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Table of Contents

Jim’s Lunch Counter.....	4
Tilly and Her Baby.....	7
Laurence and Lucy.....	13
Julia.....	18
Mike and the Woman in the White Fur Coat.....	25
George and Susan.....	32
The Steam Tunnels.....	38
Coyote And The Hummingbird.....	45
The Red Curtain.....	50
Olivia’s Story.....	57
Coyote Helps Out.....	65
The Hungry Ghosts.....	69
Ray Keen and the Baby Shower.....	75
The Wild Hunt.....	81
Steve and Mishelle.....	88
Morris and the Oak Tree.....	95
Amateur Night.....	102
Wolf Moon.....	108
Love in the Time of Pandemic.....	115
The Invisible Ex.....	121
The Sandwich Run.....	128
God of Flies.....	133
John and Lillith.....	139
Kurt The Hero.....	145
The Background Artist.....	151
The Great Zamboni.....	158
Jim Takes an Apprentice.....	164
The Man In The Hat.....	171

The Sorceress.....	178
The Wyrn in the Tunnels.....	183

Jim's Lunch Counter

Jim's Lunch Counter is one of those hole in the wall places with a few seats and a counter. Behind the counter is a griddle, a sink and one of those insane soup heating machines, the ones that look like a big beer mug with an electrical plug. That's what they are of course, an electrically heated mug. They are on a timer and the soup comes out just the right temperature.

Jim is a big friendly fellow with a fair number of tattoos that he picked up over the years as a Navy cook. Mostly the hula girl variety in fading blue ink, the ones you made dance by flexing your biceps. There were others that were rather strange designs but he never talked about them. In his apron and chef's hat he makes an impressive display as he holds court.

He could be scary at times, and all the neighbourhood toughs had learned to leave his place alone after he gave the bum's rush to a guy with a knife. I'd never actually seen a bum's rush before, but he took that guy by the scruff of the neck and the seat of his pants and threw him half way across the road toward the train station. Funny thing is, it took a bit of effort to get from one side of the counter to the other, you had to lift a section up. Well I was sitting beside that section with my elbow on the hinge and I know he didn't use it. When the kid waved the knife Jim was just on the other side of the counter and behind the kid. One big paw slapped the knife onto the griddle where it made quite a sight as the wooden hilt smoked, and the other was on the kid's neck. He must have jumped over.

I'd been a regular at the place since I was a kid, and I remember Jim teaching me to dice onions the way he did for the hamburgers when I was about ten. He looked old then, and he looks old now, but no older. Some folks are like that, they never seem to age once they hit a certain number of years.

Jim had a number of regulars that he took good care of. He was a sort of father figure to a lot of the kids growing up around our "wrong side of the tracks". The place was a safe haven from the nastier types, and there was always a hamburger to be had for a skinny kid that didn't get fed very well at home. Those kids never forgot that, and some would come in decades later to pay, often at a rate of about a hundred dollars per burger with a whispered "for the kids". Jim would smile, shake their hand and stuff the money into the till.

Just to be clear, I was fully paid up, had been for years. I liked the place and was in most days for lunch. In recent years Jim had put in a Panini press and he'd make a special for you if you wanted it. Mine was a gouda, spinach, onion, and hot pepper. I asked for rollmop herring every day and Jim would snort and say "when I sell the place you can ask the new owners for that stinking fish".

Seven in the morning until three were the hours, and I often came in for breakfast too. Nothing fancy, eggs, bacon, sausage, hashbrowns and toast. Real hash browns, the kind you made with the boiled potatoes from the day before mixed with parsley and garlic.

Jim made his own chili too, a recipe he said he picked up in Mexico but I know for a fact it came from South West Ontario. I know because it had celery and my gran made hers with celery as did all the grans from down that way. But I never challenged his story about learning the recipe in some backwater port on the Pacific coast. His stories were entertaining enough not to want changing.

I once looked the diner up in the Guelph archives, and there was a picture, looking just like it does now, from the 1920s. It was even named Jim's Lunch Counter. When I asked Jim about it he said "The former owner was named Jim. When I bought it from him I changed my name rather than change the sign. My real name's Ashley".

Yeah, he was like that. Another time he told us he came from an aristocratic family in Wessex. When asked which Wessex he said "the one beside Mercia, my family name was Childress". OK I bit and looked it up, Ashley Childress. It came out to roughly "the orphan that lives near the ash tree meadow".

Rather a kidder was our Jim, but we regulars who had grown up under his eye were fiercely protective of him and of the lunch counter and would back up his stories to anyone who looked a bit doubtful.

This is Jim's story, and we'll all stick to it thank you very much.

Tilly and Her Baby

Jim was leaning on the counter, big face close to the girl who was crying and saying over and over “you can’t get pregnant when it’s your first time”.

“What’s your name girl?” Jim said, not unkindly, but with some force so she’d know he meant it.

“T-Tilly” between the sobs.

“Alright Tilly, I’m going to have to ask you to stop the crying so that we can talk OK? Can you do that?”

It took a couple of minutes, but she stopped and looked up at Jim who held out a napkin for her to wipe her face and nose. “Right, let’s start with why you came here”.

“My Gran told me to come talk to you, although I don’t know why, but here I am”

“That would be Mavis Scott right? No wait, Mavis Cleary now?” She nodded, and Jim continued “Good, I know her, now tell me the story, who’s the boy?”

“Ray Keen” came the reply. I knew him, not an evil kid, but too handsome for his own good. It was only a matter of time before this happened, before he knocked up some girl with stars in her eyes.

“We went driving in his car and he was so nice. He took me up to the lookout and it was real warm so he took out a blanket and we sat on the grass and watched the stars. He kissed me some, then he started undressing me. I told him I was a virgin and he told me that you can’t get pregnant your first time so we did it.”

“Tilly, that sounds like you had nothing to say about what happened” said Jim. She gave a sort of grin and admitted that maybe she had started kissing him, and had started undressing him before he undressed her. “Good” said Jim “you’re not helpless, keep that in mind, the women in your family are strong”.

“Now, do you want this boy to marry you?”

Tilly looked a bit shocked at the suggestion, she wasn’t crying any more. “No, I guess not, he’s pretty but he’d leave me in the end, he likes the girls too much.”

“OK fine, now do you want to keep the baby?”

“What choice do I have?” Tilly said “I can’t just magic it away, I’m going to have to leave school and get a job. Is that why Gran sent me to see you? For a job?”

“No, it’s not. You told your Gran this same story and what you want to do did you?”

“How did you know that, have you been talking with Gran?”

Jim gave a wistful smile, like he was remembering something. “No, I haven’t seen your Gran for a very long time. Now, are you sure you don’t want the boy and you don’t want the child?”

Tilly looked a little panicked and said in a very small voice “I wish I’d never gone out with Ray, I wish it was all back to where it was”.

“Girl, I want you to go back to your Gran and stay with her for three days, don’t go home, I will fix this. Now scoot and stop blubbering”.

When she had left the lunch counter Jim was quiet for a minute, and I spoke up “Jim you aren’t going to send her to one of those back alley butchers are you? You can’t do that.”

“No need for that” he said, “I still know some other ways, and some other folks.” With that he turned to one of the other men at the counter. “Jonah, you and your wife still want a kid?”

Jonah looked a little embarrassed, but when Jim asked you a question in that tone of voice you answered, no matter if it was private or not. The rest of us in the shop knew that this story wasn’t going out the door. “You know we are Jim, but I can’t produce the juice. Lila is healthy the doctors say, but it’s me that’s the problem. We’ve been talking about adopting. You think we should take this girl’s baby when it’s born”.

Jim shook his head, “No, she doesn’t deserve that at her age, she’d never recover, I’ve got something else in mind”.

Ah, some of that sort of thing we thought, but we didn’t ask, it was no good asking Jim about his private business, still, I had to know. “Jim those other ways and other folks wouldn’t be the old ways and the old folks would they?”

He looked at me fast and gave just a tiny nod, then looked at Jonah. “I know I can trust you fellows to keep your mouths shut about this. Jonah, your wife will be pregnant soon. She’ll be a little bit further along than the usual, but you two just say it’s a surprise after trying for so long.”

Jonah looked doubtful “Not sure what you’re saying Jim, I don’t want to ask Lila to have surgery to have a kid, it’s too risky”.

