

Chapter 1

JAKE WAS A LOVELY BOY. Dorothy didn't tell him that. She gave him a bottle of beer and watched him snap the top off.

"Thanks, Great Aunt D."

"Now that you're over twenty how about just calling me Dorothy."

"You behave like an aunt."

"Being your granny's cousin only makes me something twice removed. Though I suppose we do share a little blood, a gene or two."

He was sipping beer from the bottle as if he had all the time in the world and would be back tomorrow, as if he weren't about to set off to Afghanistan, as if she hadn't put the idea into his head.

"I'd love to go myself, you know."

"You'd frighten them – Dorothy."

"Perhaps they need a few old women out there to shake some sense into them."

"You'd get shot."

"That's something you must avoid at all costs. Your mother would never forgive me."

"I'd be pretty upset myself."

She turned away and rinsed her hands under the tap, wishing she could wash away the words she'd said to him only a month ago. Who would believe that anything in this bureaucrat-infested world could happen so quickly?

"I went to see the guy of my own accord," he said, reading her thoughts. "Truly. And even now I can turn around and

say no if I want. I don't have to go. But I'm dying to get over there. It will be an 'awfully big adventure.'"

"Don't quote that. I should have read better stories to you when you were little. About birds and flowers and talking kittens."

He had his grandmother Kate's crooked smile and his mother's green eyes. They said he inherited his reddish hair from Jonathan Brooks, the father he'd never seen.

"You'll go back to university next year?"

"Depends. I guess. Right now I don't want to go on with engineering."

He looked at the clock and stood up.

"Plane to catch," he said. "Got to pick up Mom and my stuff."

"Emails. You'll send emails?"

"Of course."

Of course! Messages could bounce off satellites but he would still need an earthly connection. He walked down the path. He had kissed her. He had gone. The chocolate Easter Bunny she'd bought him for the journey was still lying on the table. She rinsed out the beer bottle and put it on the table by the door for recycling.



Her middle finger was painful again so she tapped at the computer keyboard with her thumb to open the file and read what she'd written that morning. *Dear Mr. Sharif, (he wasn't a duke or a prince of the church so that sounded right and not over-familiar) It's your birthday today so I thought I would write. You're seventy-four. I'm two years younger, born in 1934. Funny thing, age. A few weeks ago, I was sitting here saying to myself that I have most of my own teeth, my hair hasn't fallen out yet and I can keep*

arthritis at bay with pills, and that therefore I should do something useful.

The phone rang as if her words had provoked it.

“Happy Easter, Elvira,” she said in response to the girl’s greeting.

Elvira was likely hoping Jake was still there but didn’t ask, trusting to be told or maybe to hear his voice one last time. She only said politely, “How are you, Aunt Dorothy?” Elsie’s granddaughter was even less of a relation than the boy but time and birthday gifts made strong bonds.

“I’m fine. The lights are flickering. A thunderstorm? An imminent power cut? The crook Gervais hacking away at the cable to my house? One more ploy to make me move. They think I’ll go quietly into a retirement complex, three meals a day, medical help on call, Tuesday and Thursdays we go to the mall. At any rate, I’ll keep on writing till the computer dies. Or I do. Are you doing anything special this weekend?”

Elvira murmured something about the snow up north being too poor for skiing.

Dorothy said, “This is a bad line. Come and see me when you can, dear,” and hung up feeling that she should have been more pleasant. The china on the tray was not the girl’s fault.

At least her ex-colleagues hadn’t given her a two-thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle with a picture of a country cottage on it. Two years since the farewell party, April 3rd, 2004 to be exact, and a mite of anger was still stuck in her gut like a furball. We’ll miss you around here, her co-workers had said insincerely. They’d long been muttering about her being kept on way past retirement, hinting at blackmail or sexual ties from decades ago when she might possibly have been young. *I was the boss’s right-hand woman.* Someone else was in the corner office now, checking market prices, dealing with accounts, setting up meetings and arranging special

events. It was a position of power. The parting gift, delicate blue and white teacups and saucers with plates to match, represented the staff's delight that old Dot would no longer be there to set them straight or to suggest to jelly-faced Melissa that she might eat fewer donuts and wear clothes that covered more of her skin.

Microwave and dishwasher-safe, the gift of china implied that she would have nothing more to do than make tea for her friends and wait for death. They would be surprised when she and Kate and Elsie were called to Rideau Hall to pick up a medal from the Governor General for their services to mankind and their pictures appeared in the paper and their names were passed to the Nobel committee in Stockholm for consideration. They had yet to do anything to earn a hint of that glory but Harvey Lent, the first stepping stone on the route to recognition for services rendered, was due to arrive in half an hour. She hoped the other two would be on time. As a group they had to look businesslike, viable, able.

The phone rang again. Elvira hadn't finished what she intended to say. Dorothy listened. She had, after all, put her name on a list of volunteer readers never expecting that Elvira's school would be the lucky winner. "I'll be there," she said, and marked the date down in her diary. It would be a chance to recruit the girl to help with the so far unplanned fundraising effort.

As for the boy, Mr. S., it was in fact only a suggestion but his mother sees it as persuasion. Was it a cop-out, a substitute for not being able to go there myself? It's not as if he'll really be in harm's way. Not for a time anyway. And it was not, absolutely not, anything to do with Kate and my father. I got over that a very long time ago.

There has to be a long training period, hasn't there? Besides, if people don't have adventures when they're young, they tend to take risks when they're old and that can be a disaster.

LETTERS TO OMAR

I read a piece about you in the paper this morning, an interview in which you said you'd given up drink and gambling and that you are leading a quiet life. I want you to know how glad I am. I feel we have known each other for forty years, ever since I first saw you tramping through the snow to be with your love. You were a modest hero then and I'm pleased that, in your old age, you have opted for dignity. I didn't want to see you going off debauched into that good night.

