

Who is Margaret?
What is she?

and other stories

By Celia A. Leaman

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Who is Margaret? What is she?

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Who is Margaret? What is she?

*For my Gulf Island friends,
my family, and Chris, my love, my technical support.*

Thank God for humour.

Celia A. Leaman

Foreword

These stories were written by the author when she was sometimes in a speculative mood, at other times in a rather melancholy mood, and once in a downright wicked mood.

Although some of the place names exist, no person or persons in this book are real. All situations, characters and concepts are the sole invention of the author. And the author wishes you to know that, as far as she knows, she isn't an alien.

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Who is Margaret? What is she?

Veronica had lived on her own since her husband died, and she was still adjusting.

She wasn't alone in the world; she had two daughters, Clarice and Minerva, whom their father had always called Clarrie and Minnie. Veronica never called them anything other than by their proper names.

There were those who wondered what their lives would be like now their father was gone and their mother, who seemed a little strange at times, might need taking care of.

The girls had already met and discussed this.

Under the circumstances, Clarice said, she didn't see why she should look after their mother; didn't she have enough problems of her own to deal with? "But don't you dare say anything to her," she told her sister. "I don't want her knowing any of my business."

Minerva didn't want Veronica knowing anything about her personal life either, and showed the same lack of enthusiasm. She was doing quite well at her business now and intended to keep it that way—something she never spoke about because her mother didn't approve.

Both girls decided that looking after a mother, who let's face it, could live another thirty or forty years, was not an option. They shuddered at even the thought.

~*~

While her daughters spent a lot of time pondering her future, Veronica was having thoughts of her own about what

she'd like to do with the rest of her life. Finding another husband was certainly out of the question. *She'd* most definitely never say *I do* again! She was all right as she was. She had her health and plenty of money—if she was careful. What else did a person need? She told that to a perfect stranger one evening in a launderette. Her washing machine had stopped working and there was no one to fix it now, not quickly enough anyway.

It was so long ago she'd washed anything in a public place she had no idea how much money she'd need. It was quite a shock to find that she didn't have enough change. That's how she came to speak to Margaret, to ask for change.

Veronica rarely spoke to strangers because she felt it wasn't quite the proper thing to do. Besides, once you let down your reserve, you could become quite vulnerable, or involved where you'd rather not be. She surprised herself by telling this to Margaret.

Afterwards, she didn't know what had got into her by revealing such secret thoughts, but Margaret, who hadn't appeared shocked, or looked as though she thought Veronica was silly when she said she'd left her undies at home because she couldn't wash *those* in public, had just smiled.

Veronica was too wrapped up in her own world to inquire of Margaret's. If asked, she wouldn't even have been able to describe the woman she'd nattered to for almost an hour: who'd helped her fold her sheets—although she would have praised Margaret for knowing how to do it properly. No one, she would have said in her firm, determined way, *no one* had ever held a sheet and pulled it straight like that since she was a young girl.

Mind you, in those days, when her mother had made her do it, Veronica had hated the chore. But over the years, after she inherited her mother's cotton sheets, she'd come to see how important it was to get them straight before you ironed them.

She felt almost proud of finding someone else, just one other person in the world, who knew how to correctly fold a one-hundred-percent cotton sheet. She'd tried to teach her daughters to fold their bed linen correctly, just as she'd shown them how to iron shirts. You did all the small bits first: the collar, the shoulders and the cuffs. Then the sleeves before you did the back. Finally you'd press the fronts, making sure to iron the button side face down to ensure an even press *between* the buttons, and to stretch slightly to get rid of all the wrinkles.

It made her sad to think of her daughters' clothes. She suspected by the state of them they never saw an iron, and she would say so, too. The girls would roll their eyes behind her back, but she said it all the same.

Every Sunday the girls were bidden to lunch. This ritual had carried on ever since they left home, and even though Clarice was married now, Ken didn't accompany her because he was never invited. Clarice just came alone with Minerva.

Veronica had never even asked Minerva if she had a friend she'd like to bring. She imagined the types of people her daughter would meet in that underwear store of hers, and didn't want to get involved with any of them.

They would sit around the table, the girls eating quickly so they could hurry up and do the dishes and get out of there. They always had the same; a roast—although Veronica rotated the source of protein from chicken, to beef, to pork, and sometimes—only sometimes—she would splash out on a joint of local lamb. Expensive though it was, the New Zealand, she said, just didn't taste the same. She'd roast potatoes, and if it was beef, make Yorkshire puddings. To go with pork, she'd make apple sauce. The chicken would be accompanied by bread sauce and stuffing, and the lamb with mint sauce. And there would always be thick Bisto gravy, because any other sort of gravy wasn't the same. "*This* is the proper way to eat on a Sunday," she'd say to her girls, whom

she suspected never roasted a dinner in their lives. "It sets you up for the week."

Sitting around the table the following weekend, just to prove her point about doing laundry properly, Veronica told them how she'd met Margaret and how Margaret had known how to fold a sheet.

"And how would she have known that?" she wondered aloud, while her daughters gave each other looks. "Do you think her mother taught her?"

After the girls went home, Veronica wondered if Margaret knew how to properly iron a shirt, and decided she'd ask her if she saw her again—which she might, because although Clarice had volunteered her husband to fix Veronica's washing machine, she said Ken wouldn't be able to get to it right away because he was so busy.

"I don't want to wait forever," Veronica told her. "I saw on the tele that washing machines are better used than standing idle, otherwise the seals might go, and that's the last thing I want."

In truth, Veronica was a bit niggled that her son-in-law was dawdling, and she told this to Margaret when they met again.

"After all I've done for them," she said.

Margaret didn't ask what that might be. "Well, I expect he's busy," she said. "Plumbers always are. Good ones, that is. Is he good?"

"He's all right." Veronica let the matter go for now. "There's something I've been meaning to ask you," she said.

She was rolling a pillowcase into a sausage shape after taking it out of the dryer still damp. Margaret didn't do this she noticed, which put a frown on her face. After being such a good folder, she would have thought that Margaret would know it was much easier to iron cotton when it was slightly damp.

Margaret seemed to know her thoughts. "There's no need

with blends," she said. "Polycotton sheets save a lot of work. And besides, I don't have an ironing board."

Veronica forgot her question about the shirt. "You don't have an ironing board?" she said. "But how do you manage?"

"Oh, I manage," Margaret said lightly.

Veronica wondered what sort of person wouldn't have an ironing board. Unless Margaret put a cloth on a table or something and used that. Still, it wasn't the same. It couldn't be the same. You wouldn't be able to maneuver it properly.

It played on her mind all week, especially when she was doing her ironing.

On impulse, one afternoon she went across the yard to the shed. She could hardly get inside the door there was so much stuff in there—junk, Jim used to call it. He'd accused her of being a hoarder whenever she asked him to take something else out there. "Waste not, want not," she'd say to him. "We might be able to use it one day."

He'd generally complain like that when he was in one of his moving moods, as she called them. Fed up with the upkeep of the house, cutting the lawns and tending the garden, he would try to persuade her to sell the old place so they could move into something smaller.

"No way," she'd reply. "This was my grandmother's house and she wouldn't have left it to me if she'd wanted me to *sell* it."

Besides, she liked the old place and took some pride in having five rooms downstairs, five bedrooms and a large bathroom upstairs. She didn't know how people managed in those little houses they were building these days. And as for living in a condo, perish the thought! She'd hate to be so cooped up; there'd be no room to store anything.

Veronica clicked her tongue as she switched on the light. Cobwebs covered everything, and a few fat-bodied spiders scuttled out of sight.

Peering beyond the stacks of boxes and gardening tools

she saw what she was looking for. Grunting with effort she moved the lawnmower out of the way and dislodged the old wooden ironing board her grandmother had given her. She'd been grateful for anything in those days. Now, she had a nice modern one, made of metal. But as she looked at the old one, "You're far better quality," she assured it. "It's a shame you should be out here not being used."

She removed strands of sticky cobwebs and a fuzzy chrysalis. "Just look at the state of you," she scolded. "I shall have to give you a wipe down."

She lugged the board indoors and gave it a thorough cleaning. The cover was faded and scorched; she'd have to discard that. Still, she'd be saving Margaret the cost of a board; surely she could afford a cover. Margaret should be pleased she'd even think of her. They hardly knew each other.

"You'll do," she told the sturdy board as she put it in the hallway.

She supposed she might have to deliver it; she wasn't sure if Margaret had a car. All told, their conversations had been a bit haphazard. They'd start on one subject and then get distracted onto another. Margaret often hesitated before she spoke, as if consulting some inner seer.

Margaret was a bit strange really, Veronica thought, not your run-of-the mill person.

Other people must think so too, because when she and Margaret were conversing she could sense them staring at her.

"Which proves my point," Veronica said to herself, with a roll of her eyes, "of *why* I don't normally speak to strangers. You never know who you're talking to these days."

Still, it was a bit late for regrets. Now she'd started, she could hardly *not* speak to Margaret again.

~*~

"I don't know what to say," Margaret said, looking at the ironing board after Veronica took it to the launderette.

Veronica felt a little annoyed. Margaret hadn't thanked her yet, but stood looking at the board as if she wouldn't know what to do with it.

"Although, it *is* very generous of you," Margaret added.

Only slightly appeased, Veronica said, "I don't know how you've managed without one. *I* certainly couldn't." She looked sidelong at Margaret, hoping for an explanation.

None came.

"Well, I can deliver it to your house if you like," Veronica offered.

"It's all right," said Margaret. "Thanks, but I can manage."

Margaret's reaction hadn't been at all what Veronica had hoped for, she told her daughters the following Sunday. *To think*, she said—more than once—to *think*, Margaret, a woman who could fold sheets like that, hadn't been grateful for an ironing board.

Out of Veronica's hearing, Minerva said to her sister, "The launderette attendant phoned to say she'd taken that old board there. You're going to have to say something to her, Clarrie."

Clarice tried.

"Honestly, Mom, you shouldn't be so fussy with everything," she began, but then she spilled the gravy and Veronica made such a to-do about changing the tablecloth before it got stained, that's all Clarice said.

~*~

When they met the following week, Veronica told Margaret about this altercation with her daughters, but didn't say how it began.

"They had the nerve to criticize me," Veronica said bitterly. "Said I was far too fussy." She glanced at Margaret. "But you understand, don't you?"

"I believe I do," Margaret said.

"We don't get along that well," Veronica admitted.

"They loved Jim though. He spoiled them rotten."

"That's your husband."

"Yes. Well, was. He's dead now. Died a while ago."

Margaret's face creased with gentle concern. "I'm sorry, Veronica."

Veronica's machine clicked. Now it spun her clothes around and around until she felt quite dizzy looking at them. "I'm not sure I am," she said.

Shocked by her revelation, Veronica turned her attention to the washing machine. She opened the door and took out her damask tablecloth; the one she'd feared might be stained by the gravy spill, and rolled it into a sausage.

"This needs to be kept really damp and will take special ironing," she said. "It may even need steam. I use steam a lot. Not starch though. I shan't starch this. Do you use starch?"

"Never," Margaret said.

"If you iron something the wrong way after using starch, you've the very devil to get it right afterwards. I've even had to rewash things when I've done that."

Veronica finished rolling the tablecloth and tucked it into a separate bag so that she wouldn't dampen the dry, folded laundry. "Pity you can't do that with marriages," she said. "If they don't work out, give 'em a wash and then start all over again."

Veronica was quiet after that, mortified for having said such a thing. She didn't know what got into her when she was with Margaret, revealing her most innermost thoughts like that. But the woman seemed to bring it out of her for goodness sake. Now, her curiosity piqued, Margaret would probably want to know more. Then, Veronica thought, she would have to be rude and tell Margaret to mind her own business.

She drove home in a confused and regretful mood, and, all worked up, phoned Clarice.

"When's your Ken going to fix my machine?" she said.

"It's been weeks."

"He's busy, Mom, I told you," Clarice replied. "But I'll ask him again and see what he can do."

"You do that," Veronica said.

~*~

"I almost didn't come tonight," Veronica revealed to Margaret, as they sat together once again the following week, watching their clothes being tossed in the rinse water. Their machines were in sync tonight. "I wouldn't have if my son-in-law had fixed my machine, but he's up to his eyes in work according to my daughter."

"He's probably not too expensive," Margaret said.

"I wouldn't know," Veronica replied. "I don't pay him, he does it for nothing."

"Well, fancy that. A plumber who works for nothing. What a wonder."

"I don't mean for *everyone*," Veronica frowned at her. "I mean, just for me. After all, I am his wife's mother."

Margaret chuckled. "Good job he's only got one wife then, isn't it? Otherwise he'd go bankrupt."

Veronica looked at her sharply, unsure if Margaret was joking, or having a quiet go at her.

It made her think though.

Jim had been self-employed. He'd done lots of jobs for her mother when she was alive. Lizzie hadn't expected him to do them for nothing though—indeed, Veronica would have been embarrassed if she had. Lizzie would always press a note into his hand, or send him home with something for the girls. Something.

Veronica felt ashamed now to think she'd never given Ken a penny and when she got home, she phoned Clarice.