Jim sighed “I don’t often explain this, but again, I’m telling you fellows to keep quiet. Here’s the thing, there are still folk out there who know the old ways. You know how fairies get blamed for stealing babies? Well it’s true, from time to time a case like young Tilly there would arise, and the fairies would steal the baby. They didn’t keep it though, they’d give the baby to someone else who wanted one but couldn’t have one. Tilly’s Gran knows the old ways, so she’ll get rid of most of the steel around Tilly, and leave a saucer of milk, although all the milk will do is make a cat happy. To be plain Jonah, we’re going to put Tilly’s baby in Lila and then it will be your baby.”

Jonah was stunned, the rest of us, those who had been around the place for a few years just smiled and nodded to each other. Jim could sure tell the tales.

Me, I suspected that if Jonah's wife got pregnant, and Jim was involved, it would happen in the usual way. Jim had a bit of a reputation.

Still, about a week later Tilly came back in and said "Jim, Gran says you don't need to do anything, I had a miscarriage".

"Thanks for telling me Tilly, I hope you're okay," said Jim "and I hope your Gran had a talk with you about how to prevent getting a baby next time."

"She did, but there won't be a next time, I'm done with boys and all that until I finish school"

Jim just smiled and nodded as Tilly walked out. The rest of us rolled our eyes, she was a good kid and I hoped she had listened to her Gran and remembered.

A few days later, Jonah came in all smiles. "I don't know how it happened, but it's a miracle. Some of my juice must have had a spark in it after all, but Lila's pregnant. The doctor said it must have happened about a month ago. Coffee all around Jim, we can toast to my Lila".

I looked hard at Jim but he was busy pouring coffee and looked innocent as an angel. I wondered why it was that I seemed to be the only one who remembered Jim's stories sometimes, and at that exact thought, Jim looked up and winked.

Damn the man.

Laurence and Lucy

Laurence walked into the place looking a bit down. We hadn't seen him for a few months. He was usually in with his girlfriend Lucy, they had lived together for two or three years in a small apartment downtown.

As usual, Jim leaned across the counter to ask about the long face and nailed it. "Where's Lucy?"

"She's gone to be a pilot, gone to Sioux Ste Marie to a flight school there. She left a few weeks ago and I don't think she's going to be back if she graduates and gets a job with one of the airlines." Laurence said, looking more than a bit sad. "Is it mean of me to wish she fails out and comes back to Guelph?"

Jim shook his head, "You don't want that, she would end up blaming you for it, because you wanted her back. Just wish her good luck my friend, and move on with your life."

"You need a new roommate? We could be the Larry Show. Or is Bert still living with you?" Larry asked, Larry was always looking for a new place to stay, he was well known as a slob and he was annoying to boot. Bert is Laurence's best friend, they've been together since high school.

"No thanks Larry, I'll manage, and Bert isn't at the apartment any more, he moved out two months ago, he found his own place".

Those two had been inseparable, for Bert to move out when Lucy did was remarkable to say the least. Sensing a story Jim said “Give”.

Laurence seemed to collapse a bit, but telling the story was sort of the rule in the diner, and he wouldn't have been there if he didn't want to tell it.

“You guys know that I've been living with Lucy for a long time right? We've had our ups and downs, but we always work it out. She's a bit odd, some folks say, but she's just a free spirit.

About six months ago Bert moved in with us, he set up in the spare room and it was great for a while. Then it wasn't. Lucy seemed to be less happy with me, our arguments went on for longer, and I figured she was starting to get cold feet about living with me.

Around that time Bert found his own place and moved out. Shortly after that, Lucy said she wanted some time to herself, to sort things out. She left her things but moved out.

It was hard, living on my own with all her things around, I can tell you. The worst thing is that she wouldn't tell me where she was. She'd come back for clean clothes and books and whatnot, but she never told me what was going on.”

The guys were starting to grin and Laurence looked at them hard. “Laugh it up guys, you figured it out, but I didn’t, I loved those two, I trusted those two”.

“Like you guessed, I followed Lucy one day and found out she was living with Bert. I was floored, I mean if Bert had wanted to fuck Lucy I’d have gladly told him to go ahead. It wasn’t as if we were shy about that sort of thing.” Laurence held up his hand “That’s another story OK guys.”

“Give” said Larry.

I don’t know what it is about Jim’s place, but it’s like you leave all your privacy outside the place, if someone asks you a question you want to answer it. If you’ve got a story you want to tell it, so Laurence said “nothing too interesting you guys, I’m pretty straight but if I were to sleep with a guy, it would have been Bert. We had a girl out at the pond one night and the two of us were feeling her up. We were drunk and I found Bert’s dick and gave it a tug. We almost ended up bedding the girl together but didn’t. That’s it. Can I get back to the story at hand?”

“Story at hand!” Larry giggled, demonstrating why nobody wanted to room with him.

“Anyway”, Laurence said loudly “I figured what Bert had done was pretty uncivilized. Friends don’t do things like that without asking first right? It’s only manners. I haven’t talked with him since, but I talked with Lucy the next time she came over. Oh

yes indeed I did. When I told her I'd followed her, she got this sort of look she always does when I catch her at something. She can't lie worth beans and she didn't even try, just looked like 'so?'

She never said why she'd moved in with Bert but she did tell me something that I had known forever. He was a bit of an energy sink, I mean he was up for anything that was suggested, but otherwise he'd sit on the couch. Lucy is used to being with people who have a bit more to contribute, and so she ended up moving back in with me. It was almost as if she was waiting for me to catch her with Bert and ask her to come back"

We goggled at him a bit and he said "Look, I'm not jealous, I didn't blame Bert for fucking her, and I didn't blame her for wanting a bit of an adventure, I just figured they should have asked first. So when she moved back in I didn't say no. I love her OK? So sue me.

Anyway, things went well for a few weeks, and before you ask, I have no idea if she went back over to Bert's place and screwed him, I didn't care. She's a free woman and as long as she was living with me I was fine with it. I'm just not forgiving Bert because he should have asked. We were buddies for way too long for him to do that to me. I can't blame him for wanting to hook up with Lucy, you guys know how damned sexy she is.

Well as you know now, she suddenly told me she was moving away to go to flight school. I should have known something like that would happen, if she was restless enough to go live

with Bert, she wasn't going to stick around with me for much longer. And she didn't.

I'm hoping she comes back afterwards, and we're still good friends, I mean there's no way I'm going to stand in the way of whatever she wants to do, but damn, I thought we were going to get old together. I've never been with anyone who was as much fun as Lucy."

Jim poured Laurence a cup of coffee and said "Laurence, did you ever think that maybe Lucy wanted you to catch her with Bert, that she wanted you to tell her how much you love her and ask her to move back? You're not the most demonstrative person you know."

It was Laurence's turn to goggle. "You mean if I tell her I love her and I want her to come back she might".

Jim shook his head a bit sadly "No, it's too late for that, let her get on with her dreams of flying and you, get on with your life"

The rest of us made sympathetic noises, patted his shoulder and went back to our lunch.

As it turned out, Laurence waited for her until her schooling was over and when she didn't come back he found another girl and this time it stuck. So far.

Julia

She came running through the door as if Satan himself was chasing her. I was near the door and looked, but I didn't see anything in the street.

Jim came around the counter and stood in the doorway, he looked up and down the street, then looked up. Inside of a minute there must have been fifty crows around the place. Jim closed the door and went back to his usual position.

The girl was still standing, looking terrified and glancing around the place as if we might be a threat.

“Who was it?” I said, “Who’s chasing you”.

“He’s dead” she said, “I know he’s dead, I killed him”.

Jim stepped in then and said “Nobody is getting in here, sit down girl and have something to drink, you want milk, a coffee or tea maybe?”

Having to make a choice seemed to calm her down a little. Before she could answer, Jim looked her up and down and then made a hot chocolate for her. None of the powdered kind, he made the fancy stuff, all of it from scratch and she kept her eyes on him, watching every move he made. You could see her getting more calm as she did, her shoulders dropped, her breathing slowed down.

When Jim gave her the drink, she looked once more out the door and then sat down. She put her hands around the mug as if to warm them up, and you could see they were still shaking. It took a little while but she managed a bit of the chocolate and then looked up and said “thanks”.

“Feel like talking about it?” said Jim. She looked around the place and he said “all these folks will keep their mouths shut, and if anything comes through the door they will fight, but nothing is coming in, I promise you”.

“You don’t know that, there’s a dead man after me, a man I killed, how can you stop a dead man?”

She was surprisingly calm about it, and I wondered what Jim had put in that cocoa. To be honest I was getting a bit freaked out, but I trusted Jim and if he said nothing was coming through the door, I believed him. Besides, with all those crows out there we’d hear if something was coming.