Had she remembered milk? Did Harvey Lent take sugar? She'd bought peanut butter cookies. Was he allergic to nuts? She'd switch the kettle on as soon as she heard the doorbell. They'd moved the meeting from Tuesday to this afternoon because Elsie had the Red Cross event to attend. Elsie and Richard led a life a bit closer to Mr. Sharif's than hers or Kate's, and allowances had to be made for the burden of wealth.

We share the same zodiac sign but my life has been very different from yours. I mean, for instance, you live free in a fancy hotel while I live in this little house where I can't afford to have the bathroom fixed or new tiles laid on the roof even if there was time. Toronto, my city, isn't Paris but it has gracious old buildings, a Great Lake, and trees that glow red and gold in the fall. Anyway, despite our different backgrounds, we've been tied together by a thread that may be invisible to you but is there all the same. I've always been able to see from your eyes that we are on the same wavelength so to speak.

Perhaps they'd manage to stick to the agenda today instead of wandering off into gossip and the latest tennis scores and what had happened to the Williams sisters, who seemed to have peaked too young. Cousin Kate had a way of tuning out when she disagreed with what was going on instead of addressing the issue. In fact she tuned out a good

deal of the time these days. If Kate did arrive first, Dorothy would say in a subtle way that it really was time she got over Robert the swine's departure. And what was this WorldAidNow project all about if not to help her do that? But Kate had regressed and liked to talk about their early days in Canada as if they'd been pioneers. She would hark back to the barely remembered years in Yorkshire as if they'd been a happier time. As if Dorothy's dad, Dennis, had done harm when he persuaded his brother's widow, Kathleen, to bring her daughter Kate to Canada too and share a house in Niagara Falls.

It had made sense for the two single parents to live together with their girls. And there had been plenty of good times. Right now though, the past hung around Kate's neck like the proverbial bird, and no amount of telling her to move on made a scrap of difference. She retreated into those early years as to a safe place. But the past was a creaky structure and didn't offer firm support. Last week Kate had even mentioned the third child again, a phantom they'd created out of flimsy evidence when they were teenagers and for whom they had occasionally searched.

The Mozart symphony she had been half-hearing on CBC radio had been replaced by the Vivaldi piece that always made her feel impelled to jump up and down. She used her new remote to switch it off.

If Elsie arrived first, she would straighten the furniture, add more cookies to the plate, avoid questions. Getting involved in the tragedies of the wider world might help her to see that Alice had simply made a choice and that it wasn't her parents' fault. She should be thankful that one of her daughters lived nearby and still spoke to her, even if it was only Isabel the Disillusioned.

So there you were, tramping through the snow in your shabby coat while I was doing exactly the same here in

Toronto. Our climates were similar. Our worlds were different. I was going quietly every day to the office where I worked for Mr. Big Money, while all around you people were invading the homes of the very rich and committing bloody deeds in the name, as usual, of freedom. You suffered bravely as you trudged towards Lara across a million cinema screens.

No sense in telling the old actor that she also had enjoyed an affair or two. It was none of his business. She'd googled his name but there was too much information and she preferred her own version of the facts.

All the print on the screen suddenly became miniscule. For the hundredth time, she cursed Bill Gates, his company and all who worked therein. She tapped every key she could think of. Went to the useless 'help' file. Nothing worked. And then, of its own accord, the type returned to normal. It had occurred to her more than once that if her first husband, Graham J. Graham, had owned a computer, he might not have died in the way he did. Though, in moments like these, she could picture him ripping the monitor from its moorings and angrily heading down to the lake with it clutched to his chest and throwing it into the water, this time letting go. No one knew and no one would ever know whether he had simply meant to throw his typewriter into the torrent that evening and then return home. She still thought of him fondly and hoped he knew in his last moments that his death was not her fault: Her final words to him had not been meant as a command.

The phone rang again. Politely she apologized to Aretha Jones for backing out of Meals on Wheels. She had simply, she said, in the months after her retirement, taken on too much. It was time to focus her energies and commit to one thing in a serious way. A slight bitterness in Aretha's voice told her not to expect food brought to her door a year or two hence when she was too weak to open a can of soup.

A few weeks ago, when she'd told Kate and Elsie that it simply wasn't enough to sit around drinking coffee and saying, did you see the news last night, isn't it terrible, the world's in a mess, people are starving/dying/homeless, they'd raised their eyebrows in a here-she-goes-again way and Elsie remarked that she did her share, thank you. But they'd come around, and, after surveying all the charitable organisations that were reputable, the ones that spent less on administration than they disbursed, they'd picked WorldAidNow&Tomorrow and laid out a plan. Now they were three elderly women with a purpose. Acronym:TEWP. Website: Not yet and maybe never.

You first became truly exotic to me, Mr. Sharif, when I saw you in the desert. Deserts are rare here though I believe there is a small one in British Columbia – without the camels. But there you were all in white, and with that head-dress; a sheikh to your toenails. If I'd been there, I would have leapt – can you leap onto a camel? – onto the saddle with you. It would have been easier perhaps if you'd made the animal kneel down the way they do. In your tent, we would have drunk coffee out of tiny cups and eaten delicate sweet cakes and succulent dates, the sort we used to have at Christmas that came in those barge-shaped boxes. And then as the sun set suddenly as I believe it does in the Sahara because there are no trees or hills for it to sink slowly behind, we might have lain down on your couch.

My first husband, perhaps knowing that he would come to an untimely and sad end, was not great in bed. Sex of the joyful kind was of little interest to him. So you won't mind me telling you that our relationship, yours and mine, has been more intimate than you might have imagined. I haven't mentioned your accent in case you are embarrassed by it, but I love it; it has always made my heart flutter.