"You can tell your Ken, I'll pay him for fixing my washing machine," she said. "I can't expect him to do any more jobs for nothing."

For a moment Clarice didn't speak. Then she said, "Well,

thanks, Mom."

"Tell him, will you?" Veronica said, with some desperation in her voice. The sooner Ken came, the sooner she could stop going to the laundrette and revealing her secrets.

~*~

The laundrette was quiet the next time Veronica went. The attendant said there was a game on, so people would be doing their laundry at another time.

"I don't like football," Veronica told Margaret. "I can't make sense of it."

"Nor can I," Margaret said, giving a rare sigh. "But I suppose it makes sense to those who play it."

"Ken plays football." Veronica paused. "I thought I should tell you that I thought about what you said, and I shall pay him from now on for the jobs he does for me. Give him something so he can take Clarice out. I don't want them getting like Jim and me, we never went anywhere come finish. I don't like the way she's looking these days. I think she's keeping something from me." She added, as an afterthought, "Minerva is, too. I know she is."

"Your Jim wasn't well, I understand?"

Veronica didn't remember telling Margaret that. But she must have.

"He didn't look after himself. He abused his health," she said after a moment, her face working. "We should be enjoying ourselves now, what with the girls gone and having a bit of money to spare. But here I am, all alone. Happens to a lot of women. The men don't think."

"Perhaps he did think," Margaret said carefully. "Didn't you often tell him you'd be better off on your own?"

Veronica stared at her. She'd said that, yes, but it wasn't the sort of thing she'd admit to anyone. She didn't have enough nerve to ask Margaret how she knew that; ask whom she'd been talking with behind her back.

I won't come again, she thought. Things are getting out of hand.

She folded her clothes quickly, and got out of there as soon as she could.

~*~

When Ken came to look at the washing machine, he told Veronica that he couldn't fix it. It was so old and worn out, it was irreparable.

"Sorry," he said. "But I can look out for another if you like. Unless you want a new one."

Veronica could afford a new one, although she'd rather not splurge, she said. If Ken could get her a good second-hand one, she'd go for that.

"How soon could you get one?" she asked.

"They come up from time to time," Ken said. "It might take a while, but that's no problem is it? Clarice says you're getting out a bit. You've made a friend at the launderette."

"I don't know I'd call her a friend exactly," Veronica said. She pulled a note out from her pocket. "Take this for your trouble."

He looked at the large bill. "I can't take all this."

"Yes you can. It'll make up for the other times. Take Clarice somewhere nice, I know she'd enjoy it."

"Well, thank you very much," he said. "We have a dance coming up at the football club. I think she'd like to get something special to wear."

~*~

"I didn't mean to be outspoken," Margaret said when she and Veronica next met. "You know, saying that about your husband. I could tell it upset you. But it's what I gleaned, that's all."

Veronica wasn't going to admit she'd worried about it all week. "People don't understand," she said. "They meet a person and think they're wonderful, but they don't have to live with them."

"Did you find it hard to live with Jim?"

Veronica paused. Here she was again, about to go into that terrifying world of revelations.

"You don't have to talk about it if you'd rather not," Margaret said. "I understand."

"I doubt you do!" Veronica retorted, with spirit. Then, seeing the glances from the other customers lowered her voice. "That is, you might not."

"It's hard when you lose people you love," Margaret said. "Very hard." She glanced sidelong at Veronica. "I take it, you did love him?"

Veronica buried her face in a towel she'd just removed from the dryer. "They always smell so nice when they're warm and clean. I wish they'd stay like that."

Suddenly, she burst out crying.

"Stupid," she muttered, dashing the back of her hand across her eyes. "Stupid." But she couldn't stop the tears. They were rolling down her face in a stream.

She noticed people had stopped talking. One man said kindly, "You all right, love?"

"She's fine," Margaret said, putting her arm protectively around Veronica's shoulders.

"I'm fine," echoed Veronica. Yet still she cried.

"Would you like me to call one of your daughters?" the launderette attendant offered.

"Why?" Veronica said, in between shuddering sobs. "What good would that do? They don't care. No one cares."

"I care," Margaret said. She bundled the laundry, dry but unfolded, into bags. "Come on, let's get out of here."

Veronica had no energy to worry about the laundry wrinkling and setting into horrible shapes. With no strength to resist Margaret's suggestion, she went willingly to her car.

"I can drive," Margaret said, showing Veronica into the passenger's seat.

"Where are we going?" Veronica asked.

"I want to show you something. Something that might help."

Veronica buckled up. "Are you sure you can drive my car?" she said.

"Oh yes." Margaret signaled and set off.

Veronica was tense at first, because she didn't like being driven by other people. However, as they went along she found Margaret was a good and careful driver.

"Where are we going?" she asked again a little further on. The rows of houses were petering out, and it was quite dark now.

"I've decided to take you to my home," Margaret said. "I think it's time you should see where I live."

"Oh, well, that's nice. Is it in the country?"

"Yes. A ways yet."

They were out of town now and going down a country road that had tall trees either side. The dotted lines down the centre of the road, indicating that cars might overtake with care, shone in the headlights and flicked by underneath the car. An optical illusion, but it seemed to Veronica as though they were going down a tunnel. Going back in time, she mused, mesmerized by the flick, flick, flick.

She was feeling a bit better now. What was it that Margaret had asked that set her off? Oh, that was it: had she loved Jim.

What a thing to ask, she thought, and felt a stab of annoyance. But then that went away in the wake of the memories that suddenly washed in like a flood.

In the silence of the car; cocooned by near darkness, she said, "We met at a dance. We were only young. Barely sixteen. It was my first dance and I had on a peach coloured dress. A shift it was called." She glanced at Margaret, whose profile looked a bit greenish from the reflection of the dashboard lights.

Funny how that memory had come back, she hadn't

thought of it for years.

"So what happened next?" Margaret asked.

"Oh, well, we began to go out. In secret though, because I couldn't tell my mother. We never talked about boys, or sex. We were both too embarrassed."

Veronica was quiet for a moment, thinking how, in some ways, she was the same with her daughters.

"Jim could never understand why I wouldn't take him home," she said. "His parents always welcomed me."

She was quiet again, wondering now how Ken felt about never being invited to her house.

"What happened next?" Margaret prompted.

"I became pregnant, and we had to get married."

Even now, Veronica could still recall her panic the day she'd found out. Jim had been pretty shocked too, although he said he'd stand by her.

"Jim had always wanted to marry me," she said. "Just not so soon. But his parents helped us get a little house, and we were happy. And once Clarice was born, he would hardly let her out of his sight. He adored her."

"Is there much of an age difference between your daughters?" Margaret asked.

"Ten years," Veronica said, now thinking of what had happened during those ten years. She felt her stomach knotting up again. That old, hard feeling creeping back, destroying the sensation of happiness that had so unexpectedly come back to her.

"He was so close to her, you see. Jim and Clarice. They went everywhere together. I used to joke that she was his little shadow. I didn't mind, of course I didn't mind, but sometimes I felt a bit left out, so when I knew I was going to have another baby, I thought; this one will be for me. One for him. One for me. That's what I thought."

In the darkness, Veronica felt Margaret's slim, almost bony hand reach out to clasp her own. *Funny*, she thought, *I*

would have sworn it would feel softer.

Still, it was comforting. It was a long time since anyone had willingly touched her. Oh, there'd been quick hugs, even kisses at Jim's funeral. And the girls gave her perfunctory kisses. But no one had let their touch linger like this. Not since that doctor, all that time ago.

"When I saw his little face. When they handed him to me... ."

Veronica's voice broke, and she withdrew her hand to blow her nose on a tissue.

"He was a nice man, that doctor. He was gentle and took time. He sat on the bed as they handed me my dead baby and he said, 'Look at him, Mrs. Proctor. Remember him being in peace, as he is,' before they took him away. They reckoned it would help. That it would be closure."

Veronica burst into a fresh set of virulent tears. "He died," she sobbed. "Oh, he died."

Margaret stopped the car. Without hesitation, she drew Veronica into her arms. Veronica clung to her for quite a while.

Eventually, she ran out of tears and thanked Margaret for the tissue.

"Yes," she said. "I loved Jim. I loved him with all my heart. But after that, things changed. Oh, people said, 'you'll have more children,' but Bobby's death killed something inside us. Something that never came back."

She stared ahead of her out of the window. Margaret still had the engine running. The heater was still going; the lights still on.

"It's as though we were dead inside," Veronica said. "We hardly noticed when Minerva was born. Thank goodness she was a good baby else I don't know what we would have done. And all the time, all that time went by, and we never spoke of Bobby. Not once. No one did. It was as though he'd never been."

She gave a shuddering sigh. "People look at you and they think they know you, but they can never know the depth of what you feel inside or what you do to hide it."

"You never resolved this with Jim," Margaret said.

Veronica felt depleted. Too tired to ask Margaret how she knew that. Or perhaps she'd just presumed it. Anyway, she was right.

"No. Not even when he was dying did he speak of it. Over the years we'd withdrawn to the point when we didn't know how to get attached again. It's a hard thing to explain."

"It's difficult for anyone to understand unless they've been through it," Margaret said. She turned the engine off, switched off the lights and got out of the car. "Come on, we're here."

"Oh, I didn't realize," Veronica said. It was pitch black and she couldn't see any sign of a house.

"Where've you brought me?" she asked, suddenly nervous.

"Don't worry," Margaret said. "Just come with me."

Margaret had parked in a gateway. All Veronica could see was a field ahead of them.

"Where have you brought me?" she asked again. "What do you plan to do?" She looked at Margaret and frowned. Margaret was taller, Veronica would swear she was. Her eyes were larger somehow. With black depths.

"Trust me," Margaret said, climbing over the gate.

Not knowing what else to do, Veronica followed her. It was years since she'd climbed a gate and she wobbled at the top, almost forgetting how.

Margaret caught her as she jumped down and, taking her hand, they began to walk across the field.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to change shape a bit more," Margaret said. "Otherwise they won't recognize me."

Veronica stopped. "Who are *they*?"

"Those that are coming," Margaret said.

Veronica yanked her hand out of Margaret's grip and stepped back. Her heart was hammering so hard in her chest, she could hardly breathe.

For one mad moment, wondering if she'd fallen asleep in the car and was dreaming, she found a bit of bare flesh and pinched herself. But that meant nothing. She'd pinched herself in dreams before, but not woken up.

But in any case, she wasn't dreaming. She knew she wasn't. Horrified, she looked at Margaret and cursed herself for being so easily taken in.

"I know... I know what this is," she gasped. "Ohmygod, it's an alien abduction. You'll take me aboard whatever it is and experiment on me. I've read about people like you."

"Oh, Veronica, I don't intend to experiment on you, or hurt you in any way. But I do want to show you something, and I can't do that in the launderette."

"Why not? Why can't you? Why have you brought me out here in the middle of this godforsaken field?"

"Because to do it there is impossible. I need equipment. I need my—"

"You *do* want to experiment on me. Otherwise, why would you mention the word *equipment*?"

"The computer I mean," Margaret said, looking a bit exasperated. "I truly won't hurt you, Veronica. You're my friend."

Veronica wondered if she should make a run for it. But it was so dark she couldn't even see the gate now. Panic rising, she backed away. "You stay away from me," she warned. "I always knew something was a bit odd about you."

Margaret blew a long breath out of her pipe-shaped mouth. "I hate to do it to you, Veronica, but I have no choice." She lifted a hand, pointed a finger, and Veronica's protests died.

Margaret put her mind into calling down her ship. A low humming could be heard, and a draft of air, but no lights

showed until a door slid open. Margaret led Veronica by the hand up the ramp.

"Good evening," she said politely to all who had their heads bowed respectfully.

They greeted her with smiles. "Good day at the launderette?" one asked.

"Coming along," Margaret said. "Coming along."

Once the door was closed, Margaret led Veronica down the curving corridor to a room, and entered.

"Bring refreshments please," she said to the being that waited there. "You know her favorite. In fact, bring enough for two if you will."

"At once, Margaret," the being said. She was a pretty little thing, even if she looked a bit like an ant.

That's what Veronica said, now being able to speak again as Margaret touched her forehead.

"I think it's the antenna and skinny legs that do it," Veronica said. She thought she was being remarkably calm considering she'd just been abducted.

Margaret laughed and laughed.

"At first I thought I was dreaming," Veronica said. "But I know I'm not. This is for real isn't it?"

"Yes, for real." Margaret's large, oval eyes glowed a lovely dark maroon. "But I'm taking you on a journey that might seem rather dreamlike."

"Is it drugs we're on?" Veronica said. "Did you slip something into that cup of tea we had in the launderette?"

"It isn't drugs. Stop trying to explain or analyze it. Just enjoy the adventure."

Veronica decided she would do that. She didn't think it wise to disobey.

She looked around at her surroundings. Everything was decorated in soft colours, quite a contrast to the dark wood and walls of her old house. She thought she'd like forest green forever, but now she was beginning to change her mind. The

furniture had no sharp edges, and the flooring was spongy soft to walk on.

"This is very nice," she commented. She glanced out of the window. "Are we moving yet?"

"Yes, we're in flight."

"Incredible. I can't feel a thing. So, where are we going?"