Where the hell did they come from anyway?

Jim nodded and said “There are ways. Why don’t you tell it from the start? And why not tell us your name while you’re at it”.

“Julia, my name’s Julia.” and she took a big breath, looked around to see if we were listening, and started. “You’re not going to believe this but about a year ago I was sleeping in my

bed, window open because it was hot. There was a fire escape and I guess he came up that, I don't know, because the first thing I remember was that he was on top of me.

He had a knife to my throat and his hand over my mouth, and he told me to shut up or he'd kill me. I made myself relax and he grinned, kept his hand over my mouth and put the knife on the bed-table. He started to pull down my sheets. When he reached for my pajamas I reached for the knife and stuck it into his guts.

Well he reared back and pulled that knife out and started to stab me. I didn't know what I was doing but I grabbed the blade and twisted, that thing snapped off and I pushed at his throat with my other hand. He fell back and rolled off the bed. Turned out he was dead.

After the police came it all hit me and I collapsed. It took me months in therapy to be able to go back to school. Oh yeah, and quite a few stitches to close up my hand."

She opened her left hand and there was a nasty scar across her palm. It couldn't have been deep though, she could open and close her hand. I was amazed that she could grab a blade like that and I looked up at Jim. He said "if you twist fast enough and don't let it run across the flesh, you can do it".

I guess he picked that up when he was in the Navy. I looked at Julia again, and Jim said, rather gently for him, "go on".

She swallowed and said “About the time I went back to school I started to get the feeling someone was watching me, but every time I looked around there was nobody there. Then I started to hear footsteps and a few days ago I started to see him out of the corner of my eye. He was bleeding and stumbling but he was coming at me. When I looked directly at him he wasn’t there, but...”

She was starting to panic again and Jim put a hand on her shoulder, something he almost never did, and said “steady girl, you’re among friends now, tell us the rest.”

She nodded and said “then today I was walking downtown and he was there, coming out of an alleyway. I could see him and he was stumbling at me with another knife.

I ran and looked but all the stores were closed, except this place, so I came in here and that’s the end of it. You know everything now.”

I looked, aside from the crows, the street was normal, it was the middle of the day and all the stores were open.

“Not quite” Jim said, “what do you want to do now? Do you want to call the police?”

“What? And tell them I’m being chased by a dead man? They’ll lock me up.”

Jim nodded and said “What then? Will you take care of this yourself, will you take care of it with our help?”

Julia looked around again, you could tell she was terrified but seeing our grim faces she nodded. “Can I? Can I do this?”

Jim smiled and shrugged “You’re the only one who can” and with that he turned and lifted a ladle off the rack. “This will do, you see how heavy it is? You see the hook on the end?” I could, and it looked like a ladle to me, but Julia’s eyes got big and she took it carefully, like it was a sword.

She bounced it a bit, like she was feeling the balance and looked up. She didn’t look terrified any more, in fact she looked terrifying. What the hell was that ladle I thought to myself.

“You ready?” Jim said and she nodded.

Jim went to the door and the circle of crows opened up, then closed again. “OK he said, we will stay here in case you need us but I think you have this. He can’t escape, he’s yours.”

Julia nodded, looked around at us and saw nothing but confidence looking back. She pulled her shoulders back, took a big breath and walked past Jim and out the door.

I have never seen anything like it, she never said a word, just grunted once in a while as she started to move. She must have been practising some sort of martial art from the way she

moved, and that ladle became a blur. All I saw was Julia doing a kind of fighting dance, but when she swung her arm you could see shocks running up to her shoulder. I have to admit, I'd never seen anything like it before, this wasn't funny, it wasn't pretty, she was really fighting something.

After a few seconds, and it was only a few seconds, she beat down with the scoop, then reversed it and hooked something, then ripped. I don't know how else to put it, but I could almost see flesh and blood being strewn across the sidewalk.

She stopped then, and sank to her knees. The ladle rested on the ground and the crows, I'm not kidding here, the crows moved in and it was as if they were eating something.

Jim walked out and flicked his hand at the crows, who were almost covering Julia, there were so many. They disappeared almost as fast as they had come, except for one big one. Jim nodded to this one and it bobbed its head, then took off after the others.

Jim helped Julia stand up and they came back into the diner. He settled her onto a stool and went around to the other side. He looked hard at her face and she looked back, then carefully, with both hands, handed the ladle over. Jim bowed a bit and took it with both hands, turned and replaced it on the rack after wiping it with a towel.

The tension drained out of Julia's shoulders as Jim pattered around with his back to us. When he turned back he had a plate

with a grilled cheese sandwich, pickles, and hash browns. This he set down in front of Julia and she ate it in silence. In fact we were all silent after what we had seen in the street.

Once Julia had eaten, she stood up and took a step back so she could see all of us. She bowed again, and Jim bowed back once more. He reached out and put a hand on her shoulder and said “He’s gone now, the crows have eaten him. You are always welcome here my child, but for now go in peace.” It sounded like some sort of a formula, and then he reached down under the counter and came back up with a necklace and charm. This he handed to Julia, who put it around her neck and bowed again.

It seemed very much like a ceremony of some sort, but if it was, none of us knew what it meant. Julia seemed to know, and she marched out the door as if she owned the city.

Jim watched her go and then said “who needs a refill”.

Mike and the Woman in the White Fur Coat

He walked into the place, full backpack and sleeping bag. He looked like he had just come off the road, and as it turned out, he had just come off the road. We loved hearing stories from travellers, some of us didn't get out much.

“Coffee's on me if you tell us your story” Jim said as the fellow stashed the bag in the corner and sat down.

“Fair enough, my name's Mike”

“OK Mike, can't have a man tell a story with a dry throat so here's the coffee, you want some food as well” Said Jim.

“A burger would go down a treat, thanks. Maybe with fries, and I'd kill for a fresh salad”.

“No need for that, a burger and fries with salad coming up, pardon my back but I can hear quite well so go ahead with that story”.

“I've been hiking and hitching for almost a year, I hitched out from Ontario to the prairies and worked on a farm for a month during harvest, then moved on to BC where I worked in a coal mine for another couple of months. After that I went to Vancouver and spent the winter as a waiter in a coffee shop in

White Rock. Nice place, it's right on the border with the US. I lived with a couple of other folks from Ontario and we would spend some time on the beach on our days off, and then hit the bars in the evenings.

Come spring I started to move up the coast. I did the West Coast Trail, something you really should do if you ever get the chance, then hitched to Port Hardy and took the ferry up to Prince Rupert.

I hitched from there to Prince George, down to Kamloops, through Banff to Calgary and on to Thunder Bay in pretty good time. I had some trouble catching a ride out of Thunder Bay but I caught up on some sleep at least.

I was almost a day and a half with my thumb out when a woman in a white fur coat stopped to pick me up. She said she was heading to Guelph for some business and I was really happy to hear that because I'm going back to school here in a couple of days.

It wasn't terribly hot but she had the window down and wore that coat as she drove. I was pretty glad I had my winter jacket along, she really liked the fresh air I guess.

I got talking to her and she said she was in Kenora visiting relatives, and was heading back to Southern Ontario where she lives. On the way she was going to stop in Guelph to see a guy about something or other, she never really said.

I don't know how much you guys want to know about that last leg of the trip but..."

Jim had become very still and turned around with Mike's burger. "This is on the house Mike, and I would very much like to know about your trip with this woman in the fur coat. Did she happen to tell you her name?"

Mike stopped and thought for a moment. "You know, she never did, I told her mine, but she never said, it didn't seem to matter much".

"Go on and eat and let's hear about your trip from Thunder Bay" Jim was really focused on this story, much more than usual.

"Damn this is a good burger, thanks. OK well she didn't seem to be in a big hurry, we drove along Superior and then dropped down to Wawa where she stopped and she paid for a room in a motel. She said she didn't like to be cooped up in the car for too long at a time. The motel was right next to the bush and as soon as we'd got our bags in the room she said she was going for a walk. She didn't want company so I flopped on a bed and read a book for a while.

She came back in about an hour and was pretty sweaty when she walked through the door. 'must have been a good walk' I said and she whipped her head around like she'd forgotten I was there. She looked at me a bit and said 'come on, you can scrub my back' as she headed for the shower.

She didn't have to ask me twice, did I mention she was very handsome, not pretty, but handsome, elegant I guess. Anyway, by the time I got into the bathroom she had taken off that coat and damned if she wasn't naked underneath it."