LETTERS TO OMAR

When Harvey Lent, WANT's Ontario director, arrived he would thank them for choosing his charity upon which to expend their efforts. That would be the way he talked, *expend your efforts, ladies*, as he metaphorically patted their heads, hers grey with fading brown streaks, Kate's white, and Elsie's costly chestnut, and told them that the need had diminished; all was right with the world and they could go back to their tatting. Or would he see them as a promising group with a prospect at least of large bequests in case of death? Death was certain and, given their ages, perhaps not far off. What Lent wouldn't see was their potential and, in her case, a need to make up for past sins.

I was sorry a few years ago when I learned that you were spending all your nights playing bridge or hanging around casinos. It cooled our friendship for a while. Though I suppose you might have said the same thing about me watching the same movie over and over or staying up nights writing to people I don't know. I gather that you get to spend time with your grandsons and I'm happy for you. I have no children.

Three-fifteen. Better get a move on. She'd printed out the agenda, short though it was, and also made a list of possible projects. At the meeting, Elsie would add class, Kate would add seriousness and she herself would sit there and try to look like a prime mover. Whatever that was. In any case, it was up to the director to impress them. Their effort might be small at the moment but it could grow, it could spread. Standing on the podium in Stockholm, modestly but becomingly dressed, listening to the official saying, *We honour these women for raising one billion dollars to help in our fight against world poverty*, they would be famous at last. Of course they would have to donate the money to the cause but surely she could keep a little bit back to have the bathroom done over and maybe take a trip to Bilbao to visit the new museum.

I'd like to tell you something about the room I'm sitting in as I write this. The two armchairs face the window and are covered in blue leather and are extremely comfortable. This table is marked with stains from hot coffee cups. My last husband was from Russia and had no use for coasters. There are two of my paintings on the wall and two brass candlesticks on the mantel. Six family photographs stand on top of the television: Pictures of my parents on their wedding day, and of my 'niece' and 'nephew' and my 'great-nephew,' Jake. Delphine and her brother Brian are my cousin Kate's children so they're really second cousins. Delphine's son, Jake, therefore is perhaps a third cousin, but we won't climb up the family tree right now.

Delphine hadn't yet got around to blaming her for Jake's departure but if anything were to happen to the boy, God forbid, there would be no forgiveness. Not ever. The affection of years would be cast at once into the furnace of hate.

She picked up the wedding photograph and stared at her mother's face. If she'd lived, would she have been loving and kind? "Would we," she asked the pretty face, "have argued as I grew older about my clothes, my friends, my decisions? I wish... I have often wished..."

I wonder whose photographs you keep in your hotel room in Paris. I imagine there to be several large pieces of black and white furniture with acres of space between. Someone makes sure there are always fresh flowers. There are fine oriental rugs on the floor. And I bet it smells ever so slightly of incense.

She inhaled. Her sense of smell was no longer acute. She got up to light the candle. In moments its piney scent would cover stale odours of cooking, unclean corners and just plain daily neglect.

On my bedroom wall, there is a picture of you, a poster really, from the movie. It's you dressed in your uniform,

looking bewildered and somehow lost. (I called my last cat Zhivago, by the way.) The poster is curling at the edges and keeps slipping off the wall. Zhivago died of old age last spring. My friend, Matt, says he can get me a new poster by ordering it on the Internet. I just feel that's very impersonal.

So I have a request, no, not for money, Mr.Sharif, though, being rich, I expect you get a lot of letters asking for help with granny's expenses in the Home or to finance an amateur movie or to send young Dwayne to India to find his soul. Money would spoil what you and I have between us.

“Though I must say a few thousand would come in handy,” she said aloud. “But let's not get into the unequal distribution of wealth right now.” She began to type more quickly; the errors could be corrected later. The director had to be presented with women who were in all senses *with it*. She came to the point.

Mr. Sharif, though, if you'll pardon the liberty, I've always called you Omar in private, what I would really like is a photograph, a black and white picture of you as you are now. I don't want one of you as you were then. In a sense we have grown old together and I would like a picture that reflects our age.

I've been too shy to ask before but like you said in the interview, life is for living, not for wasting time. In return, I'll send you a picture of myself taken at the company's Christmas dance four years ago. The dress isn't something I would ever wear to have dinner with you in your Paris hotel but it was right for that particular occasion.

She looked out the window hoping to see her cousin, but it wasn't Kate who was walking up the path, it was him, the director, Harvey Lent himself, arriving early, damn him. Early people were the spies of the world, the overeager, the ones who were always there first. Whenever you had an appointment with them, even if you got there on time, you

were already late. And here he was, blue down jacket, sweater, briefcase, taut expression. She cast a quick glance around to make sure there were no signs of degeneracy lying about, pushed her hand through her hair and straightened her collar to create an impression of elderly competence. She opened the door wide in a welcoming way and said, “Do come in, Mr. Sharif.”



They would have been on time if Kate hadn't wanted to stop in at the post office.

And then it was embarrassing. International postage? The same price? England, Afghanistan, China? Regardless of distance. It makes no difference, madam. The clerk handed over the stamps with a shake of her head, and then Elsie reminded Kate that she might just as well give the letter to Mr. Lent to send over in whatever kind of system WorldAidNow used for its own mail. And she felt sad that her friend's mind had deteriorated so much that buying stamps was a difficulty. In any case, Jake hadn't left the country yet. Why was she writing so soon? Nothing had happened that he didn't know.

As they were leaving the store, and it was a store, its shelves full of artifacts for sale – crafts, cards, toys – and not a place simply dedicated to incoming and outgoing mail, Kate said, “I'm not crazy. I was thinking about the distance and the odds of getting shot or blown up. Delivering mail here in Toronto. Delivering mail in Baghdad or Kandahar. There is a difference, Elsie.”

“No there isn't.”

“OK!”

“Sorry, Kate. The Boreks' dog woke me up at five. I complain and it's quiet for a few days. But then they let it stay

out again. Richard bought me some earplugs but I'm afraid to wear them in case I miss something. I want to move to a place in the middle of a hundred acres with no neighbours."