"You'll see," Margaret said, turning as the door slid open and Ant Girl came in.

"The door makes that sound like it does on Star Trek," Veronica said. "And, oh, look! The stars are whizzing by. I can see them now. Oh, I say, Margaret, this isn't a sort of film set is it? A Trekkie convention?"

Ant Girl looked puzzled. It took Margaret a minute.

"Oh... no. What you see is what you get."

"Wysiwyg. Cream fresh from the farm this morning," laughed Ant Girl as she left them with a tray of food.

Veronica licked her lips at the sight before her; the perfectly baked scones, the delicious-looking strawberry jam, the bowl of fresh cream, and the fancy cakes. "Goodness, I don't know what to say," she said.

She said very little for the next twenty minutes while she went into orgasmic-like pleasure as she ate.

"I don't think I've ever had such a wonderful tea," she said, dabbing her mouth with her napkin. "*Thank* you, Margaret."

"You're very welcome," Margaret said. "And now that you're feeling more comfortable and relaxed, I'll show you around."

It was when they reached the laundry area that Veronica saw her ironing board. It was all decked out in ribbons.

"The others are fascinated by it," Margaret explained. "They'll never use it for ironing, so they thought they would decorate it."

About to say she thought that was a very strange thing to do, Veronica reminded herself of where she was, and bit her

tongue. She couldn't expect alien creatures to behave like normal, now could she?

"We'll be landing soon," Margaret said. "And where we're going, we can't stay very long." She turned to Veronica. "Don't be distressed by it."

Veronica felt a stab of anxiety. "You said you weren't going to hurt me."

"We aren't. You may feel a little poignancy. I'm hoping though, that joy and peace will follow and will remain with you."

"Why, will I remember this afterwards?"

"Oh yes," Margaret said. "I certainly hope so. Now, better buckle up for the landing. For safety's sake."

Veronica sat in a seat the comfort of which she'd never had the pleasure before. She guessed though, if you were going to do intergalactic travel, you'd need a good chair.

She settled down and fastened her seat belt.

~*~

Veronica felt the gentlest of bumps.

"We're here," Margaret said. "Only you will leave the ship. We will stay here. The one you are to see will come to meet you. Walk away a bit so you are out of the draft of the engines. We'll keep them fired up though, we won't be here long because it isn't permitted."

Margaret silenced Veronica, who was about to ask questions. "Afterwards," she said. "Ask me afterwards if you still need to."

With some trepidation, Veronica waited while the door slid open. It was so bright outside, at first she could hardly see. And then she looked across the sand and saw a figure standing alone.

"Go on," Margaret said, giving her a gentle shove.

Veronica went down the ramp and across the sand. It wasn't soft though; it was easy to walk on. Suddenly, she stopped. "*Jim?*"

There, ahead of her was her husband. Young. He was young again.

And then she looked at the back of her hands. Why, *she* was young again too.

She gasped with joy and surprise. All of a sudden she could feel the gladness in her heart she always used to feel when they met.

"Oh, Jim!" she cried, running towards him, her arms outstretched.

He ran to meet her and they embraced. Crying, tears pouring down their cheeks, they kissed and laughed, and kissed again.

"How can this be?" she said in wonder. "How can this be? You're... passed on."

"That's just it Vronie," he said. "Passed on. Only dead to the world as you know it. I'm still here, but in a different place, that's all."

"And young." Her heart caught as she stood away to look at him. She'd forgotten how handsome he was. How grey his eyes. It had been so long since she'd really looked into them. Once, they'd lain and gazed into each other's eyes for hours.

And he was strong, and straight. His hair so thick. How could she have forgotten?

"And look at you," he murmured. "My Belle."

She'd forgotten that he'd once called her that. But oh, so long ago.

Her face crumpled and she put a hand to her mouth. "Oh Jim, why did we have to change? Why did we become what we did? What a terrible waste. A terrible waste."

He hushed her and cradled her close. "It was Bobby's death," he said. "We never got over it. And we were so afraid of the pain, we became tight and hard, and turned into those horrible people. But you see, we aren't those people really. We're just the same as when we met. All the rest is a shell."

"A shell," she echoed.

"But you can crack it, Belle. Crack it open and get out of it. Be who you were." He nodded towards the ship. "They're calling you. You must go now."

"But I want to stay," she cried. "I want to have another chance."

"Your chance, my Vronie, will come back on Earth with the girls. Minnie's going to have a baby and she's afraid to tell you. He's a nice bloke, her husband to be. He's like Ken. Good and faithful. You like Ken don't you?"

"Yes, yes I do."

"Then why don't you ask him to Sunday dinner for once. Him, and Joseph he's called, Minnie's man. Invite them into the family in a proper manner. You know how you like to do things properly."

"Will we ever meet again?"

"We might." He winked at her. "But you keep an open mind about it. You've got a long time left yet. Don't be lonely about it. I'll be here."

And yet, as he said this he began to fade right before her very eyes. She could feel his last kiss lingering long after he'd gone.

~*~

Veronica sat with Margaret in her quarters.

"You were very lovely when you were young," Margaret said. "What a handsome couple you made, no wonder you had such pretty daughters." She crossed her long, slim legs. They looked rather like a frog's because her knees were knobby and her feet were webbed. Once that would have bothered Veronica, but no longer.

"I was young," Veronica said wistfully. "Jim was young." She shook her head in wonder. "So long ago, and yet, feelings came back as though nothing had passed between then and now."

She searched Margaret's face. "Did it really happen,

Margaret? Did I really see him? Was it real?"

"Yes, it was real," Margaret said gently.

"Jim said it was because of Bobby's death that I'd formed a shell. He said I should get out of it. Did you know that?"

"Well, yes, I did," Margaret admitted. There was great compassion in her smile as she said, "Come, Veronica, I think it's time you saw it."

Veronica went with her, her puzzled gaze leaving Margaret's face to look into a mirror.

"That isn't me? No, it can't be," she said. Yet, it was her eyes, her hair—but her skin! It was covered in a crinkly brown texture.

Margaret tapped on it, and Veronica could hear its hardness.

From out of nowhere, Margaret produced a hammer and lifted Veronica's arm.

"Prepare yourself!" she said, as she let the hammer fall on Veronica's shoulder.

Veronica stared at the crack that appeared at the top of her arm.

Margaret struck again, and then placed the hammer down. "You hold that bit," she said, grasping one part of the shell, "and I'll pull from the rear. We'll soon get it off."

Margaret pulled, Veronica tugged: she wanted to be out of it now. Wanted *desperately* to see herself without it.

It gave suddenly and Veronica staggered back as it crackled to the floor.

She gazed at it then looked at her reflection in the mirror. She'd never be young again, apart from that strange recent moment, she knew that. But at least now she didn't look like a walnut.

"How do I thank you?" she said.

"In all my travels I've received few gifts, let alone something that was so dear to someone. Giving me your first ironing board was a very generous gesture, and what

happened today was an acknowledgement of my gratitude."

"I shall miss you," Veronica said. "Because after you drop me off, that'll be the end of our friendship, I imagine."

"Not at all," said Margaret. "You only have to call my name, and I'll be there."

~*~

Veronica climbed over the gate then looked behind her. The ship had gone; vanished. It was hard to believe what had happened, but she knew it had. Miraculously, it had.

She sighed when she saw her car was gone. In truth, she felt a bit let down to be back on Earth. She'd rather liked hurtling around in space, and she'd never imagined there would be complications on her return.

She had hardly walked any distance at all before she heard a vehicle approaching. When she looked around, she saw it was Ken's van. Margaret had said someone would be along soon; she must have known.

Ken stopped at once and leapt out. "What're you doing all the way out here, love?" he said, catching hold of her hand. "We've been so worried about you. Someone found the car and told the police. They're looking for you."

"I went to visit Margaret," Veronica said. "The car died on the way, that's why I left it here. Is it safe?"

He nodded. "Yes. The police have it."

"Oh, I see. Well, I'll have to phone them and sort it out. Tell them it was all a misunderstanding."

"I've got you a washing machine by the way," Ken said, as he helped her into his van. "Nice one, too."

Veronica thanked him. "Perhaps you could bring it over on Sunday?" she suggested. "I can settle up with you then. Would you like to come to lunch? And Joseph. Ask Clarice to phone Minerva and say I'd like to meet Joseph. I'm sure he's a nice man. He'd have to be to want to marry our Minnie."

"You could phone them yourself," Ken suggested.

"No, I have things to do," Veronica said. "I don't have

time. Sunday will do. You can tell them I'm absolutely all right. Will you do that for me, Ken? No need for them to fuss now. No need to phone or anything. I'm fine. I really am."

Ken didn't seem to know what to say, except, "Okay, see you on Sunday then," when he pulled up outside Veronica's house.

~*~

Sunday came and the girls and their respective partners arrived at Veronica's house.

After being introduced to Joseph and saying how glad she was to meet him, Veronica said, "I thought we'd have a change from a roast. It's such a nice day we can have a barbecue in the garden."

The girls exchanged a look.

"Why don't you boys get yourselves something to drink?" Veronica said. "There's beer or cider in the fridge. I want to talk to Minnie and Clarrie a minute."

"*Minnie and Clarrie?*" the girls mouthed to each other behind their mother's back.

The men hesitated. "Oh, come along," Veronica said, ushering them out of the room. "I'll show you where the fridge is." She went out and closed the door.

"*Minnie and Clarrie?*" Clarice repeated. "What's got into her?"

"I *told* you," Minerva hissed. "Are you going to confront her about her disappearance, and her weird behavior in the launderette?"

Minerva wound her sister up for a minute or two, and when Veronica returned, Clarice turned on her mother.

"It's very nice of you to ask us here today," she said, "but we're wondering what's going on. You've rarely been nice to my husband, or considered Minnie's feelings before. And there's something else we need to talk about. Something rather distressing."

"Oh, yes dear? And what's that?" Veronica said.

"Well, to begin with, what's been going on at the launderette."

Veronica strolled to the sideboard and poured herself a glass of wine. The girls gaped; they'd never known their mother have a drink at lunchtime.

Clarice took a deep breath. "We need to talk about Margaret, Mom." She glanced at her sister. "We need to know who she is."

"More to the point," Minerva said. "We need to know if she *really* exists."

"Before we discuss my new friend," Veronica said, taking a sip of her wine, "let me tell you my plan. I've been busy the last few days. I had the house appraised and was surprised to find it's worth a lot more than I thought. I'm going to sell it while the market is hot and divide the money equally between the three of us." She smiled in turn at them. "I don't know about you, but a million dollars will be plenty for me."

"First though," Veronica continued, closing her eyes as she recalled the inside of Margaret's ship, "I think I might travel for a while. When I return I shall find myself a modern little condo with soft floors, skylights, and a view of the stars. Then, when I'm not up there myself, I can still imagine any shooting star is Margaret; zooming to and fro."

She took another sip of her wine and looked at her daughters.

"So, Clarrie, what was it you wanted to say about Margaret?"

Clarice found her voice. "Goodness, I've completely forgotten now."

"Can you remember what it was, Minnie?" Veronica asked.

Minerva glanced at her sister and shook her head. "No. For the life of me, I can't."

Veronica smiled. Margaret said they'd take her decision

well.

Margaret was so wise. There was nothing like money, she had said, to soothe away a suspicion of insanity.

The Suit

The day that changed my life began no differently to any other. I awoke just before dawn and watched the room take shape as the sun came up.

Until recently this had always given me pleasure. I had lived in the same house for years. I knew all its quirks and foibles, and I loved every stick of it. But lately things were different. With each morning came anxiety. A sort of dread.

I first noticed this after my seventieth birthday. Seventy wasn't so old really, not for these days, but since then I seemed to be falling prey to unexpected fits of depression. Moods I found hard to shrug off.

Vanity perhaps—but I think part of it was due to the mere fact of looking in the mirror every morning and knowing things wouldn't get any better. Oh, there are those women who celebrate their wrinkles, but not me! I'd once been so lovely—even though I say so myself. By that, I don't mean I was a stunning beauty, not by any means. My meaning is that I was lovely, simply because I was young. All youthful things are beautiful if only they but knew it. Too bad the young don't appreciate their natural gift.

Those days for me were gone forever now. I was becoming wrinkled and jowled, with no hope of reprieve. That was enough to depress a person, let alone the aches and pains that went along with it; the creaking joints that made one hobble at times.

My mind worried me a little, too. Often rambling off

into the wild woods of the past, I feared it might be early dementia, but I didn't like to ask anyone in case I gave myself a label. Others like having you in a box where they can control you—no one wants a senile old woman in their midst. Perhaps that was the root of my depression, the fear of being put away. For what could be more frightening, or insecure-making, than having your independence taken from you? It would be even worse than incontinence—at least if that happens within the confines of your home no one need know about it.

This hollow, bleak feeling was with me when I woke up that September morning, and I wished my family were nearer. When they had lived only twenty miles away they often popped in. I had held and watched each newborn grandchild—three of them in all, two boys and a girl—grow into fine, sturdy children.