Jim was just about on the other side of the counter he was listening so hard. "Go on" he said as he refilled Mike's cup.

"Well, maybe I shouldn't tell tales, but since you guys are listening so quietly..." Mike let that hang and looked around, Larry spoke up "we don't repeat any stories told in here Mike".

Mike nodded and said "Well I want to tell someone because I've never seen this on anyone, she had white hair that matched that coat, and she had a soft down that ran from her head to her ass, also white. She was white other places too, but I'm not kidding, that fuzz on her back got me as hard as a fence-post. That and I hadn't had sex in months.

We showered and then went to the other bed together. I'm not going to tattle, but she kept me up for most of the night."

At that point Jim looked my way and said "hold the fort, I'm going out to make a call" We all jumped a bit at that, Jim hardly ever left the diner but he was out the door and pulling out his phone.

Occasionally I did take care of the place, I'd been doing it since I was fifteen, so I asked if anyone wanted another coffee and poured a couple, then sat back down.

Mike, in the meantime had finished his food and was sipping his coffee. "Should I wait for him to come back?"

Larry poked his head out the door and said "He's still on the phone"

I asked Mike if he was set to get up to the University and he said "she said she might come back to pick me up, but if she doesn't I can take a bus, no problem."

"You got a place to stay?" I said.

"Yep, got some roommates in a house not far from Campus, so I'm good".

At that point Jim came back in, looking a bit more relaxed. "Sorry, just checking on someone, please continue Mike".

"Where was I? Mike said

"Not telling us about the sex" said Larry, to groans from the rest of us.

"Oh yeah, well we were up early the next day and drove to Espanola then turned on to Highway 6. That felt like I was home, actually. We drove onto Manitoulin Island and down

toward the ferry but she said her reservation was the next day so we stopped at Manitowaning and she took a room at a motel outside town.

It was the same thing, she went out for a walk and was gone for a couple of hours this time. When she came back she was sweaty like before, and like before she seemed surprised to see me, like she'd forgotten I was there. Again we hit the shower together and then into bed. Funny thing, it was like it was the first time again, I had to learn all over what pleased her, it wasn't the same as the night before.

The next day we drove down to South Baymouth and caught the ferry. She leaned on the rail the whole way across, like she was sniffing the wind. Me, I was cold in the breeze and sat out of the wind.

When we got off at Tobermory she drove again and we made it into Guelph in four hours and here I am. She dropped me off here saying there was good food, and there is, I'll be back. She also said she might come back to pick me up after I'd eaten".

"I don't think she'll be back" said Jim "you got a way up to your place?"

"I'll just take a bus, thanks, and thanks for the food, it was great. You sure I can't pay you for it?"

Jim waved his hand and said "starving student discount, and thanks for the story, it was a good one".

As Mike walked out of the place I looked at Jim and said “it wasn’t that good, what’s going on”.

Jim looked around and said “I know her, she’s a friend of a friend. Her name’s Megan and our buddy Mike is very lucky she took a liking to him. He’s fine though, she’s got a short memory and has probably forgotten about him already. I had to warn my friend that Megan was coming to see him.” I frowned and Jim shook his head so I let it drop.

Just another day at the lunch counter.

George and Susan

George was one of our older regulars, we teased him that he must be a hundred, but he is mid-60s I would guess. Actually it's partly his fault, he is always complaining about the aches and pains of getting old.

He didn't look old this morning, he looked confused. He wasn't sure what to order even though he'd eaten the same thing for years. Larry of course started to joke about Alzheimer's but he was shushed into silence.

Jim leaned over and said "George, it looks like you've had some changes in your life lately, you want to tell us about it?"

George took a spoon of granola and a sip of coffee. Granola? I didn't know Jim had such a thing back there behind the counter. George looked up again and started "You fellows know that I lost my wife a couple of years ago right?" We nodded sympathetically. "Well the kids are long gone and the house is really too big for one person, so I put an ad in the paper for a roommate. I asked for someone my age who wanted some company.

I interviewed a few people but they had kids that were likely to move back in, or dogs or, well anyway there were quite a few who would not have done, until I got an email from a woman named Susan. She sounded nice, she was living in a small town southwest of here, and had worked at a research farm until she

retired. She lost her husband a few years ago and her kids were gone, pretty much like me. She wanted to move back into town where she could walk to the stores again. She sounded pretty compatible so I asked her to come and see the place.

You can imagine my shock when she turned out to be an old girlfriend from my post-grad days. In fact, I'd lived with her for about a year before I moved out.

I didn't know if she knew who I was when she got there, but she didn't look surprised. Look, I wasn't very nice to this girl, I was a bit of a ladies man back then, and she was the first girl I'd ever lived with and it was hard with all those great looking girls around. It was hard to live with just one girl.

So while I was being a real shit about things, she was being incredibly nice to me. She was in grad school too, but she somehow found time to cook and clean and wash my clothes, and run me around in her car.

You'd think I'd count my blessings, but I didn't, I figured I deserved everything she did for me because if she wasn't nice to me I'd find some other girl to replace her. Of course I did, I slept with enough girls that she got sick of it and told me so. Being young and stupid, I didn't apologize and try to do better, we argued like hell, and eventually I moved out.

It wasn't too long afterwards that I realized what I'd lost, and how badly I'd treated her, especially when my friends pointed out what a shit I was to her. So long story short, I've felt bad

about Susan ever since. Not bad enough to do anything about it, like write her a letter and tell her I was sorry. I heard nothing from her either, but what could I expect. After a few more tries I finally found Moe and we stayed together for thirty years, had three great kids and it was the saddest day of my life when I lost her.

Jim refilled his coffee and made sympathetic noises, hell we all did, we'd all been there. It's sort of a rite of passage for young men to be dicks until we get old enough that we outgrow that, and stop thinking with our dicks. Still, the thought of living with some of my old girlfriends would make me fear that I'd be knifed in my sleep.

But not George, he took Susan on as a roommate figuring he could apologize and make amends.

"I took her in and showed her around and right away I realized it might be a mistake. I could see her looking at the dust bunnies and the stained toilet and the dripping sink and suddenly I could see it too. I'd never been too worried about having a spotless place, but I remembered she was a demon for cleaning. Just another thing to feel bad about I guess.

She took the room anyway and I tried to avoid her as much as I could, I didn't know what to say to her. In the meantime she started in cleaning her room and spiralled out from there so that eventually the place was as spotless as I remembered our old apartment was. She hasn't lost her liking for a clean place.

I spent that time trying to help as much as I could, I boxed up my old junk and gave it to the thrift shop. I boxed up some of Moe's things and Susan stopped me, made me put them back. 'What are you doing?' she said 'you need to keep those things, if not for you than for the kids to see when they visit'.

That was the evening that we sat down and talked. The first thing she said was that she wasn't moving in to be my wife, she was a roommate. That's when it all broke out and I blubbered my way to an apology for treating her so badly and leaving her all those years ago.

She laughed. 'Do you figure it was all your fault? Look, you were a fun guy, and really good looking, plus you were hella good in bed. Did I know you were a slut? Sure I did, and I didn't mind, I wasn't faithful to you either, you just never caught on, you dear innocent boy. You were pretty helpless and a lot of work. I actually didn't mind much when you moved out, but if you think I pined away for years after you left, you are mistaken. I moved on and I figured you would too. It looks like I was right, we both found good partners and had lots of years with them. We both had kids, and we both had a lot of years at a job we liked.'

'Speak for yourself' I said, and she laughed. She knew I didn't like teaching much, but I did it to put food on the table. I retired and started writing novels as soon as I could.

I must have looked stunned because Susan went and got me another beer and said 'Look, don't sweat the past OK, I knew

who you were when I answered the ad, I never had a bad thought about you after you left, I always considered you a friend, are my a friend?' I nodded. 'Wonderful, now I've got some things from my life I'd like to put up around the place, are you good with that?' I nodded again.

So that's how she moved in, and now she's doing all the cooking and cleaning. She does my laundry, she's changing my diet for Pete's sake. Her kids and mine are sometimes visiting at the same time and they think it's hilarious that we're old lovers. They figure it's romantic or some such.

Me, I'm just confused, it's like she never left. I keep wondering if it was like that the first time around, that she just moved in and took over my life."

George went quiet and the rest of us looked at each other, Jim said "George you're a lucky guy, and knowing Moe she would have liked that you found someone to live with. You do strike me as a pretty helpless guy who needs someone to look after him."

