

IN THE BEGINNING

VANCOUVER 1979

Christie's past is like a handful of coins repeatedly tossed in the air. Each time they land, the story they tell is different.

I think of her as Calliope, the Muse of literature. Calliope carries a writing tablet, like I carry a clipboard with a hundred sheets of lined yellow paper. Tonight, Christie wears a dark green skirt and jacket of a grainy material with which one might upholster a sofa.

"Suitable for a power lunch at the Four Seasons," is what I said when she emerged from the bedroom. Not that we'd go there, or ever have power lunches.

I may bury something of Christie's in the garden, dance over it under a full moon, chanting, naked, except for a silver talisman on a silver chain. I will pour blood on the loamy earth. In expectation, I will leave my window open after rain, when the air is pure and biting as ice.

Our apartment is immaculately furnished in chrome, black and white leather, and polished woods. The perpetual thrust of the air conditioner keeps us cool as strawberries in a display case. We are preparing to visit my family. I am wearing a white, short sleeved shirt, for they keep their apartment stifling as a greenhouse.

The preceding paragraph, the description of the apartment and the business about my family, is a figment of my imagination. Or, perhaps, I am simply an unreliable narrator. My family, what there is of it, live in another city far away. They have never met Christie. Probably never will. We do not live in a glass and chrome apartment. We share a very large bedroom with a tiny kitchenette on the

second floor of a multi-layered, patched-together, frame house in east Vancouver. Our window overlooks the playground of a private school where teenage girls in green school uniforms play field hockey on warm spring afternoons.

Not long after I met Christie, we went for coffee at a small lunch counter on Hastings Street where I have come to be friends with the proprietor, Jones.

“Damaged goods,” he said, when I walked in alone the next day. “Where do you find chicks like that, Wylie?” Jones is probably in his late thirties, a brush cut, bleary eyes, a perpetual three-day growth of beard.

“What do you mean?”

“Only need one look to tell she’s seriously damaged goods. My advice, disappear like she’s attacking you with a knife. She’s running full speed from something or toward something. You don’t ever want to find out what it is. She’s pretty, but she’s trouble.”

Jones rubs his hands on his dirty apron. He works twelve-hour days at this tiny lunch counter and barely manages to eke out a living. He has a degree in philosophy from a prestigious university. You don’t see many large ads in the newspaper advertising for philosophers.

“I think she may have had a bad marriage,” I said.

“Trust me, Wylie, it’s more than that. Every kind of weirdo wanders in and out of this lunch counter. Been watching these people for years. I can read them. That girl is carrying serious baggage, trunks and trunks full. I know you like redheaded chicks, and she’s cute, knows how to wear blue jeans, but her fucking green eyes can see right through you. Trust me on this one, Wylie.”

“Where were you born?” I ask Christie. She smiles across the table at me with a steady cat-eyed stare. “It can’t hurt to tell me that. What kind of advantage do you think it would give me to know where you were born?”

RUSSIAN DOLLS

“England,” says Christie, licking her thin, sensuous lips. It is a very hot summer evening. Christie drinks Diet Coke from a sweat-beaded glass. A cigarette pack, of a green deeper than her eyes, lies at her fingertips. “I’m told Joseph Conrad was in the family woodpile a few generations back.” She breathes in smoke, shaking her head to displace a few damp plum-coloured curls from her forehead.

“A few days ago you told me that you’ve never been outside North America. Why do you lie like that?”

“Wylie, when you ask a question you always insist on an answer.”

Why do I not take my friend’s advice and disappear from Christie’s life? Because, I discovered quite by accident that it is Christie who draws my stories from me. And what stories they’ve become. For me, she is like an apparition from Greek mythology pulling thread hand over hand from my mouth. She seduces me into spinning the chaff of my life into bright little jewels, some small, some large, word pictures that bubble on the page like flowers boiling in a cauldron. Christie has become the prism that filters and refines my plain words into rainbows. A Muse, that’s what she is. And, if I believe it, then it’s true. Literature is full of stories of a Tenth Muse. Christie, and whatever comes with her, is mine and I’m not going to let go of her, or it.

“Improbable stories,” one editor said of the crap I used to write, though he bought two of them. “Like having a clown at an execution.”

THE PHANTOM BOWLING BALL

DETROIT (UPI) – A man died after a 14 lb. bowling ball crashed through his car windshield and hit him on the head. The ball seemed to have come from nowhere, say police. The ball bounced on the hood of the car and shattered the windshield. There are no high buildings or bridges in the area. A \$2,000 reward has been offered for information concerning the origin of the phantom bowling ball.

One afternoon in 1975, the phantom bowling ball put on a red garter and lured Jimmy Hoffa to a fatal rendezvous, with promises of ecstasy.

CHAPTER 1

I have always been determined to be a writer. I have also always known that I was not very good. But even not very good writers get published occasionally. I have suitcases full of unpublished manuscripts, a three-inch thick folder full of rejection slips and a slim envelope with a handful of acceptance letters. My feeling was, even as I wrote a new story, that it would still be a failure, but it would be one percent better than the previous fifty stories I had written. I was willing to serve an apprenticeship, but apprenticeships end – and I could not see far enough into the future to envision myself as a journeyman. Years passed this way. Then Christie came into my life.