It all changed when my son lost his job and moved two thousand miles away. I know little birds must fly the nest, but you never stop being a mother. I missed him and his family. Although they say distance makes the heart grow fonder, I don't agree. I think relationships need refreshing every so often in person, otherwise they tend to shrivel.

But I knew they were busy. Young people lead such hectic lives these days. They always have something to do, or somewhere to go. That's another thing I disliked about being old, I had time on my hands. I never had a career, or a business of my own—I suppose you could say my career, as such, was to raise my child and take care of my husband, John. Now that they were removed from me, I felt a bit lost.

That morning I found it harder than usual to get up and for a while, before I could bring myself around, I lay like a lazy cat, basking in the sun that blazed through my window.

~*~

I finally persuaded myself to get out of bed, wincing as my feet touched the floor. All week I'd had a dull ache in my

chest. A tightness that wouldn't go away. Oh, I know I should have gone to the doctor, but I tended to stay away from my physician. I didn't want him discovering my mind wasn't quite up to snuff, or he might utter the dreaded words *old people's home*. My constant prayer was that when I passed on, it would be in my own place, in my own bed. I loathed the thought of shared accommodation and breathing in the stink of others.

I went downstairs to shower. The pain dissipated a little while I stood under the hot water, and after I brushed my hair I felt better. I slipped on my robe and returned upstairs to dress.

Somehow the lemons, peaches and whites of summer didn't appeal to me that morning, so I decided to pull out my winter clothes. Not having much storage, I always packed them in a suitcase in the spring. It was a pleasant surprise in the fall to find clothes I'd forgotten about, and I felt again that rare tremor of anticipation when I hauled out the suitcase. Behind it was a box at the back of the closet. Unable to recall what was in it, I pulled that out, too.

When I looked inside I remembered it was Halloween costumes saved from over the years—even though I'd rid myself of what I considered to be superfluous stuff, I had been unable to bring myself to throw those away.

With age the years tend to run into one another and become the smudge of life, and I couldn't recall the exact year I'd worn each costume, even though I could vaguely remember where John and I had celebrated.

I took some gauzy fabric out of a bag and held a veil to my face, but it brought me no joy to recall the night I was to wear the Scheherazade costume.

~*~

I suppose it all began a few weeks before Halloween. In an alley off Market Street I'd come across a store I'd never noticed before. Curious, I went in. I thought it rather quaint

the way the atmosphere changed when you walked through the door. By changed, I don't mean the temperature, but how the flashing lights and instrument panels made you feel as though you were on a spaceship. That was the point, I suppose. The theme. Even the staff wore the silver suits they were offering for sale.

I took one off a hanger and looked around. I couldn't see any mirrors to speak of, but the walls were shiny, so I walked over to one and held the suit up against me. It looked as though it would fit, but there wasn't enough time for me to undress and wriggle my way into it. There was John's supper to cook.

Watching me were two silver-bodied girls who now approached, clapping their hands with glee and chattering crazily to each other with an accent I couldn't place.

"Meta," one said, pointing at me. "*Meta!*"

"I'd like to buy this," I said, holding the suit out for one of them to take. "How much is it?"

They looked at me quizzically, as if no one had ever requested that of them before. Frankly, I didn't think they should be serving in a store if they weren't trained, but still, I foraged in my purse for my money and offered a large bill.

"Not enough?" I said when neither of them took it.

They exchanged a look, then one of them gave an exasperated little sigh, bundled up the suit and its accompaniments, and thrust it into my arms. The other guided me to the door and practically pushed me outside.

I stood for a moment, bewildered to know why they hadn't taken the money. The manager wouldn't be pleased, I thought. I should have to return another day and insist I pay for it.

I felt odd, not only from what had happened inside, but also to be back on the sidewalk. I felt a strange sense of loss. Market Street seemed alien. Dirty, and full of scurrying creatures.

The image was only fleeting, and then I looked at my watch and saw the time! I was sure I'd only been in the store for, at the most, ten minutes, but a whole hour had passed.

~*~

I didn't tell John about the suit. I wanted to surprise him on the night. This year I planned to go as Scheherazade to the Halloween party; he'd have quite a surprise, I thought, when he saw me as an alien.

I had no idea how surprised he'd be.

He came into the bedroom just as I was getting ready. The silver suit was draped over the bed.

"What's this?" he said.

"My costume," I said.

"I thought you were going as Scheherazade."

"Well, originally I was, but I saw this. I liked it and thought—"

"Where did you get it?" His face was a mask of concern.

"From a store near Market Street," I said. "Why?"

He took me by the shoulders and shook me slightly. "Where on Market Street? Can you show me?"

"What... now?"

"Yes. Get dressed."

I'd rarely seen him so upset. I daredn't question him further, but slipped on my jeans and a sweater and followed him downstairs.

We got into the car in silence.

Market Square was deserted that evening. I guessed people were at home, getting ready to celebrate—only I didn't voice that opinion. I didn't say anything, but walked quickly to the alley.

I never had returned to pay for the suit. I felt guilty about it, too, but I'd been so busy, and well, I reckoned they'd seemed pretty reluctant to take my money anyway.

Now I'd never be able to pay for it, because the store was gone.

"It was here," I said, bewildered, looking around me. "Right here. It was right here, John!" I stared at a dilapidated store front, the door secured with a thick lock and chain, and the windows boarded up.

"I thought so," John said. "Come on."

"Why are you so angry?" I asked him on the way back.

His face was set; he didn't answer. He didn't speak a word, except to say, "Get in," as he opened my door. He got into the driver's seat and we went home.

I tried to beat him upstairs; I had a feeling what he was going to do. But he was larger and faster than me. By the time I reached the bedroom he held the suit in his hands, looking as though he could murder it.

"I do wish you'd tell me what's going on," I said. "This is ridiculous!"

He pushed past me. "Goddamit, Violet," he said. "You know I can't tell you these things."

I stared at him, my thoughts churning. "You mean... this has something to do with your work?"

"Too damn right it has!" he said.

Over the banister I watched him put his foot on the top stair. "Why won't you tell me what it is? And what are you going to do with my suit?"

"What do you think?"

As he said that; as he turned, our eyes locked.

His eyes widened, and he uttered one word. "*Violet?*" before he stumbled.

It all happened so quickly and yet it seemed to happen in slow motion. I couldn't have saved him. Nothing could save him now.

I was held captive; momentarily frozen by the sight of him tumbling; crying out. And then he lay still.

Like a spring uncoiled, I felt myself released and I tore downstairs.

He wasn't breathing. I tried CPR, but I couldn't revive

him so I called for help.

While I waited, I removed the suit from John's hands. Even in death he clung to it and I had to pry his fingers away.

~*~

That September morning I sat on the edge of my bed, remembering all this. I removed the shimmering suit from the box and shook it out. I never had put it on; but from time to time over the years I had taken a sneak peek at it. The fabric fascinated me, because although I was a fair seamstress and knew my materials, I'd never seen anything quite like it before.

Impetuously and with child-like impatience, I slipped off my robe and first put one, then both legs into the slinky fabric. I fairly slithered into the rest of it, and to my delight it fitted me perfectly.

Encouraged, I rummaged in the box and found the mask and shoes that came with it. The shoes were thick and rubbery, a real contrast to the soft, pliable mask. It slid down over my face—why, it became my face as I stood back to look in the mirror. You couldn't see the seams at all.

Goodness, I thought, but where was Violet?

As I gazed at my reflection, I was taken back to that day in the store.

"Welcome, Meta," I whispered. "Welcome."

I reached out tentatively to touch the glass, to press my finger against my image. But with the suit on I couldn't feel the hardness. It was as though the glass had gone—although there was a reflection there, and a finger reached out to touch mine.

As it did, a tingle shot up my arm and I stepped back.

I shook my head to dispel a sudden ringing in my ears. Dizzy, I sat down on the bed to get my breath.

The sun was still shining through the window and I felt so wonderfully smothered with warmth as I lay back on the pillows. There I was again, I thought, just like my old cat. I

smiled, and felt my mind slip away.

~*~

Meta opened the door to Violet's house and walked out. Summer was almost over now and it was one of those lovely, bright fall mornings. The air was crisp, the strength of the sun waning but still warm. Just a nice temperature for a walk.

Someone had given his lawn a final cut for the season. The air was sweet and pungent with the scent of mown grass.

Mr. Shott was out in his garden, cutting his hedge. It was a joke in the neighbourhood that he trimmed that hedge faster than it could grow, and Meta imagined him one day peering through a magnifying glass and going at it with a pair of his wife's pinking sheers. She began to laugh; high-spirited, young laughter she hadn't heard for years. It took her by surprise; so much so, she had to hold onto his gatepost to steady herself.

Mr. Shott's little dogs saw her and began their frenzied barking. The neighbours constantly complained about them. It was known that one had nipped the mail carrier's heel. They snapped around Meta's ankles too, but she realized it was fear that made them so fierce. She bent to pick one up.

The little dog named Fi-fi trembled in Meta's arms and growled. Fi-fi's partner, Foo-foo, was still snarling and snapping at her feet.

Then Meta smiled at them, and their ferocity turned to whimpers. *That's better*, Meta thought, gazing into Fi-fi's eyes. *No one will hurt you if you don't bark, it's when you make that dreadful noise they'd like to wring your tiny necks.*

Alerted by the silence, Mr. Shott turned to see what was going on. He staggered back a pace or two when he saw Meta holding one of his pets.

"Hey, you!" he cried. "Put her down! Get out of here, you pervert!"

Meta felt a bit taken aback; it hurt to be spoken to like that. She placed the dog gently on the ground and turned

away. That wasn't enough for Mr. Shott. He went indoors and hurried to the phone.

~*~

As Meta neared the town the street became more crowded. People were staring at her and looking at one another a little puzzled. She could hear what they were thinking; had they miss-remembered the date? Was it Halloween already?

"Not likely!" Meta said to one of them, speaking in a voice that sounded quite unlike her own. "*This* is September!"

One person looked at her quizzically and crossed the street to walk on the other side. Meta felt a sting of rejection, although if she was honest, she didn't mind having the pavement mainly to herself. She was having difficulty in keeping her feet on the ground, and wobbled from side to side. It was almost as if she was having a problem with gravity. She felt happy though, and had a wide smile on her face.

Perhaps that's what bothered people, she thought; her smile. After all, how often did you see a happy face on the street these days? Had mirth become as embarrassing as a couple holding hands or kissing? It struck her as peculiar really; Earth people seemed to have no problem with violence.

She trilled with laughter, gathering a few more stares. Listen to her; *Earth people*. Whatever would she think next!

Meta decided that walking along when you felt like a helium balloon was hard work, so she turned into a coffee shop to anchor herself to a chair. Violet had never frequented this café because she was too afraid of the customers. How silly, Meta thought now, to feel frightened of the young. Why, as she listened to their conversations, she realized they were the hope of the planet! Full of life and idealism, still optimistic for the future, what a lot they had to offer the world.

The boy who sat next to her, grinned. His skin was smooth, the colour of coffee beans, and he had a ring in his ear.

"Having a cup?" he said.

"Well, I'd like one," Meta said, "but I don't have any money on me. I'd look funny carrying a purse."

"You would a bit," he agreed. "I'll treat you to one if you like."

"Oh, I would. How kind."

"No worries," he said. He laughed as he added, "By the way, I like the teeth. Good effect."

As he left the table to fetch her coffee, wondering what he meant, Meta felt her teeth and was surprised to feel them sharp and pointy.

"Josh is visiting from England," a blonde with iris-blue eyes said. "I'm Susie, and I love your costume—all of it, it's so cool. Do you mind if I touch it?"

"Go ahead," Meta said.

Susie pinched it between her fingers, and Meta flinched. "Wow, fits that well? Sorry."

Meta was a little dismayed. Beneath the table she pinched herself again. That was funny, she couldn't feel where the costume left off and she began.

Josh returned with the coffee then, and sat down. "So who are you beneath there?" he said.

"Meta is my name. Thank you for the coffee."

"Meta," Susie echoed. "That's a real good name for an alien."

"Yes, it is rather isn't it?" Meta said.

"But who are you really?" Josh persisted. "What do you do?" He sniggered, but not unkindly. "Are you a sort of bat person or something, going around doing good and saving lives?"

"I've always tried to do good," Meta said earnestly, "but you know, sadly I've never saved a life. That's the one thing I

would like to do."

"So, do you go to university?"

My, what a curiosity cat he is, thought Meta. "No," she said. "I don't go to school."

"Why, have you dropped out?"

Meta trilled a laugh. "I never thought of it as that." She chuckled as she reached for her mug of coffee then blinked with surprise. Her hand was covered in fine scales. How had that happened?

She glanced at the others, wondering if they had noticed—because anyone could tell she wasn't wearing gloves. It was all right, the two were focused on their conversation.

The young were far more accepting, Meta decided. If she'd been with old codgers they'd be judging and condemning her by now. Surely people shouldn't become narrower as they aged, but more forgiving?

"There's a lot about this place I don't understand," she said, slurping her coffee.

"What, the coffee shop?" Susie said, looking around her.

"No," Meta said. "Life on this planet."

She finished her coffee. "That was delicious," she said, rubbing her small pot belly—which surprised her really. She hadn't notice *that* when she'd first put on the suit.