"Oh no" said George, "don't get me wrong, I do a lot of the housework myself, the sweeping, the dishes and all the repairs, it's just that she's so damned efficient that it feels like she's doing it all. I'm trying, I really am".

"So she's not just a roommate?" Jim prompted.

“Oh hell, that’s why I feel so confused this morning. Last night Susan walked into my room and climbed into bed. She said she was cold and tired of sleeping alone. We didn’t have sex, I don’t know if I can get it up any more... no that’s a lie, I did, but I don’t know if she wants it or not. And I sure as hell don’t know if I want to take on a new relationship at my age”

I thought that I’d like to meet this Susan, she seemed to understand our George pretty well, and have him well under control.

Jim grinned and said “But George, it’s not a new relationship is it?”

The Steam Tunnels

I walked into the diner to find Mike there talking with Jim. Apparently Mike was asking about his woman in the fur coat, the one who gave him a ride down to Guelph from Thunder Bay. He was wondering if she was around.

Jim was saying “Her name is Megan, Mike, and I doubt she’s still around, but if she is it’s not likely she will remember you. Her memory doesn’t work like that, and in fact, neither does yours. Do you remember that you told us she had fur down her spine?”

“What? No she... oh my lord she did, it was a white down, how could I forget that?”

Jim smiled “It’s built in, Mike, the guys here probably just remembered you said that too. We don’t remember what isn’t in our experience. I’m going to tell you something about Megan and everyone here will forget it in a week. She’s a wolf-woman and it was a very lucky thing that she liked you.

She came down here to Guelph to check up on her mate, who is a bit of a wolf with the ladies. If she’d found him with a girl she would have torn a strip off of him. Her too likely.”

Mike shivered at the thought. “Maybe I should forget about her then.”

Jim shook his head, “Remember what you want, all you have to do is tell the story to yourself or write it down and read it again. It won’t do any harm to remember, in fact if you see her again you need to understand what she is and act accordingly.

Like I said, I doubt she’s still around, she moves constantly, you could say she’d got a large territory but she might come back to town one day soon. Want me to let you know if I see her?”

“I did, but if she doesn’t remember me maybe I should just let it drop” Said Mike.

“Well she’s got your scent, she’ll remember that, if she sees you again, and it looks like she likes you so don’t worry too much. On another topic, how are you settling in to your new place and the school Mike?”

“I don’t know, the roommates seem a bit childish to me this year, maybe it was the travel, but they seem to be stuck in a cycle of study and drunk. That used to be good enough for me but it seems there should be more to life” Mike replied.

Jim poured Mike a coffee and said “Go on”.

“Thanks” said Mike “I’ve been spending more time on campus, mostly at the coffee shop where I’ve been talking to folks a lot. There is this one girl named Liz I buy coffee for quite a lot, she doesn’t seem to have much extra money and I’ll often split my

lunch with her. Nice girl but she's got me into a very strange world up there, or should I say down there”.

The rest of us can tell when there's a story coming, so we swivelled our stools around to listen more carefully.

“I got talking to her about my roommates and she said she understood just what I meant. She said her people were just as set in their ways, just as boring. Something in the way she said it made me ask her how many roommates she had and she said ‘oh just four or five usually, but altogether there are a couple hundred’. What, you mean one of the residences I said. ‘No, we're under them, in the steam tunnels’.

You can imagine my confusion. Those things are dangerous, and they get used regularly by the maintenance staff. There's no way there are people living down there. There were rumours of some kids going down there back in the '70s to play board games, even rumours of people getting lost, but none of that turned out to be true. I must have looked pretty skeptical, in fact I told her that I didn't think that was possible, what about getting down there? You'd see people dropping down into the manhole covers on the walkways.”

“Hang on,” I said, “There's tunnels under the University?”

“Oh sure,” Mike replied, “the place is heated by steam from a central plant, that's the big stack and cooling towers you see down by the new field house, and you can see the tunnels through the occasional gratings on the walkways”

I remembered those, and nodded. I just didn't think they were that big.

Mike continued "Liz got a little hurt that I didn't believe her and she told me that she was too poor to live in residence or in an apartment, but that she knew about the tunnels from an uncle who lived there while he went to school. 'In fact, there's generations of folks living down there, it's a bit of a community' she said. You could have pushed me over with a feather, I sat there with my mouth open for a while before I asked her to tell me about it.

Liz said 'It's not a big secret or anything, it's just best not to talk about it too much. The maintenance folks know we're down there and they don't mind as long as we don't mess around with the equipment or the pipes. It really is dangerous down there, but like the guys who have been living there a long time, some of the maintenance people have been there for generations. The job passes from fathers to sons and I guess the sons inherit the families.

Look, it started in the 1970s, when some kids went down there to play games, that's not a myth, it really happened, and that's when some folks got hold of a few keys. You don't drop down from the pathways, you go in and out through doors in the basements. Now we've got folks who take shifts watching certain doors and a rap code so that people don't wander in. That's part of the reason the maintenance people don't mind us there, we keep the place safe because it's our home. Where we

bed down the guys even knock to make sure we're decent if they have to work there. It's like a big family.

It is a family, actually, some of those originals are still down there, and they had kids and grandkids. Some folks like me are just there for our schooling, and some were born down there. The kids get taught by us until they're old enough to go to classes on the campus. Sometimes they slip into the regular classes and if the classes are small so they'd be noticed, they listen at the air vents.

We've got some forgers down there, and some friends who have jobs in the administration, so the long-timers have student cards they use to get medical help, and we sometimes get food from the cafeteria workers at the end of the day. Those of us who are just visitors, who are just there for our four years, help as much as we can, sort of a volunteer rent payment. It's kind of a tradition to leave all our clothing and other belongings when we graduate if they're needed.

Before you ask, we police ourselves, anyone caught stealing or fighting is thrown out and told never to come back. There's few enough of us that we can make that stick. So far anyone who wants revenge and tells people we're down there is assumed to be lying'

By that time I was just shaking my head, it was stupid, she was pulling my leg, and I told her I thought so. She got a bit upset and said 'I like you Mike, and the only way you're getting

down there to see for yourself is as my guest. You want to behave and come see?’

I backed off a bit, I like Liz quite a lot and so I said I’d go with her to see, if she wanted to take me. She said she wasn’t going to show me everything but she’d show me where she lived.

Turns out there is an entrance in the coffee shop, it’s a door I’d never paid any attention to, it looked like a broom closet to me. She did the shove and a haircut knock, no I’m not kidding you, there was a bit more to it, some back and forth, but I guess that code is so old and stupid nobody would try it. And why knock on the door of a broom closet anyway.

She took me in, told the guy on the door that I was her boyfriend and he nodded to me. So into the tunnels. It was just an industrial looking place, pipes, valves, bare bulbs, some grates in the ceiling for air and light, and heat. A lot of heat. Those steam pipes aren’t fully insulated, I guess to keep the tunnels from freezing.

Liz walked me a couple hundred yards to an alcove where she and four others had bunks set up amongst the pipes. It was all very student residence-like and when I commented she said ‘what do you expect, we’re here as students, most of us have very little money and those that do sometimes help those that don’t to pay their tuition, and like I said, the families down here sometimes just put their kids up to the vents. They don’t need a diploma, so why spend the money? But we’re all serious about getting an education. Did you know that some of the kids

who grew up down here are now grad students? It's true, I told you there were forgers and friends in the Administration, a record isn't hard to produce if you need one. I suspect some of the profs know what's happening, these kids down here are smart.'

I had to ask about privacy when you wanted to have sex and Liz just looked at me with a duh sort of face. 'if it's a couple of us down here the others bugger off for a while, if it's one of us and someone from topside, we go to their place. It works out.'

Anyway, Liz asked me not to blab about things, but you guys never talk outside the diner so it's OK right?"

We all nodded, damn I'd never thought about there being students down in those tunnels when I was a student, I'd never heard a word about it. It was like a secret society I guess, a sort of fraternity.

Jim had Mike's burger ready and he said "You've earned another free meal my friend, on one condition".

Mike grinned and said "Yes, Liz is at my place about half the time now".

Coyote And The Hummingbird

They called her the Hummingbird. Amber was blindingly fast at one of those card games where you matched shape, colour or numbers.

She was in the seat by the door having coffee after a practice with her band. She played violin with the band and viola with the Guelph Symphony, a talented girl all around.

