flicks the light switch again, returning the bathroom to darkness.

Sam is seated at the kitchen table, stacking the segregated coins and stuffing them into paper tubes. Marsha settles herself into a chair opposite him where she'd left her half empty glass.

"That's pretty good cognac," she remarks. She can't think of anything better to say, feeling herself naked and somewhat vulnerable under somebody else's bathrobe in a strange house with a man whose real name she still doesn't know. Sam interrupts his coin stuffing to retrieve the Hennessy bottle from the sideboard.

"Here. Have the whole bottle. There's lots more where that came from." He dismisses Marsha and returns to his accounting, then glances up and adds, "By the way, I forgot to enquire if you're hungry. There's smoked brie and sturgeon caviar in the fridge, Ritz crackers and baguettes in the cabinet. Help yourself."

Marsha's attention has wandered to the patio doors that open onto the adjoining deck where Sam keeps his anti-aircraft gun. The sky has cleared and moonlight is glancing off the thing's tubular silhouette. She's finished her cognac and poured herself another, no longer tense, feeling quite relaxed now. She could get used to this place.

"What's that contraption on your deck? Expecting an aerial attack or something?"

"That's a telescope," Sam answers her, not looking up, "And not just any telescope either."

"Okay. So what's special about *your* telescope?"

Sam throws her a sideways glance as if deciding whether to launch into a long-winded monologue on the science and mechanics of astronomy or just reply with a grunt.

"Well, for one thing, that three and a half metric tons of stainless steel, precision optics and advanced electronics takes me out of this world to somewhere I really belong. I can see the craters of the moon so closely that if a cockroach showed his ugly snout up there I'd know it. It uses global positioning technology to align and focus so I only need to program the thing to look where I want to go in the sky." He pauses for a moment, then asks "Would you like to go at it with me?"

Marsha's mind has slipped a cog. Is he talking about star trekking? Or something else?

“I wouldn’t mind seeing the moon through your telescope if that’s what you’re asking.” She downs the rest of her drink. She’s warmed up now, contented, as if she’d left this chair to go to her day job about ten hours ago and just now returned to her usual place at the table, their table. She and Sam had suddenly become an old married couple.

Sam walks over to unlatch the sliding glass patio door then tugs it open and steps outside. He pulls off the protective tarpaulin that covers the apparatus, opens the cover on a small control panel and starts pushing buttons.

“I’ve programmed the device to return to the place in the sky I was last studying which is in the vicinity of the planet Jupiter. Take a peek through the eyepiece.”

Marsha presses her eye to the telescope and sees what she imagines is a line of baby chicks following their mother across the night sky.

“Those are some of the moons of Jupiter,” Sam explains. “The one I’m particularly interested in is a moon called ‘Io’ which someone told me means ‘myself’ in Italian. You’re Italian, aren’t you? Is it true?”

Marsha’s attention is focused on the larger body, the hen that is still a mere peck of light in the far reaches of the solar system. “Yes. ‘Io’ indicates the first person singular. What’s so different about that one little moon?”

“Well,” Sam continues, shifting to a more professorial tone, no longer the humble down-and-out panhandler, “There are exactly thirty-nine moons that orbit Jupiter and Io is the innermost of those moons. Jupiter was the name of a god of the Romans whom the Greeks called Zeus and Christians worship as God the Father. Io herself was first identified in 1610 by Galileo Galilei who was condemned by the religious establishment for suggesting that the entire universe might not revolve around a flat earth with the Vatican at its center. Oh, and by the way, there’s going to be a pop quiz after this so be sure you take notes.”

Marsha is laughing at this last remark. “You’re funny, Sam. You’re kind and clever and funny. And you *are* very strange. Freakish, I’d say.”

Sam continues as if there were an entire lecture hall hanging on his every word. Marsha can see now how a little speck of light at the far reaches of the universe can become a man’s passion and his love.

“Io is probably the most exotic place in our solar system. It’s got active volcanoes, lava lakes, sulphur plains and sulphur dioxide snow covering its surface. The yellow glow you’re seeing is caused by sulphur deposits and the blood red hue that can sometimes be observed at its poles suggests melted sulphur lakes.

“Acting as a huge electrical generator as it moves through Jupiter’s magnetic field, Io develops about four hundred thousand volts across its equator with a current of some three million amperes that throws up energized sulphur and oxygen ions, creating extraordinary auroras. The unusual colors and surface features of Io have inspired observers and poets to describe her as either a rotten orange or a pizza.

“But Io’s resemblance to food is merely the consequence of her volcanism. Once upon a time, though, Io was a maiden of surpassing beauty. She was the mythical lover of Zeus whom, as I’ve already said, the Romans called Jupiter. One day, Zeus saw young Io rising

naked from a stream where her father Inachus, who was a river god, was living. His only words were, 'You shall be mine. I am not one of the lesser gods'."

He glances toward Marsha to check if she's listening or if his lecture is going straight over her head. A little drunk on cognac by this time, she cannot stop giggling.