There was some sugar left at the bottom of her mug and she scooped it up. As Josh's eyes widened, Meta realized he was watching her and she quickly whipped her tongue back into her mouth.

"That's a neat trick," he said. "How'd you do that?"

"It's all part of the costume," Meta said, who was a bit perplexed herself about her tongue having grown so long so suddenly.

"What do your parents think about you going around dressed like that?" he said.

Susie chuckled. "I don't think she's a student, Josh," she answered, before Meta could think of an answer. "I think

she's older. Probably has a husband. Do you have a husband, Meta?"

"No, not now. I used to have, but he..."

Susie was distracted and looked across the room. "Oh no, he's here again," she whispered.

Josh took his eyes off Meta for a moment. "She's talking about that man in the corner. We've seen him in here before. He sits and stares at the savings bank."

Meta's eyes narrowed, as best they could. "Really," she murmured. As she spoke, Corner Man—as she immediately named him—turned and met her eyes. Meta shuddered. His thoughts were twisted and mean. She thought he might even be a bit mad.

"It's just as well you've finished your coffee," she said. "I should go if I were you. Go on, get out of here."

A group of students were leaving, and Josh and Susie stood up to join them. Susie held out her hand, but rather than shake hands with her, Meta gave her a hug, keeping her fingers out of sight. It seemed, as well as scales, she was growing claws.

When the café was relatively empty, Meta approached the man.

"I know what you're up to," she said. "Why don't you forget it? You could end up inside again."

His eyes darkened. "Get away from me, weirdo."

"*Me* the weirdo?" Meta said. "Hah!"

He cursed her, and told her again to clear off. When she didn't, he got up and pushed past her. As he did, Meta discovered he was carrying a weapon. She followed him out of the door and across the street, wobbling along in her strange gait.

~*~

Officer Carl Bergson, retirement age and due to leave the force, thought he'd seen everything there was to see in that small town until then. Dispatch had called, saying that

Mr. Shott was worried because his dogs had stopped barking. This made Carl laugh; usually they received complaints from Mr. Shott's neighbours saying the dogs wouldn't shut up.

"So, what brought about this wonderful phenomenon?" he said.

"He reckons there's a lunatic on the loose, dressed as an alien," Dispatch replied. "It allegedly frightened the dogs into silence."

"I'd like to meet that special person," Carl said, laughing again. "Okay, I'll keep an eye out."

He circled the neighbourhood for a while before seeing the alien-looking creature entering the café. Whoever it was didn't look dangerous to him, just someone having an early Halloween prank. He was about to pull away when Corner Man came charging out of the café with Meta hot on his heels.

Meta could barely keep up with the man, so by the time she walked into the bank he had everyone down on the floor and a gun pointed at a terrified teller. Meta felt no fear as she walked up to him. The realization had come to her as a bit of a surprise, but she knew if he shot her, she wouldn't be harmed.

"Put the gun down, you silly man," she said.

Corner Man gaped at her, and that moment's hesitation gave Carl, who'd crept into the bank behind Meta, the chance to overpower him. Corner Man's gun went off, but he only shot a light fixture.

As Carl helped the man out of the door a sigh of relief swept the room like a breeze. People began getting to their feet, brushing themselves off and remarking what a lucky break they'd had. No one asked where the alien had disappeared to because they were too embarrassed to talk about it.

~*~

Carl was about to go off duty when Dispatch called

again. Mr. Shott had now seen the lunatic alien entering the house up the street, and feared the old lady who lived there might be in trouble. And by the way, his dogs still weren't barking.

Carl knew that house. He knew that someone called Violet West lived in number thirty-three, and said he would check it out. He parked the cruiser outside Violet's house and knocked on the door. No one answered so he tried the handle and found it unlocked.

He stepped inside and called, "Mrs. West?"

Still receiving no reply he cautiously went from room to room. Finding no one in the living room, kitchen or bathroom, he went upstairs.

"Mrs. West?" he called softly. He sighed when she didn't reply, and he walked over to her.

Violet was lying on the bed. She was quite dead.

"Violet West," he said, shaking his head as he closed her eyes. "Well. Goodbye then."

~*~

I smiled as I watched him from beyond. "Goodbye," I whispered.

It was years since I'd seen Carl. He'd been the one to come that day with the ambulance, to find John at the bottom of the stairs.

I was so upset, and he was so consoling, I had revealed what John and I had argued about before he died. I can remember saying, "He couldn't be allowed to take it. You do understand that, don't you?"

I never thought what I'd said might incriminate me in any way until Carl said, "I won't put that in my report."

If he had, and John's colleagues had been alerted, they might have taken the suit.

I couldn't allow that to happen. I had to keep that suit.

It was mine. It was Meta's.

Yes. Meta's. And Meta was going home now.

The Man at the Side of the Road

He was sitting at the side of the road, his feet actually on the road. It made me feel that if a careless driver swerved too close, his feet might be run over. I winced at the thought, sucking in my breath.

"What's up?" my husband said.

Those were the first words he'd spoken since he'd told me, quite calmly as if he were changing his socks, that he wanted a divorce. He wanted to be with someone who suited him better, he said. Couldn't I understand that after twenty years of marriage this could happen?

I could, actually, but I'd been hanging in the marriage out of loyalty, trying to keep the promise I'd made when he slipped that ring on my finger.

"Eh?" Bob said. "You all right?"

I guessed he might be a bit worried, because I hadn't ranted or anything. I didn't see the point when his mind was made up. He said he would be fair. He might be a cheat, but I didn't believe he was a liar, so I guessed he would be. He wasn't what one would call a bad man, just another human being who couldn't keep a promise.

"That man back there," I said. "I'm worried someone might run him over."

"What d'you want me to do about it?" he said.

"Pull over."

"You serious?" Bob said. "What, on the highway?"

"Yes. There look, there's a place."

As soon as the truck came to a halt I got out and ran back along the road. Bob shouted after me, but he didn't follow. Cars, trucks, buses were passing me like bullets. Some guys were making suggestive signs, poking their fingers out of windows.

The old guy looked up as I approached. Wordlessly, I took his hand and helped him down over the grass verge where we could hear each other speak.

We walked along and sat by a creek where the din was less. Man was a noisy creature, I thought irritably, as if without sound he wouldn't feel himself there.

"What were you doing up there?" I asked the old guy. "You could have got yourself killed. Do you live anywhere?" A modern question. Once it would have been, 'Where do you live?'

He looked amused. "You ask a lot of questions."

I was surprised at his voice, it didn't match his appearance, although looking closer, I saw that he wasn't dirty, just simply dressed.

"That's because I care," I said. "And aren't you the lucky one."

"Well, you've got that right," he said. "I've been sitting on that road all morning."

I refrained from asking why, and bit back a lecture about it, too. I had enough problems of my own to worry about, and who was I anyway to say what he should or shouldn't do? The way I felt these days I might find myself on the highway soon, looking to get run over.

I gazed around me with something like despair. I could only imagine how lovely the place must have been before the freeway bullied its way through. I could hear a bird singing and was reminded of when I was a girl; how I would awaken to the dawn chorus. I never heard it any more. I'd heard the songbirds were diminishing, and it was no wonder when we kept destroying their habitat. They kept cutting down the

trees to make room for more development, it was hard to imagine the world to come.

Garbage littered the bank and the creek; fast food containers, bottles, cans, cigarette cartons and those blue strips that tear off cellophane wrappers; straws, squashed indistinguishable items. Apparently on some highways they find feces in bags where people haven't bothered to stop.

A groan escaped me.

"We're living in a world of pigs," I said. "It's my planet too, and they're ruining my garden."

At my feet, almost hidden beneath a wad of sodden newspaper, I noticed a tiny, star-shaped flower. "I feel like that plant," I said. "Struggling to survive in a hostile world."

"It is the way of this world," the old guy said, in a slow, thoughtful way. "To be here is to discover what you don't want."

"Don't want," I said. "Or can't have." I told him of Bob's decision. "My husband wants a divorce."

I looked up at the sky through blurred vision. "Sometimes I think there's nothing left for me here. I keep thinking ... well, it may sound strange, but I keep wanting to go home. Only I don't know where home is."

He reached out and took my hand in his. It was brown and lined, but smooth to the touch, his fingers tapered; his nails well manicured. "There must be one place on this earth where you have felt truly happy?"

I had to think for several moments. "There was a place once," I said. "I camped by a lake. I've never felt peace quite like it since."

"Sometimes it helps to revisit places where we have been happy," he said.

"Oh, but I was younger then. Things were different. Safer. I could never go there again. Not on my own. Not these days, I'd be too frightened."

"You know what Mark Twain said," the old guy replied,

throwing me a challenging look. "Courage is resistance of fear, mastery of fear. Not absence of fear."

He stood abruptly and stretched. "Oh well, I guess I'll be going along now. Thank you for your kindness."

I watched him clamber down over the embankment, cross the creek and disappear into the woods. I thought perhaps he'd wandered out of his property; become disoriented and walked the wrong way. Or perhaps he liked to sit on the highway to watch the cars. Different strokes for different folks, and to my reckoning the human race was getting weirder by the minute.

"Everything okay?" Bob said, as I got back into the truck. He was reading one of his hunting magazines and barely looked up, so he didn't notice I was too distracted to answer.

~*~

At work the following Monday, "I suppose I'll have to deal with it," I said to my friend, Barb. "But I'm a bit shocked. It was so unexpected."

"Me too," she said. "How the heck will we manage now?"

We'd both arrived to find termination papers on our desks. Our company was closing down at the end of the week and we were two more workers to bite the dust in the declining economy. My planets must have been out of alignment or something; at the end of the week Bob was moving in with his girlfriend.

Thinking I should tell our children about what was going on in our marriage, I phoned them that evening. I didn't want to burden them with my problems, but I would have been comforted had they asked if I was okay.

That's a joke really. They hardly had time to listen.

What has the world become when we no longer have time for one another? I wondered. I was their mother. Didn't that mean anything any more?

At work the next morning the boss informed me I'd accrued some holiday time, and asked would I like to take the time off or have the money. I said I'd take the time. Let someone else do the packing, I told Barb, I'd have enough of that to do of my own soon.

The old man's words must have been simmering in my mind; that look he'd given me when he'd spoken of Twain must have woken a part of me I thought was dead. Perhaps my courage was only dormant, because I found myself digging out our old camping gear from the basement.

Bob made no comment about me going on a trip, but he did look a bit sad. That surprised me really. Perhaps he'd been looking forward to watching me suffer.

I packed up the car and, past Hope—the analogy made me laugh aloud—I found myself on the road to Lytton. I could have gone east, on into the Interior, but something drew me north. Even though I reminded myself it was probably a foolish thing to do, I kept thinking about what the old guy had said about going back to somewhere I'd felt truly happy.

It took six hours to reach Williams Lake, and then I turned west. I arrived at Till Lake that evening. There was no one else about; I had the whole campground to myself.

With rapists and murderers on my mind, I didn't sleep well that first night. As well, a great depression descended on me, and in the morning I felt exhausted. I didn't see any reason to get out of my sleeping bag. What was the damned point?

I lay for a long while, watching flies and little insects trapped in the vent above me. I knew how they felt. How was I going to get out of this situation? How would it be when I returned? Where would I live? Would I survive?

I buried my head in my pillow, suddenly, so tired.

I had rarely, in my whole life, taken a drink before five in the afternoon, but when I did get up eventually, I started a fire, made some coffee and poured a whole slew of whiskey

into it.

After a while, I decided it would be a good time to go to the lake. I took off my sneakers and socks, rolled up my pants and paddled in.

Man, was that water cold!

I'd seen a film once where someone had just walked into a lake and drowned. I remember thinking what a quiet death that must be; just wading in, deeper and deeper until your body is swallowed up. First the legs, the hips, then you're up to your waist. Finally, your head just vanishes. Glug glug. After a moment the water is still, as though you'd never been.

Must have been a brave stunt artist, I thought, turning away. I went back to the tent, crawled into my sleeping bag and closed my eyes.

~*~

I didn't wake up until it was dark. I couldn't believe I'd slept all day, but I guess when you're so emotionally tired, it wreaks havoc with your physical energy.

I started as a light passed through the tent like a ghost, briefly illuminating my belongings. The light switched off. A vehicle cut its engine. Holding my breath, my pulse thundering in my ears, I strained to listen. I heard a car door slam. A male voice.

I reached for my bag. At least I'd had the forethought to bring bear repellent with me. I didn't give a damn if it was illegal to spray humans. If my life was at risk, I'd use it!

Fumbling in my jeans for my car keys, I prayed that my car would start. If anyone came to the tent I'd threaten them with the spray and make a run for it. I had enough gas to get into Williams Lake. Once there, I would be safer.

Then I heard a child's voice. And a response from a woman. As quietly as I could, I unzipped my tent and opened the flap.

There was a full moon that night and it illuminated the campground. I could see a couple erecting a tent, and they

were considerate people because the woman was whispering instructions to the child, not yelling like some ignoramus would be, disrespecting the other campers' peace.

Once the tent was up, the couple and the child crawled inside and I didn't hear a sound more.