The usual chatter in the diner was interrupted by a couple of kids who had run up the street and into the door. “There’s a bunch of dogs coming up the road” they yelled.

Jim went outside to look, he spent a few moments standing perfectly still and then came back in. “They’re coyotes, must have come up from the river. It’s been bad lately, no food and they’ve gone crazy with hunger. They’re not thinking straight, and if they get further into town the police are going to start shooting them.”

“Can’t you do something about it?” I asked

“I can’t, not without killing them, they are so hungry that Coyote has left them, gone somewhere else, so there’s nothing to get hold of in their heads.”

I had no idea what Jim was talking about, neither did anyone else, but his explanations were often confusing so I let it slide.

“Can we chase them back to the river with pots and pans or something?” I said.

“They’re gone, they’re beyond thinking,” said Jim, “nothing we can do... although...” he turned to Amber and said “You want a challenge Amber? You want to see just how well you can play?”

Amber looked confused, but Jim continued “There’s a way to get Coyote back, it’s got to do with music, a certain tone that sets up a connection. Coyote likes music and if he hears it through their ears he may come back to them and then I can get through to them. It’s a risk, they could attack, but I think you can do it. It’s better than having them all shot dead, they’re only here because we cleaned out the river valley. We’ll be outside with you to help if they attack. Will you do it?”

Amber didn’t hesitate, she unpacked her violin and asked “What do I play?”

Jim nodded, “You have to find the right pitch and tone, and once you do you’ll know it, then just play anything, Coyote isn’t fussy. It’s got to be a high pitch.”

Amber looked like she had the idea and stepped out the door, we followed along and as we did I asked Jim quietly what he was talking about when he was saying Coyote was gone. “Coyote is the essence, the reason, the sense of these fellows, he’s what you guys call a trickster, but that’s just his sense of humour, Coyote is what makes them what they are and

sometimes he wanders off. In this case he's been forgotten in their hunger”.

I wasn't any more clear about things than before, but I nodded and turned to watch Amber. She had started to play scales. If music soothes the savage beast, she wasn't going to do much with scales I thought, but she kept on while looking at the beasts.

They were a bit confused to see a bunch of people in the street and were hesitating, but you could see them trying to get over their confusion, and then you could see them maybe thinking that we were food. We were ready to move between them and Amber if we had to.

Up in pitch went the scales, Amber was playing them higher and higher and she was bowing faster and faster. Suddenly she stopped playing. I looked but her bow arm was a blur, and I could see it hitting the strings, but I heard nothing. I glanced at the kids inside the diner and they had their hands over their ears, it looked like they were in pain. Maybe I was wrong, maybe the pitch was too high for me to hear.

Suddenly the coyote's heads came up, like they were paying attention, and that's when Amber's left hand started moving. In no time at all it was a blur as well. The coyotes were focused on her now, and she played for one minute, two, three minutes.

It was then that the coyote's heads dropped, almost like they were going to sleep, but they were still listening. Their ears were pricked forward.

Amber played for another minute and then Jim touched her shoulder, telling her it was OK to stop. She did, she looked exhausted and I took her into the diner so she could sit down. The kids were wide eyed looking at her, I don't know what she played but they seemed impressed.

Meanwhile Jim, who had taken his ladle out with him, tapped it on the ground. Once, twice, three times slowly it rang out and the coyotes turned around and walked, some of them stumbling, back to the river. Now that they weren't in an attacking mood, you could see how weak and sickly they were. It broke your heart to see it.

Jim came in and asked Amber if she was all right. She nodded and he made her a strawberry sundae. "You've earned it today" he said "and you need some sugar so eat up. Very good work.

I will make sure those coyotes get fed this evening, I should have been paying better attention, and I should also say that Coyote appreciated your playing, you have his thanks"

Amber carefully packed away her violin, cleaning the bow and wiping the sweat from the body, and then looked at Jim and said "I didn't know I could do that", before starting in the ice cream.

“We never do” muttered Jim.

The Red Curtain

Nick was shaking, he was so deep into an adrenaline dump that he had trouble grabbing the door handle to get into the diner. When he did get in we could hear that his breathing was ragged and he was unsteady on his feet.

He made it to a stool and leaned on the counter, shoulders up around his ears. Jim said softly “Breathe, breathe” and when his breathing became a little more steady, Jim put his hand on his back and said “relax, drop your shoulders, breathe”.

Nick still jumped when Jim touched him but he was calming down. Once his eyes got a little less wide, and his head came up as his shoulders un-clenched, Jim poured him a coffee and pushed it in front of him.

The rest of us got back to our lunches and our chatter. Jim hadn’t looked toward the door and he is pretty good at spotting trouble so we figured whatever had set Nick off, it wasn’t going to come into the diner after us.

Jim turned around and continued making the paninis that had been ordered and his familiar movements went a long way to calming everyone in the place. After he’d served them he turned and said quietly, “so what’s up Nick?”

Nick looked up with relief and said “Thanks, I didn’t know where else to go, I think I’m in trouble. You know that I’ve

been living with my girlfriend Anna for a while now, a couple of years. Well just now I almost punched her.”

“In this case, almost is good” said Jim by way of encouraging Nick to stay calm and tell us the story.

Nick nodded a bit and went on “We have been really happy, but lately the arguments have been getting worse. She seems to want to make me angry and I can’t seem not to. I know that she’s poking at me and I don’t know why, that makes it even worse. I try to walk away but she follows me and just keeps poking.

It’s like she wants me to scream at her, and I do, it goes back and forth for a while and then somehow it’s late and we go to bed furious. That makes it even more upsetting, trying not to touch her while I’m sleeping, I end up right at the edge of the bed with muscle cramps.

This has been going on for quite a while, but this morning she started in on me right from the beginning. I was going to go for a run but she begged me to stay so I stayed. Once I did, she started in with the poking and I lost it.

She had scored a point I guess, I dunno, but she turned away and it seemed like a red curtain came down in front of my eyes. I grabbed her arm, spun her around and had my fist cocked. Honest to god I was going to punch her in the face, but somehow I managed not to and that’s when I started shaking. I ran out of the apartment and straight here just to get away from

her. I don't know what to do, I think the next time I might punch her for real."

He looked at Jim with real pain in his eyes. Jim looked back with no sympathy at all. "You know what you have to do Nick, you're just asking us to tell you what you know."

Nick looked miserable. "I love her so much, but I don't know how to fix this."

"You don't, you can't" said Jim "it's too late to fix, before you laid a hand on her you might have talked it through, you should have talked it through, but you can't. Not now, and you know it. I don't know what's going on between you but you're a big part of the problem aren't you?"

"I think so, but I don't know what to do about it. She's doing much better at school than I am, she's got it together and I seem to be drifting around. I get mad and I know I've got a temper so I shut up and shut her out, I don't even look at her and so maybe that's why she pokes at me, to get me to talk to her, but all that does is make me angry. I can't take much more of this."

Jim looked a bit annoyed "You're not taking any more of this Nick, you can't. You have already gone where you were afraid you were going to go, haven't you? What do you think will happen next time?"

"I'll punch her."

“You’ll punch her. It’s over Nick, I’m sorry for that, I liked you two as a couple, but you’ve both worked yourselves into a corner and there’s only one way it ends up. Anna in the hospital or you leaving. Both ways, you’re not together any more and I’m pretty sure you don’t want her in the hospital do you?”

Nick looked like he’d been kicked in the guts, he seemed to collapse but he also seemed to finally understand what he had to do.

About two weeks later, Anna came into the diner. We hadn’t seen Nick since he made his decision, so we had no clue what had happened. All of us looked at Anna’s face, we couldn’t help it, but there were no bruises.

Anna sat down and ordered tea and a scone and played with the scone for a while before she spoke up. “Nick is gone, we had an argument and he stormed out, when he came back he said it was over and that he was going to move out, and now he’s gone.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Jim said, “did he say why?”

“Yeah he did, he told me that he was about to punch me, and that next time he probably would, and that we couldn’t fix it.

But we could have, we really could have, I wouldn’t have minded if he hit me, as long as we could have talked it through,

as long as we could have gone back to what we were like when we first moved in. I know we could have worked it out.”

Jim looked at her closely and said “I know you believe that now Anna, but deep down, do you have any idea of the violence that was happening when he was about to punch you?”

“What, how do you, have you talked to Nick?”

“Yes, he came in the day he grabbed you and told us about it.”

“So you’re the reason he left! Damn you guys, why didn’t you keep out of our business!” She got up to leave and made it as far as the door, but then she seemed to sink into herself a bit. “I drove him away, didn’t I.”