"And no social life. You'd die."

"What do you mean? I'm not some hare-brained idiot flitting about from party to party. I work. It's all for charity. You know that."

There was a silence. The light turned red as Elsie drove through the intersection. She could feel Kate putting her own foot on an imaginary brake.

"I don't know how Delphine's going to cope now that Jake's gone," Kate said.

"Look how she coped when she got pregnant." Elsie said.

"Your Alice was a big help, then."

"Yes."

"Isabel and Mike are back home?"

"Before she went to Paris I told her. Isabel, I said, be content with the books. Or if you must go, take in Chartres, go to Rheims. She was letting herself in for disenchantment. The man's been dead for fifty years. Stories are bound to come out. Saints always fall off their pedestals sooner or later. Most of them."

"I'd like to go to France one more time," Kate said.

"Before!"

Kate laughed. "It's got to be before we're eighty now."

"We didn't write down what we wished for 'before seventy.'"

"It didn't seem worthwhile, and yet here we still are. We didn't expect to have expectations, I guess."

"You got what you wanted before you turned forty."

"What I said I wanted: children and tenure."

"What more could you have asked for?"

"Things I didn't know were available to me. Dorothy kept the lists?"

“Yes,” Elsie answered, “she has.”

“We haven’t had a ‘girls’ outing’ since you sold the cottage.”

“Richard sold the cottage! Isabel still moans about it and it’s been four years.” “Do you miss it?”

“I don’t miss the driving.”

“Those Labour Day weekends were great.”

They had laughed and splashed around in the lake and drunk too much wine and then driven back from Muskoka on the Sunday so that Elsie and Kate could get their kids ready for school. And once every decade they’d written out their desires and ambitions: things they wanted to achieve and acquire before they were thirty, forty, fifty, sixty.

“Before I’m eighty,” Kate said, “I think I’d like to die.”

Elsie didn’t allow herself to feel guilty about Kate’s remark. Sorry, yes, that Kate was the first of them to lose a grip on life. In their youth, she’d been the leader, the bright young woman who played the tunes they danced to and got them into trouble and out of it. Then for years she’d been the busy academic, writing, talking, involved. But she hung back from life now. She’d allowed herself to become a sorrowing widow and the man wasn’t even dead, only absconded. And today she was fretting because Delphine’s boy, her grandson, was flying towards danger. It was partly to rouse Kate into action that Dorothy had set up this charitable venture. Elsie looked at her friend and wanted to shake her. Her coat was a sandy beige. No coloured scarf enlivened her appearance. No touch of lipstick enhanced her mouth. With her high cheekbones and wide-set eyes she could, even at this age, have looked beautiful. There must have been some Viking blood in her Yorkshire forebears. But she was pale, drab. In fact, she sagged. And her new hearing aids were visible beneath strands of hair.

“I’m going to take you to my spa, next week,” Elsie told her.

“It’s too expensive.”

“My treat.”

“I mean, generally. We shouldn’t be spending money like that.”

“Then the spa will go out of business and seven nice young people will lose their jobs and go home to live off their parents. Not to mention the ones who make those aromatic oils and all the equipment. In India and Brazil where they gather the coconuts and beans for oil, poor peasants will...”

“Shut up, Elsie.”

Elsie knew that one of Kate’s sorrows, if sorrows could be counted like birds on a wire, was her loss of scholarly advantage. She’d retired ten years ago, at sixty-two, and now others were publishing papers on the frequency with which Peter Walsh fingered his penknife while he thought of Clarissa Dalloway and on the true effect of sub-zero temperatures on the Canadian novel. Young postgrads were writing books about the spread of information technology and the consequent decline of literature and Kate’s name no longer appeared in highbrow journals.

For years, because she was absorbed in a departmental row at the time, Kate had blamed herself for her daughter’s ‘mistake.’ But Delphine, as Elsie could have told her then, was a sexy little teenager and her mother didn’t know the half of it. She stifled the thought that was approaching, *Alice would never*, because the reason why Alice ‘would never’ had become obvious over time. In any case, the ‘mistake’ had turned out to be a joy – till today.

She parked the BMW outside one of the handsome brick homes at the top end of the street. The two empty frame houses on either side of Dorothy’s at the end of the cul-de-sac gave the crescent a dangerous appearance; all kinds of squatters, druggies and criminals could move in any day,

start fires, shoot each other. At the very least it was a prime location for rats.

Kate peered in the window.

“He’s not much to look at,” she murmured.

Elsie recognized another of her friend’s regrets and said, “We’re here to back up Dorothy in this new scheme of hers. What he’s like is unimportant.”

She could see the man leaning backwards to avoid a torrent of words and possibly spit.

“Delphine will never forgive her if anything happens,” Kate said, thinking of Jake.

“They protect them well,” Elsie said, not at all sure that ‘they’ did or even if ‘they’ existed. It was a mere comforting lie, a few words that meant, *let’s go in and do what we’re here to do.*

Dorothy had set out fine cups and saucers instead of her usual mugs and arranged cookies on a plate with unaccustomed elegance. There were even small cloth napkins. She welcomed them and introduced them to the slight, worried-looking man on the sofa. He did make an effort to stand but Elsie held out a commanding hand and he sat down again.

“Well, Mr. Lent,” she said. “To begin with, we’d like to plan an event that will bring in several thousand dollars.”

“What I’ve been trying to explain to your friend,” he said in a defensive way, “is that the money doesn’t always get to the places where it’s most needed.”

“And I’ve been saying,” Dorothy said, “that it’s a sin and a crime and the money damn well should get to those who need it.”

“You do see,” Mr. Lent replied, “that we’re not in control of the circumstances. It’s a difficult environment. That’s why we need young people.”