Reassured, and comforted by their company, before I got back into my tent, I went to the outhouse. Logging campgrounds are well taken care of. It was clean with a fresh toilet roll.

I rinsed my hands in the lake and back at the tent I poured myself a drink. I almost gagged at the unmistakable tang of souring milk. I was surprised it had turned so quickly. Soon, I would be forced back into society by the need for groceries. The thought didn't thrill me.

~*~

In the morning, I awoke suddenly. You know sometimes how you sense something before you see it? Well, I swear I'd heard those footfalls in my sleep before they arrived at the tent.

My instant reaction was to wish Bob were there. Then I reminded myself, he'd never be there for me again. Choking back bitter emotions, I could feel my pulse throbbing in my neck as I called, "Who's there?"

No answer, yet someone was standing outside, I could see a shadow. Grabbing the pepper spray, I unzipped the tent.

It was the old man.

"What are you doing here?" I said, squinting against the sun as I crawled outside.

I looked around me, amazed. During the early hours of the morning, tents had sprung up around me like mushrooms.

"Everyone is gathered now," he said. "Making some coffee, Cathy?"

"Coffee?" I looked at him blankly; I was still wondering where all the tents had come from, and who was inside them.

I made the coffee on automatic pilot. I needed a cup

myself, perhaps with something strong in it—except then I remembered the whiskey was all gone.

It was chilly, so I sat back inside the tent. It's amazing how warm it can feel in that small enclosure.

The old man stayed outside, sitting with his legs crossed. He didn't seem to feel the cold. He was used to it, I supposed.

"So," I said. "Are you going to tell me what you're doing here? And how you know my name?" I hadn't locked my car, so I guess he could have snooped in the glove box and seen my insurance.

He seemed to know what I was thinking.

"I know a lot of things without having to look them up," he said, his eyes meeting mine. He took a sip of his coffee and complimented me on the taste. "As for what I'm doing here, I find people who are ready."

"Ready for what?"

He smiled. "To go home. Like you, Cathy. You told me as much."

I had, it was true. Even so. "This is crazy," I said.

"It won't be as strange as you think," he said.

"What won't?"

"Going home."

Deciding to humour him, I said, "Okay, when you say *home*, where do you mean?"

"The place you have longed for in your heart, Cathy."

I laughed uneasily. "But... it was just a fleeting thought sometimes. I don't know where it is. I don't know what I meant."

He smiled again. "You'll all remember soon. I'm here to help you transition."

"Transition?" I said. "Transition to what?"

"To home. Your home planet, Quinqera."

About to retort, *where the hell is Quinqera?* I swallowed a mouthful of coffee instead because that name seemed familiar. Where had I heard it before?

"You recognize it."

I looked up, and as I held his eyes, a memory flickered in the recesses of my mind. It was too elusive to grasp. It was like when you look at the night sky there's a star you can only see if you don't quite look directly at it. But you know it's there.

"You came from there," he said. He gestured with his hand towards the others. "All these people did. And now it is time to return."

I laughed aloud. "You're telling me I'm an *alien*?"

"Humans have such a strange concept of what comprises an alien," he said. "They're so hypocritical."

I glanced over to the mushroom patch.

"All those people..."

"I'm a gatherer, Cathy," he said, standing. "You'll understand soon." He thanked me again for the coffee, gave me a polite nod and walked away.

I watched him go over to the others; touching them, pointing to the sky; reassuring them.

Following their gaze, although I couldn't see the stars I knew they were there; the other planets. Something not being visible isn't proof it doesn't exist. Obviously all those other people believed him. They trusted the old guy.

And really, how had he turned up at Till Lake? How had he known I'd be here?

Suddenly, before I can think any more about it, something huge begins materializing over the lake. It is as though it exists in another dimension because although it hovers, shimmering above the water, the trees and reeds are barely disturbed.

With rapt expressions on their faces, the others forsake their tents, their belongings, and begin to walk towards it.

The old guy walks back to me and holds out his hand.

"Don't be sad about your family, Cathy," he says. "One day I could be waiting at the side of the road for them, too."

Duplicated!

The year 2225

I still grieve. Of *course* I do. But truth is, I only grieve for what *might* have been, had things been different. I've said to myself countless times; stop feeling guilty, Dara. You can't grieve for something that isn't really gone.

I just feel sad, that's all. Sad... and a little regretful.

It all began when Zan, my husband of some years, announced that we were getting a Duplicate. He said he was working on a new prototype and therefore it was thought by the Board of Directors that he'd be the best person to test it. Knowing Zan as I did, he'd probably put the suggestion to them. He was one of their top scientists; they were hardly likely to refuse him.

A Duplicate was one of the latest clone robots derived from a base clone that would become, with human input, a duplication of the human who chose it. Although cloning was once taboo, after WWIII things were different. That war, which decimated half the world's population, didn't end it as people feared, but it did change planet Earth beyond recognition. The conflict between religions was the cause of WWIII and afterwards, seeking to maintain peace, religion was banned. Without religious dogma many former restrictions disappeared. One of these was unbridled cloning.

Blob clones as they were called, in different shapes and sizes, were stacked like chrysalides in Duplication Centres,

awaiting human input to bring them fully alive.

One evening, Zan said he would be having a Duplicate made of himself.

"Are you sure you should do that?" I said.

"Quite sure," he said. "And you'd better tell your mother so she can get used to the idea."

Mother didn't live with us, but she visited a lot. She adored Zan, but the feeling wasn't mutual. He never let her know though. He could be a bit sneaky that way.

"She won't go for us having one," I assured him. "She's still under the impression that robotic technology is a waste of time and taxpayers' money, and that they'll take workers' jobs away."

"That might have been true in a pre-war world," Zan replied, "but not ours. You must have seen the most recent statistics?"

The stats he spoke of were the rates of suicide and premature deaths. And yes, I had seen them. Although it was once thought in the past that life would become more leisurely, believe me, that hadn't happened. People now found themselves dropping dead from overwork and exhaustion. That's how the extensive development in robotics had come about, to help make up the shortfall in the workforce—at least, that had been the original idea. Like many good ideas, they were funded by the rich. Consequently, only the privileged could afford the more elaborate robots. And we, I suppose, because of Zan's position, would be considered the privileged.

"There are two parts to this process," Zan explained. "I'll go in for the initial introduction and then we'll do the tweaking, which will be the final transfer of information from me to the robot. You can come and watch if you like."

Zan was a renowned scientist, considered to be brilliant by some in his field, but sometimes (I thought), a bit unrealistic.

"It's okay for other people to do this," I said, trying not to dampen his enthusiasm but wishing to express my genuine concern. "But you? What if something goes wrong?"

"Like what?"

"Well, I don't know. You've hardly given me time to think about it. Don't you think you should give it more consideration?"

"I've given it all the consideration I'm going to," Zan said firmly, closing his briefcase with a snap.

I worked at home at my computer, providing information and delivering ebooks to library patrons.

"But he might get in my way," I said. "What am I going to do with him all day? And what happens when you've finished studying him? What will happen then?"

Zan gave me a withering look. "He won't be here *all day*, Dara. As for the rest, we'll take it a day at a time."

"But Zan," I said. "I—"

"I've made up my mind," Zan said firmly. "It's all arranged."

~*~

Mother didn't take the news at all well. "It's no good going on about it to *me*," I said, exasperated after an hour of her wrangling. "Zan has made up his mind and it's all arranged. So speak to him about it if you can't stand the idea."

"I think you've both gone raving *mad*," Adorata said.

Oh, yes, even in the year 2225, they still used that term despite the politicians assuring us that, along with extremism, insanity had been eradicated from the planet.

"Don't look so worried," I said. "It might not work out anyway, Zan's ideas don't always. If it doesn't, he'll take the robot to the Disintegration Centre to get rid of him. It's as simple as that."

Mother sniffed. "Nothing's ever *that* simple, Dara. You should know that by now. And if you must *insist* on getting one, why not get a female? Even in this day and age I think

it's quite immoral to live with two men. How will you cope?"

"Oh, don't be so old fashioned, Mother," I said. "He's a robot and, according to Zan, he'll do exactly what I tell him." As often seemed to happen, I was now defending one of Zan's crazy ideas while not being fully convinced myself.

"From my point of view," I continued nonetheless, "a male will be far more manageable. Besides, it wouldn't make sense to have two of *me*? What would she do all day?"

"If the thing was a female, it could clean your house for a start," Mother retorted.

"The robot is not an *it*," I pointed out. "Neither a *thing*. He'll be called Blochlen, and if you can't remember that you can call him a Duplicate, which is his proper definition."

"Duplicate, pooplicate," Adorata said waspishly, running her finger along the top of a shelf. "The *Duplicate* then, can start here. Just *look* at this dust."

"I'm sure any Duplicate can clean," I said loftily. "Female *or* male, I shall train him. And he'll probably grumble less. That's if they grumble at all. I bet they don't. I expect you can programme them not to."

"Huh!" said my irritating mother. She wouldn't give in; she never does. "I think it's a foolish idea, and mark my words, Dara, you'll regret it."

Adorata's fears and warnings added to my own if I were truthful, but I tried to put them out of my mind and prepare myself for Blochlen's arrival. What else could I do? Zan was determined to bring him home whether I liked it or not.

~*~

The week after Zan went through the initial steps he was informed that the robot was ready for the second process. I went with him to the Centre and took a chair in a viewing room. I watched the two of them being wheeled in on their respective gurneys. It was amazing. The blank expression on Blochlen's face was the only indication that he was the robot. They were identical.

I settled into my seat as the process began.

I was so engrossed I started as a man sat beside me. He wore a white coat and I think he thought I was a fellow scientist. I didn't dispute his assumption. Once people knew I was Zan's wife their demeanor changed to one of deference, and I hated that.

I found out that he was fairly new to the company and worked in the Adjustment and Disintegration Department. He was sandy-haired, with a round face. Behind his glasses his eyes were the colour of the ocean on a misty day.

"Where I work is a little depressing at times," he said, giving me the thumbs down sign. "We don't do that many adjustments you know. It's all poof! and they're gone."

Presumably, he was describing the disintegration process. "I can imagine how you'd like to watch the start-up process for a change," I said.

He smiled and gave me a thumbs up this time, as though to say, 'yes, rather.' He had a nice smile.

"I understand that this is another prototype?" I said.

"Is that what you've heard?"

I looked at him sharply, unable to think why he was throwing doubt on the matter. Unless he was just being careful not to give secrets away. Zan kept an awful lot to himself so I was used to that.

"So what part of the business are you involved in?" he asked, catching me unawares.

I had to think quickly. "I suppose you could say I'm going to be monitoring the robot."

"Oh, I see." He was thoughtful. "Well, I doubt you'll find it any different to the others."

"What do you mean?"

"It won't solve the problem."

"But I understand these robots don't have any problems," I said. "That they're almost ninety-nine percent infallible?"

"Oh, there's nothing wrong with the *robots*, it's the

humans who are the problem." He gave me rather a sly look I thought. "I have a theory about it, too," he added.

I turned my head away, not wanting to know. I already felt annoyed with him for coming in there, heaping more uncertainty on my already burdensome anxiety.

Thankfully, he didn't pursue it and we sat in silence, looking down on Blochlen and Zan, watching as Blochlen's face underwent a series of emotions. It was amazing. Like watching a film on fast forward.

As the process came to a close, my companion stood.

"I'd better get back to work," he said. "I don't want Professor Leven to find me slacking."

"Oh, I doubt he'd think that," I said.

"Obviously you don't know him very well," he replied, thumbs down.

About to retort a response, I thought better of it. He was probably sour, I thought. Zan said a lot of his peers were jealous of him.

Before he left, I saw his nametag. He was called Jantzen. Alan Jantzen.

~*~

Zan had said there would be a number and USB port on the bottom of Blochlen's foot. The number was his make and model and the USB port could be used to hook him up to a computer. He could be programmed to record what happened in any given day and Zan could retrieve the information at his leisure.

I thought that smacked of spying on the robot's life, but then I reminded myself he *was* just a machine. However, as the two of them stood side-by-side in front of me, it was hard to think of Blochlen in that context. Very hard indeed.

"This is Dara, as you know," Zan said to Blochlen. To me he added, "Blochlen has been programmed to exist at the mental and emotional stage I was a few years ago, and so, in his mind, we have only just met."

Blochlen flashed me a stunning smile and I felt strangely disconcerted; Zan hadn't smiled at me that way in a long time.

"But how will he be able to substitute for you at work if he isn't educated to your present level?" I asked.

"He can perform many functions without having my current knowledge," Zan explained. "He can always be tweaked to a higher level." He carried on talking about it for a while in scientific terms, probably more to impress the technicians rather than to inform me. I hardly understood a word he said.

When we got outside to our vehicle Blochlen offered me the front seat, but Zan insisted he sit beside him. I didn't mind because it meant I could observe Blochlen from the rear without appearing rude.

As I compared them, I marveled. It was amazing. I know I've probably said that before, but it's *true*. Physically they were identical, but you know, as I kept looking I could tell a difference. Zan might have said it was just my perception or only in my mind, but I swear, Blochlen's whole aura—although we aren't supposed to speak of such matters these days—was lighter somehow. Purer. Cleaner.