I was living in a rooming house in East Vancouver when I first met her. *Existing* in a rooming house in East Vancouver would be more apt.

My fame as a writer was limited to winning a contest sponsored by a mimeographed magazine with a maudlin story about a boy and somebody else's dog that brought me a one-hundred-dollar prize.

I knew my way about Vancouver well enough to qualify for a license as a taxi driver, an occupation I pursued half-heartedly when all other doors were closed. I did odd jobs, delivered telephone books door to door, helped out a mover friend on end-of-the-month weekends. I once demonstrated a product in a supermarket – I wore an apron, cooked sausage on a tiny skillet and gave out samples. I continually burned the sausage and people spit out the samples. I was fired after three hours.

Whenever I was late with the rent, which was often, my landlady, a garish old woman named Mrs. Kryzanowski, would threaten

to permanently separate me from my room in the Breathing Castle, as the rooming house is known, a warren of additions built on additions, full of occupied sun porches, walk-in closets, and mysterious hideaways, each more lonely than the last.

Under my large, creaking bed with its ancient teak headboard, are those three suitcases full of novels, stories and notes, much of the collection thinly disguised autobiography, written in a strident, all-knowing voice. When I reread that work it does not surprise me that I have to drive taxi to keep my rent paid and my stomach full. That was, until I met Christie.

Two of Christie's favorite words are "Tell me?" Question? Statement? Command? "Tell me?" she repeats over and over as we make love, aching for me to describe to her our lovemaking in the most graphic way possible. Mostly I cannot. My jaws seem locked by some gargantuan headgear. Christie thrashes and cries beneath me. "Tell me. Tell me. Tell me."

"Tell me, Wylie?" she whispers another time, rubbing about me like a heat-seeking cat. Tell me how we met. Tell me about our first time. But reality is too much for me. It turns me catatonic, until, much later, I sit staring at the geography of my keyboard. As I type, coloured flowers appear on the page.

This is another of the kind of story I was writing when Christie appeared in my life. It is a story that was published in a small magazine, but from it you will see why I was not more successful.

THE POWER OF THE UNIVERSE

The spaceship looked like a cross between a footlocker and one of those dun-coloured boxes where mailmen pick up letters and packages mid-way on their routes.

Zinth landed the spaceship in thick foliage on the edge of a downtown park. He unbent himself from the craft. He was about five feet tall, resembling a stick-figure drawing made of pink shower curtain material. He walked through the empty park staying within the moon shadow of trees. It was 3 a.m.

Staring straight up the trunk of a sycamore, he spotted a gull asleep on a high limb. He trained his vision on it, deduced its DNA, and a second later he occupied the body of an identical gull.

As dawn broke, Zinth the gull flew to a dumpster behind a fast food restaurant. As a vital-looking young black man jogged up to the back door Zinth snapped into synch with the young man's DNA. As the black man entered the restaurant, his duplicate turned away from the door and moved off through the downtown streets.

Zinth's assignment was to learn about fuel. He soon discovered that his borrowed body was crying for fuel. He let the part of the young man's brain that craved sustenance, take over. He entered a café and ordered breakfast, surprised at the words he spoke and more surprised at what was delivered to him. He let himself taste a few of the morsels as the young man ate. But Zinth soon turned off his taste buds. While the food and drink were hot, they lacked the hot blood taste so necessary to good food. Apparently insects were not part of this species' diet. There was nothing like a blowfly casserole with a scattering of fire ants for breakfast.

Zinth wandered into a laundromat, which at 10 a.m. was a hive of activity. The box-like white machines that first wet and then dried the cloth articles stuffed into them obviously operated on some kind of fuel. Zinth would watch and learn, take samples.

He noted that after the cloth items were placed in the machines, a magical white powder was poured over them, sometimes from a small box, sometimes from a cup dipped into a large box of magic powder. Zinth noted that the machines were quiet until fueled by metal slugs of some ilk, two usually, sometimes three, and the wet machines would spring to life, hissing and gurgling, vibrating with energy.

Their magical powder apparently remained in the cloth articles for when they were transferred to the wind-box, as Zinth thought of it, the second machine needed only to be fueled by more slugs. He spent over an hour staring at the rows of machines, until a black woman dressed in purple garments glared at him and said loudly, "What you lookin' at?"

Zinth turned his gaze away without replying. Already a plan was forming. He noticed that bolted to the wall was a machine that dispensed small boxes of magical powder, and another machine that dispensed fuel pellets in return for patterned paper, the same kind he had exchanged for his breakfast.

He watched a woman acquire an orange-and-black box of powder, and a handful of pellets. She set the powder and pellets on the counter and began sorting her cloth objects into two piles which Zinth determined had something to do with shades of colour.

He walked casually down the counter until he was behind the woman. Suddenly, he seized the box in one hand, the fuel pellets in the other. He mishandled the stack of metal pellets, grasping three, sending the other three clattering to the floor.

Zinth told his feet to run and as he moved toward the street was surprised at the commotion that followed him. The pellets and