Kate looked at the man. He might have been a curate from a Victorian novel hoping perhaps to marry one of the

daughters of the house except that here there were no daughters. What he truly was, this harmless-looking man, was a pander for a modern minotaur. Need young people indeed! And he was here because Dorothy had woken up one morning with an excess of charity in her mind, a dangerous feeling that something must be done and that she and her friend and her cousin were the ones to do it.

Elsie said, "We were only suggesting, Mr. Lent, that if our first effort works as well as we expect it to, we could do more. I have contacts. We have ideas."

"It's a matter," the man said, "of sending the right message."

Dorothy half rose from her chair and then said, "We are not stupid, Mr. Lent."

Perhaps we are, Kate thought, and then put herself into the foreground and made her statement.

"What we have in mind is an approach to people who are able to donate large sums. We might put together a mixed-media show to let them see what is at stake here. By the end of May, we'll have something to demonstrate what we mean to do. We'll start with a small event. Even spreading the word surely makes a difference."

The man nodded and smiled, half-believing, but Kate knew that what he really wanted was to get away from these three elderly harpies as fast as he could.

"There's still the matter of getting the money to the right place," he said.

"That's your job, surely," Elsie replied.

"Ah, not exactly. There's an office in Ottawa. They disperse the funds. See where the most need is. And so on."

"So what's the problem?"

"Warlords, Mrs. Graham. AK-47s. Opium."

Kate said, "What we need to know, Mr. Lent, is whether it's worthwhile doing anything. If we're simply making money for thieves, why should we bother?"

There she had him. Dorothy was pleased with her. She watched the man backtrack, cookie crumbs dropping down his jacket. Yes, well, it was just that – and of course every effort would be made and they would do their best to get the money to the school or the hospital and hope that the right kind of people had control of the village wherever it was. And even the widow’s mite...

Dorothy saw him out, feeling the pent-up thoughts of her friends aimed at her back like arrows.

“He thinks we’re three crazy old women,” Elsie said.

“Let’s show him we’re not.”

“Or prove that we are,” Kate said. “He wasn’t in the least pleased. He wants donations from rich people. He sees us as bake-sale material. Girl Guide cookie sellers. Bottle collectors.”

Elsie said, “It’s all a matter of planning.”

“I’ll get us a drink.”

“Not for me,” Elsie said. “I’ve got Richard’s sister and family coming for dinner tomorrow and I have to pick up a few things. I wanted them to come on Monday but no. It has to be what suits her. I’m not doing the whole Easter feast thing. It’s a casserole I just have to reheat, but there’s the salad and the table.”

Dorothy brought Elsie a glass of cranberry juice and herself and Kate a glass of the new organic Merlot she wanted to try.

“Here’s to TEWP!”

“Do you still have the ‘before’ lists?” Kate asked.

“You want to look at them now?”

“No she doesn’t,” Elsie said. “She thinks we should write down what we want before we turn eighty. Just staying alive and healthy will do for me, thank you.”

Dorothy thought of Jake and wished for him to stay alive till he was thirty, forty and decades beyond.

LETTERS TO OMAR

“You have to admit,” Kate said, “that looking at us from Lent’s point of view, we are three old women. Past it.”

“Speak for yourself, Kate,” Dorothy answered. “Drink up both of you and go home and think of brilliant ideas. I have a letter to write.”

Before she touched the keyboard, she thought for a while about inequality. And this was a letter she would send. After all, there was a shared secret here.

Dear Mr. Ericsson. (He would note the formality and be pleased)

My friends and I are involved in raising money to help with the tragic civilian situation in Afghanistan. We have thought about Iraq but that disaster is beyond any slight help we might give. Or anyone perhaps. I thought that given the years we spent working together (Discreet, Dorothy. Very good. Avoid any hint of blackmail.), you might be happy to make a contribution. A cheque made out to me will go towards the arrangements for our first event. And you will certainly be invited to whatever it turns out to be. (Not very businesslike.) Of course you will be named as a sponsor.

Best wishes,

Dorothy

After she’d mailed the letter, she wondered whether he would expect a tax receipt. Too late she realized that she should have asked him to make out the cheque to WANT.



Kate chopped the parsley fine. She loved its old-fashioned mellow flavour. The board shook as she banged the knife down hard. The grated breadcrumbs and lemon peel were already in the bowl. She’d cleaned the capon inside and out and would

put the dressing into it at the last minute. Delphine's first Easter without Jake. Perhaps it would be smart to rent a video tomorrow and avoid too much reminiscence. It might be smarter still to go to church, but neither of them had been inside a holy place for years. It was Dorothy's fault. There she was at her age stirring things up almost as if – almost as if, having no kids of her own, she was jealous of other people's. Jake should have been at university instead of heading off to a country so bleak and so violent.

That line from the hymn they'd sung at school, *Time like an ever-rolling stream bears all our sons away*, was dismal and prophetic. Time didn't have to take her grandson. Of course she'd have lost Jake long before if the family hadn't been religious then and Robert a pillar of the church. What if, all those years ago, someone had used the words *abort or adopt*? It didn't bear thinking about. She was grateful to the god they'd sung and prayed to for keeping the surprise baby safe. In that world no one went around altering *sons to persons*, or adding *daughters* and changing the rhythm of old poetic lines.

How the teachers at Graydon High had discovered that Delphine was pregnant before her own mother had noticed was a mystery.

"We can't tolerate this kind of thing in our school." There they were like two bad children, mother and daughter, called into the principal's office on that cold March morning twenty-three years ago. In some schools there would have been compassion and help, but here there was chilly accusation.

The day came back to her with astounding clarity. Roualt's painting behind Mr. Marston's chair never lost its colour. The voices from the schoolyard below were as shrill as today's crows. The edges of the wooden desk remained sharp to the touch. No details of that scene had faded the

way memories are meant to do over time. And then Delphine leant forward and threw up over Mr. Marston's desk. Kate was never sure which of them screamed. But they left the mess for him to clear up and walked out without, as she happily recalled, an apology.