"And then? And then? And then?"

"And then he caused a dark rain cloud to obscure the landscape and, well, I guess he had his way with her."

"Sam, that's a lovely story. It has sexy ending."

"Yeah. It doesn't really. Things don't always work out, even when you're a god. Zeus' jealous wife Hera, who was also his sister, became suspicious when she ordered the clouds to part and found her husband hiding something. But before Hera could make out what it was, Zeus had turned poor Io into a heifer which, in Hera's mind at least, was not nearly as bad as his cheating with another god or a human."

"Sam, do you think there's a God out there? I mean a real God, not just mythical ones." Marsha poses the question like a coed fallen in love with her professor, someone she thinks must possess all the answers.

Sam stares back as if he were now seeing Marsha for the very first time.

"The simple answer is that some researchers peer into electron microscopes while others stare at the heavens. Gemmologists scan the insides of diamonds. Poets search the sonnets to *amor* and *eros*. Philosophers look inside their own heads for the answer. But regardless of whether we gaze inward toward the microcosm or outward toward the macrocosm, we'll always return to the very same spot.

"Now what's so intriguing about astronomy is that you can take a perfectly black patch of sky and see absolutely nothing. But through the eye of the telescope you'll discover there's a whole mass of stars in that empty space that are actually many small and large suns even more powerful than our own sun. And in between those stars there are more black patches. With an even more powerful telescope you will discover that they too are full of suns and with an even more sophisticated telescope you can see into even the black patches between them and so on toward infinity. It makes the physical space between us human beings seem really small, don't you think so?"

Marsha looks at Sam, who is seated on the metal stool he uses when peering into the eyepiece, as if he himself has somehow issued like an uncorked genie from inside this marvellous device, from the planet Io maybe or beyond, a visitor from some other distant galaxy. The afternoon rainclouds have cleared away and a bright full moon is hovering overhead while Jupiter and Io twinkle together in the night sky.

She leans over to kiss his mouth and is surprised when he doesn't pull away. She unties the sash and lets the warm bathrobe slip from her shoulders. Settling herself spoon fashion into Sam's lap, she turns her eye to the telescope.

MILLICENT



Scene One. The Kitchen.

For years, she'd kept to her place on the wall alongside Hotsie the toaster. By this time, they were like an old married couple, his plug inserted more or less permanently in Millicent's socket. Nonetheless, from time to time, she glanced longingly at Fast Eddie, the shiny new blender with his brightly illuminated dials and bold plastic knobs and thick glass body sitting proudly on a nearby shelf and recalled what their last hook-up had been like. Hotsie, on the other hand, hardly lived up to his reputation anymore, especially since the family rarely used both bread slots at once. Such a small amount of current wasn't nearly enough to warm Millicent's wiring. She hadn't blown a fuse in years.

"We need to remodel this kitchen, Honey. It just isn't efficient anymore, especially now with the new blender and my Thermomix cooker. There simply aren't enough receptacles. I need to keep switching from one plug to another."

"Why don't we just tear everything out and start over? I'll ring up the builder in the morning and get a price on a new kitchen, one with lots of new receptacles."

"I'm afraid that's the only way. How long do you think it would take?"

"Don't know. A week or two, I suppose. We could go away on holidays in the meantime."

"Wow! That would be fantastic. Let's do that Alaska cruise we've talked about for so long."

Millicent fell into a deep depression on overhearing that this kitchen where she'd spent her entire service life was soon to be remodelled. Worse, the realization came like a death sentence. Tear out all the electrical wiring and start over? Why, she'd likely end up in a dumpster. Was there life after dumpster? No electrical receptacle, or anything else for that matter, had ever returned to tell the tale. Whatever would she do? Had her largely unfulfilled life suddenly come to an indecorous and abrupt end?

Hotsie wasn't so worried. After the proposed renovation, they'll simply move him to another receptacle, she thought, one that was newer and more upscale than old Millie. He was looking forward to the change. Just like a male, Millicent thought to herself. Fast Eddie wasn't worried either. He hardly ever thought of Millicent except during their brief coupling every now and again, whenever somebody fancied a Smoothie which wasn't often, and anyway he was more focused on his own speed – rumoured to reach three thousand revolutions a minute – and how much noise he could generate while getting there than anything Millicent might be experiencing. To him, any receptacle that offered sufficient amperage would do well enough.

The following night, after the house lights were extinguished and the family had all retired to their bedchambers, the Borrowers emerged from the woodwork to go about their usual mischief.

borrowers *bar-œ'erz* *n.* tiny invisible gnomes that emerge from hiding to steal things in the night. Missing items that cannot be located next day are said to have been taken away by the borrowers.

“What’s the matter Milly? No need for crying. Tell the Borrowers what’s wrong.”

“They’re going to remodel the kitchen and tear out all the old wiring. The Missus says she doesn’t have enough electrical outlets.”