I must tell you what came to me. You'll see why later, but it occurred to me then, the very first time I met him, that Blochlen seemed devoid of cunning.

~*~

Whatever I imagined he would be Blochlen did *not* turn out like I expected. As the days passed, despite Zan saying he wouldn't be up to his level, in some ways I thought Blochlen was beyond Zan's state of being.

I was also amazed by his knowledge of everything, and had to keep reminding myself that of course he knew these things because he was Zan. That is, in a way—although Zan hadn't been so involved in our family life, or so considerate about my comforts, likes and dislikes, for a very long time.

I asked Mother whether she thought Blochlen was

different to Zan.

"Strange you should mention," she said. "I was only thinking that myself. He does seem a *bit* different. I can't think why, except you have to remember this is a machine and so he'll have his own little idiosyncrasies, won't he? Like kissing the back of my hand when we met. I can't recall Zan ever doing that, can you?"

"He might have once," I said, having a vague memory.

"I think it's rather charming." She looked sidelong at me, raising an eyebrow. "Perhaps Zan will take a leaf out of Blochlen's book."

I was surprised she'd say that, I'd never told her about our marital problems—well, I don't know I'd go so far as to say they were *problems* exactly, more like annoying hiccups that kept occurring, brought about by Zan becoming a workaholic and his growing indifference towards me. My feelings for him hadn't changed, but it took two to have a loving relationship. Had Mother noticed it too?

"I *do* see these things," she said, as though I'd spoken aloud. "Even if I don't say anything. That's why I was dead set against you having another man in the house. However, I have at times been wrong. It would be interesting if some good came out of it after all."

Mother might be having a change of heart about Blochlen, but I was less sure. I knew Zan and I didn't think he would ever mimic Blochlen. If anything, he would encourage Blochlen to become more like himself.

The thought depressed me.

~*~

After several months, when Blochlen showed no signs of changing his behaviour and he was tweaked so that he could replace Zan at work at any time, I was disappointed to find that Zan spent no more time at home than he had before. Rather, it was Blochlen I spent time with.

Having got used to his presence in the house, I began to

feel easy in his company. He was never in the way; he never interfered or interrupted me during my working hours. When I left my office at the end of the day he would ask me if I'd care to bathe before dinner, and would prepare the spa. I would emerge relaxed to find dinner prepared.

At work, Blochlen was very capable and could probably do Zan's job without any tweaking, Zan said. One evening, after praising Blochlen's attributes, he added, "I can see you're enjoying his company."

"I enjoy *your* company," I said, hoping he'd leave it at that. He did for the time being.

Mother was shrewder.

"I don't like the way you're looking at that robot," she said. "Neither the way he's looking at you." She gave me a warning. "You be careful, my girl."

If *she* was concerned about my growing feelings for Blochlen, think how I felt. Yes, I did enjoy his company. I felt lighter when he came into the room. And at night, when I went into our bedroom, I have to (blushingly) admit that sometimes I wished it were Blochlen getting into bed with me. I'm sure *he* wouldn't have buried his head into another research paper and then fallen asleep as soon as his head touched the pillow.

~*~

Heeding mother's warning, I phoned Alan Jantzen to see if he could give me some advice on how to deal with the situation. Under the circumstances, I could hardly ask Zan.

After reminding him where we met, "I need to see you, Alan," I said. "I have a few questions." He sounded friendly enough and we arranged to meet at a café.

I still didn't tell him who I was, which I felt a little guilty about. But I feared that if he knew, he wouldn't open up to me. After I heard what he had to say that ended up being a wise decision. He would have been horribly embarrassed.

"It's good of you to come," I said, shaking his hand.

"Not at all," he said. "How can I help you?"

"The first time we met, you mentioned a problem regarding the Duplicates, and I've been wondering what you meant," I began.

He considered me for a moment, no doubt trying to decide whether to talk.

"It is important," I said, to encourage him. "Please, tell me what you know, and how you know it."

"Very well." He pulled his chair closer to the table. "I've derived my information from the robots before I've terminated them."

He looked around us to ensure no one was listening.

"As I mentioned before," he went on quietly, "there *are* no problems with the Duplicates, they are almost a flawless design. The complaints come from the people that are duplicated. They pay a fortune for the robots, but then they get jealous and want to get rid of them."

"Jealous?" I said. "I don't understand. And has this happened in all the cases?"

He nodded. "In all the instances I've researched, the personality of the Duplicate is much sunnier than the host's." He smiled. "Who'd you rather live with, a grumpy or sunny partner? Husbands end up falling for their wives all over again—the *Duplicate* wives, that is, and vice versa. And then the Duplicate's feelings get involved."

"But they aren't supposed to have any feelings. I was under the impression they couldn't manufacture any emotions, although they would have a certain amount of empathy and understanding." I was quoting from one of Zan's glossy sales brochures.

"That's not what my own research has shown," Alan said. "Inorganic robots might follow that theory, but not robots derived from clones with human input."

But Zan was brilliant. How could he have missed such a thing?

I put that aside for a moment. "So what did the robots tell you?"

"The wives bonded with the robots. Then the duplicated partners—the husbands—got jealous and wanted the Duplicates destroyed. In each case the wives pled for the Duplicates' lives. They said they'd fallen in love with them because they resembled who their husbands *once used to be*, before they became belligerent, deviously manipulative and selfish—BDMS, or beedums, as I call it in my thesis."

"You're kidding?" I considered at that point he might be joking. I'd met these lab people at various social functions and found them to have a warped sense of humour. "You mean you're writing your thesis on this?" He nodded. "So Zan... I mean, Dr. Leven will read it?"

"He has read part of it," Alan said dourly. "He told me to mind my own business and to stop making waves."

"But you aren't going to stop working on it, are you?"

"Of course not. I love my work—it's interesting, don't you think?"

More than interesting, I thought.

He lowered his voice further. "I know we aren't supposed to talk about religious and spiritual matters, souls and suchlike these days, but that doesn't mean to say they don't exist."

He looked a little nervous, and no wonder; this was dangerous talk. But we were practically alone and unlikely to be overheard.

Not that the subject bothered me, having a mother like mine. Adorata rebelled against the government's permitted reading lists. She still had stashed away one of our ancestor's family Bibles and she also kept a whole library of books on spiritual matters—something that would get her a jail sentence if anyone found out. But she insisted that the State was wrong. She said that every human being needed spiritual sustenance, and that's what she'd raised me to believe.

I'd never divulged this to Zan though. He was one of State's Children.

"It's all right," I said to Alan, inclining towards him. "Go on."

"It is believed that the soul doesn't exist. But I'm not sure I entirely agree with that." He paused. "What would you say the soul represented?"

I thought for a moment. "According to what I've read, it is an indestructible essence that is embodied for a while in each lifetime, which is a person's self. I tend to think of it as a sort of energy capsule that contains all the memories of past actions and events, which in turn will shape a new life's destiny according to what sort of personality that soul has."

"Very well put," he said, now getting a little excited that he'd extracted that out of me. "So a soul carries a will with it, right?"

"I suppose so," I said, wondering where this was leading.

"And anyone who has a will can use it one way or the other, right? Meaning, they can choose to be kind, loving and caring for their fellow beings, or become beedums, right?" I nodded, sniggering mentally at the beedums. It was a marvelous word.

"It's generally thought that clones don't have souls," he said. "Or, at least it *was* when people were allowed to talk about these things. So, my theory is, *if* that's true, perhaps it's the reason certain aspects of the donor's personality don't get transferred, because there is no receptor for it."

"Could it really be that simple?"

"It's the most logical explanation I can come up with," he said. "And if that's the case, it won't go away by ignoring it, or by creating new *prototypes*. The problem is; how can we know, or even research it in earnest, when it's taboo to talk about it?"

"If there are problems, of course it should be discussed," I said.

"Yes, well. Besides government legislation, there are those who don't *want* it discussed."

"Like who?" I asked in all innocence. "And why?"
Never thinking he'd answer, "Like Professor Leven."
I gulped mentally.

"In the two cases I told you about," Alan said, "where the women fell in love with the Duplicates, they described their husbands to me. To back up their comments so that they couldn't be considered prejudiced, I did a little research of my own."

"You mean you investigated the men? And what did you find out?"

"They were of the beedums type. I should have to study each case very thoroughly, of course. But my theory is, the Duplicates, not possessing any beedums at all, seem to be purer, cleaner and without cunning."

I looked away so that he wouldn't see the confusion in my eyes. You realize *why*; I've already told you how I thought that about Blochlen the first time I met him.

"So, to sum up," Alan continued, "because when the wives first met their husbands they didn't know or see that side of them and fell in love with their kluck." He grinned. "That's KLC, kindness, loving and caring. The Duplicates, not having these negative tendencies, reminded them of how their men once were. Result? They fell instantly and head over heels in love again."

I was so tempted right then to reveal who I was and the difficulties I was having. But I couldn't find the courage.

"Professor Leven is aware of this," Alan said. "But he's dismissed my theory. He's even threatened to fire me if I persist along these lines. Yet I feel potential customers should be warned about it."

"They most definitely should!" I said.

I was bewildered about Zan's reluctance to do the right thing. After all, he held a lot of sway. Did he consider it a

personal failure that he hadn't thought of Alan's theory himself? I wondered.

"I'm sorry you're having this problem with Professor Leven," I said, not knowing what else to say. "I hope it resolves itself."

Alan didn't look too hopeful. He went on to tell me that after the husbands had the Duplicates terminated, they'd used the excuse of infidelity to divorce their wives. And yet, as they were Zan's colleagues, they must have known of the existing problems and therefore the risks they were taking before they ordered them.

"You know what I think?" he said. "I think it was a beedums way of gaining a divorce. Makes you wonder what Professor Leven's personal agenda is, doesn't it?"

I'd rather he hadn't said that.

~*~

In an effort to put my mind at rest, that evening I said to Zan, "I've been thinking that it would be a good idea for us to go away somewhere together."

We were sitting in the living room after dinner. I was reading a steamy romance; his nose was buried in his computer.

"What's that?" he said, distractedly.

"I was saying that we should go away together. You haven't taken a holiday for ages, and I think it would be great to spend some time alone. Can't you take a couple of weeks off so that we could go to the coast?"

"You know how busy I am," he said. "Anyway, what's brought this on?"

"Several things." I glanced across the room and smiled at Blochlen. "Blochlen, would you leave us please?"

He nodded politely, glanced at Zan and left.

"Such things," I said quietly, "as having Blochlen here. We're rarely alone any more. Don't you care about that?" When he didn't answer, my temper flared. "If I didn't know

better, I might suspect you."

That got his attention. "Suspect me of what?"

"Withholding vital information from me."

He looked at me coldly. "What information?"

"You're making it very hard for me," I said, squirming under his intense gaze and wondering how I could reveal what I knew without implicating Alan.

And then it came to me. "While I was at the Centre, I met a woman," I said, averting my eyes. "A recently divorced wife of one of your colleagues. She contended that bringing home the Duplicate had been her husband's ploy to get a divorce."

I repeated what Alan had told me, pretending I'd heard it from the wife.

"Oh, that. Well, they handled it all wrong," he said, returning to his work.

"Excuse me?"

He sighed. "Those guys. They should have got *two* Duplicates, one for each of them and then there would have been no problem."

I stared at him, hardly believing what he'd said.

He put his computer aside. "Dara, just why do you think I brought Blochlen here? Surely you must have wondered?"

I'd never considered any reason other than the one he gave me. Now I thought again.

"You said it was to test a new prototype," I said a few moments later—when I could. "You mean you have another reason? You lied to me?"

He gave a deep sigh.

"I wasn't lying. I was demonstrating how we could keep our marriage going. I thought it would be fun, with no harm done. We could resolve our problems sensibly. You have to admit things aren't what they used to be."

"I know I'm not entirely blameless," I said, granting him that much. "But my feelings haven't changed for you, so

whose fault is it that we have these problems?"

"No need to get snappy," he said, looking offended.

"Snappy? You don't know what snappy is," I snapped. "I never complain, and yet you're rarely here. And when you are, you never stop working. You have no time for me. No time for *us*. We never do anything together any more, and our sex life is the pits!"

"Whoa," he said, looking at me uneasily.

"Well, it's true isn't it? What do you want then, a divorce?"

"You know I can't risk that. Divorce isn't the casual thing it used to be. And I'm not just *any* man. I have to watch my professional reputation."

"Oh, of course you do," I sneered. "You must watch out for *that*." There must be someone else, I figured. He was doing his utmost to palm me off on Blochlen so he could have an affair without feeling guilty.

I know it may seem a convoluted way to think, but I was sure that's what he had in mind. The personal agenda that Alan had alerted me to.

"Who is she? Who do you want to replace me with?" I demanded.

He looked at me as though I were stupid. "You just don't get it, do you? I've just told you."

"No you haven't," I said, racking my brain to try to remember what he'd just said. It's hard for me to think logically when I'm upset.

"She doesn't exist yet," he said. "But I intend to make of duplicate of you."

"But... that would be me," I spluttered. "What would be the point? Why don't you want the real me?"

"Perhaps for the same reason you find the duplicate Zan far more interesting than me?" he said. "Because I know you do."