The scream that began that day was continuous: A long loud wail that came from the mouths, serially, of her mother, her friend and, seven and a half months later, the baby. The baby had been a huge surprise to Brian, who had not been let in on the secret and was too busy playing hockey and preparing for university to notice that his sister was growing larger. Or at least he had pretended not to know. He was a sly boy and surely couldn't have ignored all the whispering, the visits of older women and the fact that Delphine no longer went to school.

Robert had blamed Kate as if she'd told their daughter to go and have sex with the Brooks' boy and get herself into 'that condition.' Sullenness festooned the house. But after a couple of weeks' deliberation, he had given Delphine a cheque for two thousand dollars and then stayed out of the way. He was about to be promoted and from then on, entering into his new role as if he had been born to it, Judge Charbonneau became a man of balanced opinion. He could have continued to be a distinguished member of the community, and they could still have been living in the house she'd hated to leave if only... I can't help myself, Kate, he'd said on Easter Sunday three years ago, looking at her as if he expected sympathy.

But way back then, barely heard amid the yelling and the cries of who's going to look after it and what were you thinking, a quiet voice had said gently, We will take care of it. That was Elsie's girl, Alice, Delphine's best friend. She'd talked to Delphine as if they were still twelve years old and not eighteen, conjuring up pictures of a playhouse in the backyard and dolls that could be left out all night in the rain

without coming to harm. The next weeks and months were a blur, an expanding blur. And that summer, wearing a large hat and a long skirt, dragged down by both, Delphine had tried to work at the poetry they'd been studying in school before 'the fall,' because that was what they said. *She fell*. Into temptation, into a vat of boiling oil, into the arms of the rapidly disappearing Jonathan Brook. He had faded out of sight, out of the province. Too young to be a father, his mother said, which had led to strong words from Kate. And the poetry was dreary stuff: *Deep in the shady sadness of a vale, Far sunken...* So Delphine had given up on it and read Jane Austen to her unborn child instead. At least she'd read *Pride and Prejudice*, but most of the time she leafed through magazines, movie magazines, home care magazines, parent magazines, picking out advice, recipes, ads for everything that could be eaten, worn, sat in, slept on, visited.

Kate smiled as she recalled the day in the office and the ensuing turmoil and the deep pleasure of buying clothes for the doll who couldn't be left out in the backyard overnight. Her own mother's prognostications of a long descent into poverty without work, without qualifications, without a man because who would want her granddaughter now, hadn't removed the smile from Delphine's face as her belly swelled and all the older women she knew looked at her more fondly the larger she grew. *Have another piece of cake, Delphy, you're eating for two now*. And Alice kept on saying, *We will look after it*. Some friends hinted at dire consequences, a single mother, too young for motherhood, but none of those depressing sibyls had prophesied that her beloved grandson would head off to a country where he might be killed or badly injured.

Kate suggested calling the baby Helena if it was a girl, William if it was a boy. But when the baby arrived Delphine, holding him, looking up from the bed, said, "His name is

Jacob Chance Charbonneau.” And any thought the Brooks had of being grandparents to the child went out the window along with any support they might have been about to offer.

“Jacob is a solid name,” Delphine had said then. “And I like hearing Johnny Mathis singing that song, and my Chance is a ‘fine thing.’” Rocking the baby gently, she crooned, “‘Chances are, your chances are awfully good.’”

Kate saw in that moment that the young mother was a child herself. A child with a child. And she had wept.

Delphine had refused to put “father unknown” on the birth certificate and persuaded Mrs. Brook and Jonathan to come with her to the registrar’s office. Looking like a stunned deer, the boy had signed his name with a shaky hand and allowed his photograph to be taken. *A child needs to know who his parents are.* He’d fled back to university in New Brunswick, married young and had four children. The Brooks, sure that their son had been cunningly seduced, never spoke to the Charbonneaus again. Their loss!



Delphine poured more green tea into the little cup and rejoiced that she’d managed to suppress the impulse to shout at Jake there in the airport, *After all I’ve done for you.* She had instead put on a show of pride as he turned to wave one last time before he disappeared through the entrance to another universe. And he had not returned quickly through the security gate to say, *I can’t go, mother dear, how can I leave you?* which, for five minutes, standing there like a dumb statue, she’d half expected him to do.

So when she got back to the city after driving through heavy holiday traffic, she’d come to *The Pink Wok* on Dundas, Jake’s favourite restaurant. Three tables away, the

only other customer was eating very slowly and staring around as if he wanted to make time pass. He was good-looking in a solid way, sad. Perhaps he was one of the recently unemployed. At her usual table near the back the old woman was deftly eating noodles with her chopsticks. Jake had figured she was the owner's mother because she was always there and possibly had been up since dawn chopping vegetables in the kitchen. However hard her current or past life, at least *her* son had not gone off to Afghanistan.

The place needed a better-written menu and a more enticing line on the window than "Our food will not disappoint." With the right ads in a few travel magazines and theatre programs and the offer of unique foods from a remote Chinese province, customers could be lured from as far away as Niagara and perhaps Buffalo too. Add in a picture of the Chinese grandmother wearing a cheongsam and smiling, and there'd be a queue to the corner. Maybe.

The waiter brought the packaged food to her table. Chow mein. Black bean chicken. Egg foo yung. He handed her a fortune cookie.

She sipped more tea and broke the crust open. The little slip of paper read, *You will meet your fate outside the door.* She and Jake had laughed over those predictions many times and never believed a word of them though she had kept several favourable ones in her wallet as if they were charms and might come true. This one sounded dire. Was she going to slip on the icy sidewalk and break her leg? As she lay in hospital, the limb suspended in traction, friends would murmur that the "accident" was due to her unhappiness at Jake's leaving. Or maybe her future in the shape of a handsome man was even now approaching, slowing down his steps so that he would be outside at exactly the right moment. And how was she to know which moment that was? If she went out of the restaurant too soon, he would still be two blocks

back and she could hardly stand there waiting for him. If she went out too late, he'd be crossing the road, out of sight, never to be met in this lifetime.