“What? Why, that’s absurd. She bought that stupid Thermomix gadget simply because the old witch doesn’t know how to cook. If she did, she wouldn’t need all these fancy appliances. Whatever did people do before electricity, huh? I’ll tell you what they didn’t do. They didn’t go to bed hungry, whereas nowadays if you hide the can opener or the microwave goes on the blink, they’ll all starve.

“I’m gonna end up in the dumpster,” Millicent sobbed. “It’s the end of me.”

“Now, now, Dearie. There’s a solution for every problem. Have you discussed this matter with the circuit breakers in the basement? You might need to go straight to the main breaker. Without her, it doesn’t matter if they have new wiring or old; she controls everything.”

“But I can’t move from my post on the wall. What if somebody gets up in the night and wants a slice of toast? I need to be here for Hotsie.”

“Hmmm, that’s true. You are rather stuck in your place, aren’t you, poor dear? Hey! Why don’t we go down to the basement and explain your case to the main breaker?”

“Would you? Oh, thank you Borrowers. You’re all so very kind. But I’m afraid my days are numbered.”

Scene Two. The basement....

“Should we follow protocol and bow low to the breaker bitch? Or just boldly state our case?”

“Personally, I’d rather die on my feet than live on my knees!”

“She’s a circuit breaker stuck in a box just like poor Millicent. Did you think she can toss lightning bolts or something?”

“I wouldn’t take the chance.”

“Coward!”

“Yeah, coward!”

“Speak for yourselves.”

The Borrowers are bickering amongst themselves and have forgotten all about poor Millicent's problem.

"What's all that racket goin' on there? Huh? Step out and identify yourselves, ya dodgy rascals!"

"Oh no! It's the main breaker herself. We're caught."

"Ahhhhh, those pesky little Borrowers again. Well, alright. What have you brought me in tribute this time? Huh? I fancy a nice pearl earring in a gold setting; maybe a diamond ring or two."

"We're sorry, Your Highness, but we've come with a plea. A matter of life and death it is."

"Well, then? State your case. And make it quick. I'm a busy breaker."

"Yes. Well. You see, the homeowners were overheard discussing a complete kitchen renovation which means they're going to tear out all the old electrical wiring and we were thinking that it wouldn't be fair to our friend Millicent, if you know what we mean, like she sits on the wall there all day and night, week after week, month after month, year after year, and well, she's been so faithful and all, especially to Hotsie the toaster, although to tell the truth we think she's got eyes for that new blender fellow, what's his name, oh yeah, Fast Eddie, and..."

"For pity sake, state what it is you want and go away. Please!"

"We want to know how to save Millicent's life. Otherwise, she'll end up in the dumpster."

The word 'dumpster' sent shivers up the main breaker's spine. If the truth be known, nobody was safe anymore.

"Look here, you little imbeciles. If all that woman wants is more electrical outlets, then there's an easy fix without renovating the whole kitchen. Here, open my front panel. Yeah, that's it. What do you see in that little cardboard box inside?"

"A 3-way plug adaptor? What's that got to do with anything?"

"You're even denser than I'd thought. Okay. Let me explain this as simply as I can. A 3-way plug adaptor gives the old witch three receptacles for every one she has now. And it solves another problem as well. I heard through the circuits that your friend Millicent is looking for more a little more action than she's getting from old Hotsie. You might need to break her in gently but I think she'll get on board with the idea. Anyway, it's an offer she can't refuse"

"What offer?"

"A threesome, idiot!"

"Oh. Okay. Well, then thank you, all-knowing main breaker. We'll take her the 3-way plug adapter now."

"No need for thanks. Just bring me the pearl earring. I have a buyer waiting.

Scene Three. The kitchen.

Millicent is looking more depressed than ever. She's already resigned herself to the dreaded day when the builders rip out her wiring and tear her body parts from the wall.

"Look Millie," shout the Borrowers in unison. "We've solved your problem."

"What? How?"

"3-way plug adaptor, meet Millicent the single receptacle."

Millicent looks suspiciously at the 3-way plug adaptor. She thinks it's something only kinky folks might be into; something purchased on the internet that arrives in a plain brown package without return address.

"See, if suddenly they find you with three electrical outlets instead of one, then they won't need to spend all that money renovating the kitchen. Your life will be saved."

"But I've never done anything like this before!"

"Hey, it's adapt or die these days, Millie. Which is it going to be?"

"HMMMMMM, I guess I'll have to try it."

"Okay then, this might hurt a little. He's got two long arms and a rather big prong going there."

Millicent closes her eyes and leans backward into the wall, pretending to steady herself for penetration as the Borrowers position the 3-way plug adaptor, but all the while imagining what thrills and delights are in store for her. She images herself with Hotsie the toaster, Fast Eddie the blender, and Thermomix all plugged into herself at the same time, drawing twenty amps or even more, sparks flying and circuit breakers popping all over the place.



End of Sample Chapters



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