I was furious that the conversation had turned this way

and went to leave the room.

"By the way," Zan said, stopping me in my tracks, "someone told me they saw you in a café with Alan Jantzen. What was that all about?"

I didn't know what to say. The last thing I wanted was to get Alan fired.

I had to twist the truth slightly. "I first met him while Blochlen was being prepared. He watched alongside me and later, we just met."

Zan's eyes narrowed. He was no fool.

"I don't know what he said, but I can tell you now, if he doesn't soon have a change of mind, he'll lose his job and I'll make sure he never gets another! The man's an idiot. He simply doesn't see how we can use this to our advantage."

What? I thought. *No insanity left in the world? You're kidding me.*

"What are you saying?" I asked. "What do you intend to do? Become a marriage guidance counselor and advise the use of the Duplicates as a resolution for marriages on the rocks?"

"The Duplicates could be used for all sorts of things. Just think about it." He was getting excited about it too. "No more divorces. Happy twosomes forever." He grinned. "Or foursomes."

He reached for me and pulled me down on his lap.

"We could have it all," he said silkily. "Think about it, Dara." He nuzzled my ear with soft kisses. "We get a duplicate made of you and we all live happily ever after, with none the wiser."

"Do you feel I've really changed so much that you can't love the real me?" I asked, my ego stung.

"You aren't without your BDMS," he said and then gave a derisive laugh. "Beedums. Alan Jantzen's a moron. You think I can take someone who uses words like that in his thesis, seriously?"

"He's eccentric, that's all," I said, thinking I should jolly well say more, but I could hardly think straight to tell you the truth. Zan hadn't tickled my ear for months.

~*~

The next morning, still in the afterglow of being reintroduced to my husband's sexual prowess, I went downstairs to find Zan in his office. He was filing some papers and had his back towards me. I'd done a lot of thinking that morning and had come to a decision that didn't please me, but one I thought was the only solution.

Standing in the doorway, I said, "After last night, surely you must feel we can work things out?"

I saw him stiffen and I prepared myself for an argument. However, after a long pause, he said simply, "So, what do you want me to do?"

Slightly heartened that he was seeing some sense, and believing it was due to the renewal of our intimacy, I was encouraged to go on.

"Zan, I really don't want to do this," I said. "But it's no use. You're going to have to return Blochlen. There's no need for him now... really, is there? You must surely realize we can still get it together? There's no need for Duplicates of either of us, we'll be fine. So... isn't it better to forget your plan? And wouldn't it be better to remove the temptation?"

I waited in the silence.

"Are you going to tell him?" he said.

"I can't." I said. "I... can't." And I walked away before he turned and could see my expression.

~*~

I thought I should warn Alan Jantzen, so I called him to explain that Zan would be paying him a visit with yet another robot—our robot. First though, I had to explain who I was.

"I just didn't know how to tell you before," I said. "If I had, you wouldn't have explained about the beedums or the kluck, would you?"

"I guess I wouldn't," he replied.

And you know what? It was his honesty, his dedication to his work rather than for personal gain (or crazy mad-scientist ideas) that made me say, "I wish there was something I could do to help you so that this doesn't happen again. I wish Zan had never brought Blochlen home. I hate this. Will you please talk to him again about this situation? I'm *so* upset."

"*So* in love," he dared to say, the cheeky devil, but before I could expound denials, or at least scold him for his impudence, he said, "Okay. Only for you, Mrs. Leven, I will see what I can do."

I hoped Zan would listen to him this time. Perhaps see that it was his duty to resolve the crisis.

~*~

Perhaps, perhaps. Perhaps one day, in these days of genetic engineering, pigs might fly.

Zan and I kept our distance for the next while. The matter had become one of some embarrassment between us. I was nursing my anger, and he knew it. I was hoping that Alan had managed to talk some sense into him, but I daren't ask; Zan never mentioned Blochlen's name.

Sometimes I liked to think I saw genuine remorse in his eyes, but I wasn't sure. I wondered if seeing his double go up in smoke, or whatever happened to the robots, had sobered him a little.

Imagine my surprise when, some weeks later, he raised the subject of the holiday.

He probably thought I'd reject the idea, and I must admit I did feel ambivalent about it. However, in spite of his insanity I still loved him, and I decided I could work on my feelings just as easily in the Caribbean as in our apartment, so why turn down a holiday?

I bet you wouldn't.

~*~

We went for two weeks to a Caribbean paradise.

Gradually, as the days passed, with all that lovely rest, soaking up the sun and swimming in the glorious ocean, my anxiety and anger dissipated. I truly felt as though I had my husband back and was enjoying every moment of him.

"Those other husbands didn't give it enough effort," I said smugly, on the way home on the plane. "Look what we've rekindled."

"What other husbands?"

"The men," I said. "You know, the ones who didn't have the kluck."

"The kluck," he repeated slowly, a slight frown on his handsome, tanned face.

I was reluctant to mention Alan's name for fear of raking up bad feelings, but I was too puzzled to bite my tongue.

"I'm talking about Alan Jantzen's thesis," I said. "Surely you must remember? He said you'd read it but wouldn't give it any credence."

He looked at me. "But Alan's a brilliant scientist."

It was the way he said it. And what he said.

Oh, dear, I thought. *Oh, dearie, dearie, double dear.*

"Want to join the Mile High Club?" I said, thinking that he and I needed to be alone. Right now, before this went any further.

He gave a wicked chuckle. "Where?"

"Follow me."

I led the way to the bathroom. When we were secured inside the tiny enclosure, I said, "Let's take our shoes off."

"Kinky," he said, slipping off his sandals.

It was a bit of a struggle in such a confined space, and wriggling around got us all hot and bothered, and we ended up joining the Club. But afterwards, I remembered what we'd gone in there for and I looked at the bottom of his foot.

There it was; the number and the USB port.

When I thought of the implications, "Oh, Blochlen," I

said. "How *could* you?"

He looked at me shamefacedly, not saying anything.

"Come on," I said. "What happened?"

"The evening Zan told you of his plan, well, I did overhear some of your conversation," he said. "Consequently, not wanting to be responsible for causing any more trouble in your marriage, I told Zan I didn't want to exist any more. But he didn't agree. He insis—"

"Whatever you say, you're lying," I said. "He *did* agree. The very next morning, he said he would take you to the Disintegration Center."

"That was me you spoke to," Blochlen said. "Not Zan. And what you said... well, although it saddened me, it made me more resolved that my decision was the right one. But the problem is—"

"I'm not listening," I said, tossing my head. "You're nothing but a sneaky machine. You decided you would get rid of Zan instead!"

"No, it wasn't like that, Dara. I swear it wasn't."

I ignored his denials, struggled past him and managed to get out of the door. There was a line-up about half way back the plane, and I can tell you, I shot *such* a look at a boggle-eyed teenager who sniggered as Blochlen followed me out.

I was so mad, so stunned, so... totally not knowing what to do, I couldn't speak to Blochlen for the rest of the way.

We collected our vehicle and he took us home from the airport. He tried to speak to me several times, but I snapped at him to be quiet. All I could think of was how *cunning* he'd been and I couldn't wait to tell Alan Jantzen how wrong *he* was. Wrong, wrong, *wrong*. The beedums *did* get passed on.

~*~

At the soonest opportunity, I made arrangements to meet Alan.

"The robot *must* have beedums to have done what he did," I said, after I explained.

"Did Blochlen admit to anything?" Alan asked.

"Well, no," I said. "He just said that he'd offered to be terminated because he felt he was causing so much trouble in our marriage."

"And did he tell you what Zan said?"

"I've refused to listen to his excuses!"

"They aren't excuses, Mrs. Leven," Alan said. "He is telling you the truth. He really doesn't have beedums. He isn't responsible for your husband's demise."

"Then who is? What are you saying?"

I saw the look in his eyes, and put things together.

"Oh, Alan," I gasped. "How *could* you?"

"Your husband, Mrs. Leven, had beedums to the point of being dangerous. It wasn't hard to get rid of such a detestable human being. I just took advantage of a perfect opportunity to resolve everyone's issues." He winked. "Especially yours."

Putting a finger to his lips, he opened the door and went out.

~*~

Well, what could I do? It was no use reporting what Alan had done otherwise they might take my Duplicate away. After all, they still had their brilliant scientist, the project would continue. And really, would you turn down a perfect partner?

I bet not.

After Alan explained how it came about, I realized Blochlen had nothing to do with it, so it was no use staying cross with him. After all, while we were on holiday he hadn't tried to hide who he was. He'd gone around barefoot. I could have looked—except, how often do you look at the bottom of your partner's feet?

Well, as I say, I still grieve. I'd be a cold-hearted witch if I didn't feel *something* for Zan's unfortunate accident.

But, having a bit of beedums of my own, I'm not *that* sad.

The Author



After Celia moved from England to Canada in 1980, she was published in the UK, Canada, the United States and South Africa. She wrote and co-directed an English farce that was performed on Galiano Island, BC, and now writes novels that are published by Twilight Times Books, Tennessee, USA. (www.twilighttimesbooks.com)

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Details of Celia's books and upcoming publications can be found at www.devonshirebabe.com.

Purchasing Information

Celia's novels are available from www.twilighttimesbooks.com or from any bookstore, quoting either the ISBN or the author's name.

In stock at Miners Bay Books, Mayne Island, and the Insight Gallery on Galiano Island, if you are traveling to the Gulf Islands, British Columbia.

*Published Novel***Mary's Child**

ISBN 1-933353-11-2

Times have been hard for Mary Jay. Refused the refuge of relatives when orphaned, she has spent the better part of her sixteen years in a workhouse. When she has given up all hope of ever leaving the detestable place, she is apprenticed out to a farming couple, Harriet and Ronald Bennett, who live at Blackthorn Farm in North Bovey, a hamlet on the outskirts of Dartmoor.

Even though Mary finds it hard to please her new mistress, she is joyful to be comparatively free. Ronald loves her; he calls her his angel. That's why he's so shocked when Mary runs away from Blackthorn; then devastated further to know why. Because of Harriet's attitude, he can't allow Mary to return to the farm, but rather than have her go back to the workhouse, he agrees that she may live with Flo Endacott, the local midwife.

It is Flo who delivers Mary's child, Kitty, and it is that kindly soul who lives with the knowledge of the circumstances surrounding Kitty's conception and birth. She keeps this secret for years until Kitty is a young woman and stumbles on the appalling truth herself.

Anguished, shocked, and at first rejecting who she is, Kitty emerges brave and courageous as she faces the demons in herself and the devil of a man who fathered her; who wrecked not only her mother's life, but also her grandmother's before her.

Published Novel

Unraveled

ISBN 1-931201-10-2

What could be more alarming than a ferry going astray and people can't get home to their dinners? Imagine the chaos, the frustration! Yet, that event is nothing compared to what the Gale Island psychic and astrologer predicts for her clients when writing to warn them about an upcoming cosmic event.

Covering up for the straying ferry, Busby Barratt, president of the West Coast Ferry Corporation, tells a pesky newspaper reporter that it was really a trial for future mystery tours. He knows Pug Snood, the owner/founder of the WCFC, will fire him for incompetence if he discovers the truth. Either way, Barratt is going to be in deep doggy-do if Pug sees the article. In a panic, he phones Millicent, Pug's wife, asking her to hide the newspaper.

Easier said than done for poor Millicent. She's already suffering from Pug overload since his retirement and is sick of lying to keep the peace. She's fed up with living according to the hundred-hour clock and having her every movement shadowed like a faithful dog.

Pug isn't faithful though—at least, not to Millicent. As the influence of Uranus and Pluto grow greater and expose his clandestine affairs, Millicent is driven to distraction. Rescued by the island therapist, Hannah Moon, from driving on the wrong side of the road, they consequently become friends. Millicent finds the courage to make a few changes in her life, including adding a little spice in the way of a dashing young lawyer, Chance McColl.

Short Story Book

Island Stories

The Adventures of Oliver Turtle, and Doll

Oliver and Doll Turtle have only lived in their condo for a year, not long enough to become bored—at least from Doll's point of view. She *loves* having nothing to do except plump the cushions. Oliver, however, is already homesick for the scent of mown grass. When he sees a real estate ad for a property on Gale Island called Strawberry Fields, he can't wait to view it.

Being Like Annie Fairfax

The day Maxine meets Annie she feels something niggle in her gut and she comments to her husband, "I bet I'll end up like Annie Fairfax." There is absolutely no reason why she should say that, except it's just something she knows. Not that she wishes to know such a thing, because Maxine doesn't want to be like her, no way. However, when her husband doesn't dispute it, she feels unnerved; it's one more thing to confirm her growing suspicions that her life is about to change.

She Drove a BMW

Nell, in her forties, has fallen in love with Nick who's much younger. Things are going great. No one has a problem with their relationship, except Nell when Nick tells her he wants her to meet Maggie, his mom. Nell, fearing the worst, plans to find out what Maggie is like before meeting her formally. She phones her friend, Marcie, who runs a daycare centre, and asks if she'll accompany her to a café that Nick's mom frequents so that she can give her the once-over. Marcie reluctantly agrees, taking with her, six pre-school children!