She caught the waiter's eye to let him know she wanted the check. She would allow fate to take its course as it always did in any case. Fate could have held back the letter confirming Jake's position with the aid organization. The post office was not always efficient. Thousands of letters got lost every year, delivered to the wrong address or mangled in the machinery. But this one with its call to the war zone had arrived at the right place, neither stolen nor chewed by the dog next door. She herself had carried it to her son like a butler in a movie except that she had no silver tray. While he opened it she had, in a fair imitation of nonchalance, gone to stack the breakfast dishes. Then she allowed him to tell her the news, managing a taut smile and, "That's great, Jake," in response. And now he had gone. At this very moment the plane was probably skimming down the runway.

She wanted to spend the entire weekend taking stock of the gap in her life. There was a sudden deficit. From that morning in the principal's office to this, her son had been there. His life had been part of her life and the beat of his music had throbbed through the house. In all of his days so far, even when he was away at Western, there had been considerations, plans to make, clothes to buy.

You're still a good-looking woman, Delphine, her friends had begun to say after Bert's accident, some of them insensitively soon after, as if with all her advertising skills, she should go out and market herself. Now they would renew the attack. She pictured the ad: Woman, 42, a little on the plump side, round face, brown hair not grey yet, green eyes, seeks male for sex and other purposes. Job: Assistant Creative Director for Hunt and Berdak Advertising. Hobbies: reading, watching TV, avoiding strenuous exercise.

She walked out of the restaurant gingerly. City workmen had cleared the ice and salted the sidewalk. Falling wasn't an option here. She looked right and left. There was no one coming in either direction. Her car was in its parking spot across the road. She smiled at her own silliness and looked up at the sky. Fate in any shape was not apparent. She moved away from the building in case a chunk of masonry decided to fall on her head. There were footsteps behind her. The man from the other table had come out of the restaurant. She turned to look at him. He stood still and appeared to be waiting for her to speak.

"Jonathan?" she said.

"Marilyn?" he replied, laughing.

"I'm sorry. I thought you were someone I once knew."

"Well, I could say I remember you from somewhere but it wouldn't be true."

"Marilyn?"

"Someone I once knew."

"My fortune cookie."

"Mine too."

She had to go home. Standing there waiting for her fate to be delivered to her like a pizza-hold-the-anchovies, was ridiculous. And besides it was cold and snowflakes were beginning to drift down. A late storm was threatened, the last bite of winter.

"Goodbye, 'Jonathan,'" she said.

"See you around, 'Marilyn.'"

He strode towards the art gallery and for a moment she watched him. He was wearing a smart navy topcoat, no hat, pulling on gloves. Well, you let that one get away, she told herself. And then remembered her reason for being in the restaurant. Chance, the fine thing, had set out on his adventure. She came back to grief. It was no time to be looking for fate in the shape of a man.

Bert, her partner for ten good years, Jake's loving stepfather, had driven off an icy road into a tree when the boy was thirteen and there had been no live-in lovers since then. She and Jake had mourned together and survived together, cheering each other along in the dark moments. And now he was gone. *I'll email. I'll send pictures.* He would meet a sensuous veiled woman who spoke only Afghan, they would have six children, he would forget his own language and never return. *Be careful, my child.*

She drove home with care, had driven with care ever since that awful night when the cop had appeared on the doorstep with his black news. The radio announcer said, "As of tomorrow, the Don Valley Parkway North will be down to one lane." She switched stations and found Diana Krall singing, "Love me. Love you, baby." Humming along, she parked the car alongside the curb outside her house and saw a man standing at the door. Waiting. Waiting for her. She'd won the lottery and the bag in his hand was full of money? Or tickets for a trip to Vegas? Or was he going to jump at her, force her to open the door and let him inside and steal the picture her mother thought was a Braque? She reached for her cellphone.

"Don't do that," the man shouted. "It's all right."

"Jonathan?" she said for the second time in an hour, feeling foolish and wondering why she expected to see him of all people. What did she want after all this time for Chrissake? An apology!

The person was half turned towards her. He was wearing a leather jacket and gloves and holding a large bag.

"I don't need anything today," she said as she got closer to him.

"I'm not selling," he said.

She saw that besides his soft bag, he was carrying a long narrow instrument case, the kind that mafia hit men use as

a cover for their machine guns.

I should turn and go back to the car and drive around till he's gone.

The man reached for her. Delphine bashed him with the bag from the restaurant. Noodles and vegetables burst out of it and sprayed onto his jacket.

“Hey! Don’t you remember our promise, Delphine?”

Delphine looked at the features, the short blonde hair, the smooth cheeks, and saw familiarity but recalled no promise.

The stranger laughed. “We always said that wherever we were, whatever we were doing, we’d meet up again when we were forty. And here I am. Only two years late.” He set his instrument case down on the step and brushed Chinese food off his shoulders. “I’ve come to see the doll who couldn’t be left out in the rain.”



Kate prodded the fattest part of the capon and watched the juice trickle out. Was that a slight tinge of pink? She poked the fork into the skin by the leg and the leg came loose. It was cooked. Was it overcooked? The potatoes mashed with parsnips and butter were ready and the beans were strained. The others had offered to help but this was the cook’s private mad moment. Stirring the gravy with one hand, she shook the jar of dressing over the salad with the other. She’d torn the recipe out of a magazine in the dentist’s waiting room. It was such a weird mixture that she felt it had to be good: Equal parts vinegar, oil and marmalade. The gravy was a fat-free chicken stock, white wine and herb concoction. Grey as it looked, it tasted delicious.

The guinea pigs in the other room were talking quietly.