“It takes two people to have an argument.” Jim said.

“Aw fuck, I wanted it so bad I figured we had to talk, and so I pushed him to the point where he was going to punch me, how is that two people, that was me.”

“Why were you pushing him? What happened before you pushed him”

“He got moody, more than usual, he never looked at me, he never wanted to have sex, he just shut me out and I have no idea why, so I wanted him to talk. At first I said some things that got him mad and so he talked to me, but then he just got

more and more angry and he would walk away. I didn't know what else to do so I kept pushing."

"Why was he moody Anna, do you think"

"He said a couple things about how his life was drifting, he was talking about getting into grad school but he never did much about it. He seemed fine working, so I never worried about it. Do you think he was that bothered about his life?"

Hell he was making OK money, and once I get my PhD I would have made lots more, we would have been fine and it never bothered me that he wasn't on any sort of career track."

"What about him?"

"Did it bother Nick? Why should it?"

"Because he's a pretty traditional boy maybe? Because he believed it was his job to take care of you?"

"What the hell, that's stupid, why would he think that, hell he was raised by women, his mother and his grandmothers all worked to support the family, the men were mostly out of... the..." Anna stopped. "He didn't want to be like his family. Damn it, why didn't I see that?"

"Because he didn't tell you, because he probably didn't know it himself. Look, Anna, people often don't look very closely at

why they do things. You two went down a road that was a dead end, it's sad but it happened."

"You're telling me it was sad, it took him a week to pack up and move out and I cried for the whole time but he wouldn't even talk about staying. Eventually I helped him pack up but that was really hard, I wanted to unpack his boxes while he was packing them, in fact I did that at the first, but he looked at me like I was some sort of monster, that scared me a lot more than him threatening to punch me, which he would never do. Would he? I was sure about that up until I opened that box and pulled his shirts out."

"Have you heard about frogs in a pot?"

"Sure, put them into cold water and turn the heat on, they don't think to jump out. You mean we just sort of eased our way to where he would punch me? Oh shit. But now I can explain all that to him right?"

"No, think about that Anna, what would he feel like if you explained why he almost hit you, about his family, about his feelings that his life was drifting."

"He'd tell me it wasn't true and then pretend it wasn't. He'd resent the hell out of me.

It's over isn't it?"

Olivia's Story

I was out for a walk on the old radial trail when I found her. She was tucked up under a rock shelf and huddled in on herself. I asked if she was OK but she didn't seem to hear me.

I climbed up there and realized she was shivering from the cold. I put my jacket around her and when it touched her she cried out. I squatted a little distance from her and waited to see what would happen, I got the feeling she didn't want any help that involved me touching her.

Eventually her hands went to my jacket and she pulled it around herself. At about the same time she started crying and slowly looked around. When she spotted me she pulled back but I told her everything was fine, I wasn't going to hurt her, I just found her and thought she needed help.

It took a while but eventually she came out from under the rock and I was able to walk her back into town. I walked her to her place and as we went I asked what the matter was. She didn't say, but I figured out it wasn't anything that had just happened. She had some sort of trauma in the past and it had hit her, she ran onto the trail and thought she was hidden under the rock.

As she handed my coat back I told her my name and offered to help if I could. She nodded and took a business card from me.

Later that day I dropped into the lunch counter and talked to Jim about what happened. He told me that if I was going to help I had to be ready for some pain. I wasn't sure what he meant but he said "You're probably ready to find out what we do here."

That was rather cryptic and I said "you fix people and situations by magic". He shook his head and said "It may look like magic to you but it's not, it's just story telling, but you pay a price when you hear the stories, you take on some of the pain."

"Will you help this girl?" I said, but Jim shook his head and told me she was mine, and I was going to get her to tell her story. He suggested that if she called me, I should bring her into the diner until she trusted us.

As it happened, she did call and I suggested we walk from her place to the lunch counter for coffee and a snack. She seemed fine with that and we had a good walk and a chat about nothing at the diner. She laughed a bit but I could see she was reluctant to talk about anything serious in front of a bunch of strangers. I was included as a stranger.

Still, a few more visits together, and one day she walked into the place on her own. Why not? It was just another diner and she was just dropping in for coffee. I could see she was getting comfortable with the regulars, and she was on a first name basis with many of them. Jim learned what she liked and had

coffee ready for her as soon as he spotted her coming down the road.

Then she was gone for a couple of weeks. I knew she was around, I spotted her walking once or twice, but she stopped coming to lunch with us. Jim told me to be patient, that she'd be back and a short time after that she walked in.

She wasn't in a bad way, but she wasn't her usual happy self. I could see there was something on her mind, and I wondered. Jim nodded at me so I thought that it might be time to ask for the story.

“Olivia, it seems like you've got something on your mind, you know we hear a lot of stories in here, do you have something you'd like us to hear?”

Olivia got a look of sheer panic in her eyes, she whipped her head around looking at everyone in the place, but then she looked a little more slowly. She saw nothing but kindness, nothing but encouragement, and Jim spoke up “A sorrow shared is a sorrow halved”.

I had last heard that from my great grandmother, but it seemed right for our little family. I wondered that Jim had never said it before, maybe he had and I wasn't paying attention. Olivia seemed to understand what he was saying and so she looked at all of us once more and asked, “Look, this isn't a nice story, are you guys sure you want to hear it?”

That told me a lot about the woman she had become, whatever it was that kept coming back to hurt her. “I want to hear your story Olivia, if it will help, I’m here to listen.” As I said it, it really sounded like some sort of formula and out of the corner of my eye I saw Jim nod.

Olivia took a big breath and looked right at me as she started talking. “It was in high school, I was sixteen by a couple of months, still a virgin.”

“Shit” I thought to myself, I am pretty sure I know where this one is going and I’m not sure I want to hear it. Jim looked at me as if to say “shut up and listen, you asked, you need to listen”.

Olivia hadn’t noticed and she said “I thought I was pretty grown up so when some of the older kids organized a field party I wanted to go. I knew there would be drinking and I hadn’t been drunk before, but I wanted to be. Damn I was pretty innocent, I sure wasn’t grown up, but I thought I was, so when a boy a couple of grades ahead of me asked me to go I said yes.

He drove me out to the party and we were drinking and having a good time. I had three or four bottles of what the guys called “panty remover” and I laughed when they called it that. Yeah I was such a big girl!”

She stopped for a moment and I said “You were sixteen, Olivia, no matter what happened it wasn’t your fault, don’t take that on.”

She snapped “It was my fault! I didn’t even notice that I was the only girl there. Don’t you get it? I should have seen that.”

I tried to make my eyes as soft and kind as I could, and just waited for her to continue. She had decided to tell the story and I wasn’t about to argue with her about whose fault it was.

“Anyway,” She dropped her eyes and continued “I got pretty drunk and the guy I went with asked me if I wanted to play a game as he started to feel me up. Even I wasn’t that stupid and I said no. Of course he didn’t hear that, and kept groping me. I tried to push him away but three of his buddies grabbed me by the arms and legs and they took my clothes off. They took me over to a mattress that came from somewhere and threw me down on it. For the rest of the night they took turns fucking me.

I screamed my head off but they just laughed, we were miles from anywhere and there was nobody to hear me. It hurt, it hurt a lot, they bruised my arms and legs from holding me down, and eventually they started burning me with cigarettes to keep me still. Every time I tried to fight they’d burn me.”

She was rubbing her arms as if trying to brush off the hot ash there, and as she did, my guts started to knot up. I wanted to go back and kill every one of those kids that hurt her. I wanted to throw up, I wanted to hold her and, damn it, I just wanted it to

go away. I didn't know if I could listen to any more because I was feeling what she was going through.

“Eventually they got bored and just left me there naked on the mattress and toward morning they threw my clothes at me, let me dress and took me back to my house where they just dumped me on the front lawn. To top it all off there was nobody at home, my folks had gone to visit my grandmother which was why I could go to that party. I crawled into the house and showered and bathed and showered and scrubbed my skin for a long time. I threw up in the tub a couple of times but there was nothing left.

When my folks got home the next day I told them I had a bad cold and I stayed home from school for the rest of the week. When I went back I shut up and kept to the back of the class and just gritted my teeth until I got out of there. Those guys would make comments to me once in a while and of course I would hear people saying what a slut I was.”

When she looked away I doubled over on the stool, my chest was hurting so much, I actually slipped off and went down on one knee. Jim reached over and pulled me back up onto the stool before she looked back.