“I really thought he was some kind of saint.” That was

Isabel.

Then Mike's deep voice. "And what saint were you out with till 9 o'clock that night? That's what I'd like to know."

"I got lost."

It was unlike Mike to be aggressive. In all the six years he and Isabel had been together, Kate had never heard him speak sharply to her. Why here and why now?

Delphine said, "It's easy to get lost in a foreign city."

As Kate poured the gravy into its boat, she heard Dorothy comment, "It's a sad thing when someone you've admired loses their gloss."

"What is stupid," Mike went on, "is to go about having illusions about people you never knew in the first place."

"You're not likely to have illusions about someone you know," Dorothy said. "Once you get to know them."

"Isabel," Kate called. "Could you give me a hand, please."

Isabel was near tears. "Mike never said anything till now," she whispered to Kate. "It was the man in the Barron house, the one who told me the story. I went to a bar and had a glass of wine with him and then another. I couldn't help it."

"Perhaps Mike's hungry. Take the veggies in, please. It's all ready. Delphine!"

For the table, Kate had taken out the fine linen cloth and napkins that had been part of her mother's trousseau. The delicate drawn threadwork around the edges was torn here and there and all of it had to be washed by hand. But this was her first major feast in three years and she'd aimed for elegance. Beside each place, there was a small gift. And in the centre was a ceramic horseshoe filled with yellow and purple flowers, the colours of Easter. Sorrow and joy. The rarely used silver cutlery shone – she'd polished it yesterday. And she had actually gone out and bought six matching

long-stemmed wineglasses. She was only sorry that Elsie wasn't here to admire her effort.

Delphine came into the kitchen and picked up the heavy dish with the capon on it and carried it into the other room. She set it down in front of Mike. Any of them were capable of slicing the beast, but it had always been a man's task. He picked up the carving knife and fork and began to cut into the breast with slow precision. Kate wanted to snatch the knife from him and take over but had to watch, fretting that he was giving everyone too little. But the plates were soon filled with vegetables, cranberry sauce, gravy.

She sat back and sighed and enjoyed the murmurs of praise and all the words that were a cover for the absence of Jake. She wished that Brian and Megan and their children lived nearer. Then it would have been a real family gathering, although Delphine and her brother had an edgy relationship and might have quarrelled.

Dorothy said, "Why do we have to have a feast at Easter? I doubt if they did that in the first years on the Third Day."

"Need to eat after Lent."

"It's just another excuse to pig out."

"Primitive," Mike said. "It's another day when the lonely and depressed get to feel lonelier and sadder."

Mike carried the troubles of the city on his back as if, all around him, here at the table, sat starving street people waiting to be fed. There was something about the man, in spite of his gentle face, that induced guilt. To forestall Dorothy who was taking a deep breath prior to weighing in with her own view of the matter, Kate said, "There is a beauty to Easter. The idea of renewal, of life after death, of redemption in a way."

"But what an awful way to die," Isabel said.

And for a moment Kate felt a shiver of dread and noticed that Delphine had stopped eating.

“The question is,” Dorothy said, “was it necessary?”

“The real question is, was it true?”

“If so many people have believed over so many centuries, then perhaps that makes it true whether it happened or not.”

“That sounds like Peter Pan and Tinker Bell, Mike,” Isabel said. “Clap your hands if you believe in Jesus.”

“Many do just that and so he lives on.”

“Cut some more capon, please, Mike,” Kate said. She could sense a downward spiral. None of them exactly believed in the Christian story now, but for her and Dorothy and even for Delphine, there were remnants of faith, pricks of conscience that made them uncomfortable to hear words of denial. They were in fact superstitious. She poured more wine into their glasses and waited for an upturn in the conversation.

“I made a blueberry pie,” Delphine put in. “Jake’s favourite. Do you think they’re having a celebration there?”

“Unless they’re in some enclosed place, it might not be wise,” Dorothy said. “Why are we sitting around the table enjoying this fine food when we should be weeping about the state of the world?”

Kate looked at the carving knife and then at her friend.

Isabel said, “You’re a laugh a minute, Aunt Dorothy.”

“I haven’t finished. I was going to say that it’s important to do what we’ve always done. Continue in our traditions. It makes a framework for us to live in. And in that way... in that way –”

Dorothy had lost herself in a web of ideas. Kate smiled. Her friend’s mind had always been a crowded place and now that she was older her thoughts were sometimes hard to keep hold of – like slippery fish.

Isabel and Mike cleared the dishes while Delphine got strips of paper and pencils out of the sideboard drawer.

“They sell this game in a box now,” Dorothy said. “Twenty-five dollars at least.”

“I suppose it’s cheaper than buying a dictionary if you haven’t already got one,” Kate answered.

Mike was the first to choose a word. “‘Hexamerous,’” he read out and spelt it. Kate thought she knew what it meant and wrote her answer. When everyone had put down their own definitions of the word, they handed the slips to Mike who smiled as he read them out. “‘The ability to satisfy six lovers at once.’ ‘A plague on all things American.’ ‘The curse of love.’ Interesting, guys, but this is the right one. ‘Having six parts.’”

“Six parts of what?” Dorothy asked.

“It doesn’t say. Of anything, I guess.”

A point for Kate.

Isabel gave them “hirple” and none of them came close to its true meaning. Dorothy picked “interjacency.”

In the end, amid cries of unfair because she knew more Latin than they did and could figure out the roots of words, Kate won the chocolate egg.

Delphine left early saying she had a project to finish, taking a plate full of leftovers with her as if she planned to work through the night.

“We’ve filled the dishwasher,” Isabel said. She went out of the door hand in hand with Mike. Reconciliation had taken place in the kitchen.

Dorothy was the last to leave. “If you can do this for a few, dear,” she said, “think what you could do for a crowd.”

Alone, Kate sat down and ate the last piece of pie. We eat for comfort, she thought. We eat for love.