“To top it all off,” she said “I ended up with a bladder infection that has screwed up my insides ever since.

Now, I can't trust anyone, I can't have sex with anyone without remembering, and every time I try to get a boyfriend, all it

takes is the wrong word from him and I'm running away as fast as I can."

She stopped for a moment and nobody said anything. "There, I've never told anyone else about that, I hope you guys aren't too freaked out about it. It happened a long time ago and I'm over it now."

She damned well was not over it, but she looked a bit less haunted than she had when I first saw her under the rock, or even when she came into the diner.

Me, I was not over it at all, I felt helpless, I felt like getting a few of the boys together and hunting down every one of those bastards and cutting them open. I hurt.

The rest of the regulars didn't look a lot better, but they never looked away from Olivia, they made it clear that she wasn't somehow less worthy of knowing, now that they knew her story, and that seemed to give her strength.

Jim reached across the counter and took me by the back of the neck, he held his hand there for a few moments and that gave me some strength again.

In the end, Olivia kept coming back to the diner, something that she might not have done a year before, and she talked a bit more easily about that night. I think we actually managed to convince her that it wasn't her fault, and she became a lot more lively. She even managed to find a boy who was good for her. I

asked her if she'd told him the story and she said "I did, and he just cried and held me all night. I could feel his muscles bunched as if he wanted to go back in time and save me. He's a good guy and I'm glad he didn't think I was damaged goods."

The way she said it made me feel she didn't consider herself as damaged goods any more, which made me happy, because I was still feeling pretty damaged.

I told Jim that I hadn't believed him when he told me it would hurt, it was just a story that happened to someone else and he told me that by asking for the story, I was willing to take on half that sorrow and so I did.

"Unless you're a monster, and you aren't, you can't listen to a story like that without living it. It's called empathy, but some people might call it magic," he said with a wink that made me feel a bit better.

Coyote Helps Out

“How are the Coyotes” Amber asked as she came through the door.

“Fine, I’m hoping they are good with the scraps they are getting from the butcher down the street, getting enough to make it through, without having so much they have too many pups, it’s a balance.” Jim said.

“That’s good, I really feel like they’re my responsibility since the other day when they came into town and I played them out again.”

“Well I suspect you could call yourself a part of their pack now”.

Amber looked a bit thoughtful, as if she was considering whether to tell us something. “Funny you should say that, the other day I was walking through downtown Kitchener and a couple of guys seemed to figure they ought to go with me. I tried to put them off but they stuck to me like gum on a shoe, you know, unwanted. But I turned a corner and there were three coyotes just sitting across the sidewalk. They weren’t doing anything, just sitting there but as the guys came around the corner the coyotes looked straight at them and I swear they suddenly got a lot bigger.

The guys didn't see them at first, or maybe thought they were dogs but after about three steps they realized they were being watched. I swear I felt prickles up and down my back and they weren't looking at me. The two guys must have felt the same because they turned and went back around the corner at a run.

The coyotes looked at me, tossed their heads like they were saying goodbye and trotted off around another corner. I know they're coming into town but these were pretty bold."

Jim nodded, "You've made a friend of Coyote for sure, and he's a friend worth having."

"I can hear the capital C when you say Coyote, you're talking about the trickster aren't you? Like Raven."

"You know Raven? Yeah she's got lots of names, Anansi in Africa, Whiskeyjack some places, in Europe she's Lugh or Eris or Loki. There's always someone stirring up the pot and Coyote is one of her forms. As Coyote she has a special link with the ones you played to." Jim smiled as he said this, knowing there was more to the story coming and Jim loved nothing so much as a story.

Amber smiled back, but a bit crookedly "That many names? Well whoever she, she?, whoever she is, I think she's been messing with me and the band. Since I played here things have been getting a bit more messed up than they usually are with a live band.

I mean there's been the usual tangles in cords and missing equipment, but this is different. One gig the sound went out on everybody except me. I was left there with a full house and only myself. I didn't really have a choice, I switched to classical music and the audience seemed to think it was part of the show. After about five minutes everyone else came back in and we did a bit of a transition from classical back to rock. We got a really good review the next day.

Another time the posters for a show got mixed up and folks thought that a really popular band was playing. It was about half and half, our fans and these other fans. We explained there was a mixup and then started playing. Turned out pretty good, by the end of our first set the whole place was happy.

A couple of weeks ago we were heading to a gig in Owen Sound in my boyfriend's van, all of us and the equipment jammed in together, when the van broke down just outside our house. We were just getting out when this giant mobile home pulled up behind us. Turns out the driver was a fan and he was going to see the show, so we piled the equipment into the auto-moose and we drove up and back in luxury. We made sure that guy had a place right next to the stage.

Just two nights ago we were booked into a big club and two other bands didn't show up. Fortunately we've been working up some material for another album, so we played everything from the last two albums and previewed all the stuff for the next one. We found some good things in the new stuff, fixed some of the holes on the fly.

Anyway, it's been weird, like someone is playing tricks, but not nasty tricks. Like someone is being helpful by screwing things up. Does that sound like Coyote?"

Jim was laughing when he said "Yep, that's Coyote all right, he really must have liked your music. I'd be prepared for a bit more of his help, but don't worry, he has a short attention span and he'll move on."

Amber frowned, "Him, I thought you said she was a she."

Jim shook his head "She, he, trickster remember."

"Ah, gender fluid trickster eh?" Amber laughed "Well as long as she likes me, and gives us the good tricks, I'm not going to complain."

The Hungry Ghosts

When I arrived at the lunch counter the first thing I saw was a new shelf with some food on it. A couple of oranges, some dry rice, a banana, a glass of water, that sort of thing.

“Are you converting to Shintoism Jim?” I asked. He shook his head as he poured me a coffee.

“No, but the hungry coyotes reminded me that others are hungry too, like the ghosts that hang around here. So I thought I’d give them something.”

“You have ghosts here in the diner?”

Jim smiled and said “sure, they’re mostly old customers that have died but still have the habit of visiting.”

I decided to play along “So it looks like they eat for free, but you charge us living customers for the food. How does that work?”

“They pay their fair share around the place.” Jim grinned and said “you see any tigers around here? That’s the ghosts that chase them away”.

I was laughing by then, “But I thought that was Larry with his tuneless whistling that did that”.

“Hey!” said the aforementioned Larry.

Jim laughed and said “Well OK maybe it’s Larry, but the ghosts do work for their keep, just like you guys do. Remember the coyotes? You guys were out the door to help, that’s important, that’s family stuff there. None of you hesitated to help, you just stepped up.”

“Well yes, but it’s pretty hard not to help when everyone else is standing up. You’d feel a right jerk if you were the only one hanging back when there was a problem you could help with”.

“Sure, but you know it happens, just not in here. You wouldn’t have noticed, but all the ghosts were out there too. If you’d tried to stay inside one of them would have blown in your ear and then grabbed you by the nose to drag you out.”

“You mean conscience as a hungry ghost, right? All those former customers have set the example and we try to live up to it?” I said.

“That’s one way to put it, but it’s a bit more than that. For instance, Shelly there is the one who warned us about the coyotes coming up from the river.”

I looked around but saw nothing and said “Wait a minute, that was the two kids who ran in here.”

“They were great grandkids of Shelly, she’s the one who chased them into the shop instead of running on past like you’d expect them to do.”

I was getting a bit irritated by what Jim was saying, I mean a joke is fine, but ghosts? Ghosts that haunt a lunch counter? Seriously, you can push a metaphor too far.

Jim could see that I wasn’t buying it. “Fine,” he said, “we’ll drop it for now but keep an open mind. Just consider how you feel when you’re in here with the ghosts and when you’re out and around the city.”

We left it there, but I did pay attention to how I was feeling for the next few days and I didn’t really notice much of anything.

Then came the day I had just sat down for coffee but got the feeling that I’d left my door unlocked, or something. It was an urge to go to my place. All right, I went, it was a pretty strong feeling and when I did, I found a friend of mine sitting on the steps. She was having trouble at work and needed a shoulder to cry on. “Why didn’t you call me?” I said.

“I wasn’t sure if I should bother you with my problems, so I came over to see if you were home, and then I just sat down to think for a while.”

Another time I looked up at the door before a friend of mine came around the corner. It was like I knew he was coming.

Then there was the time I got an urge to go pee and while I was doing that an old girlfriend came in with blood in her eye, looking for me. The guys said they hadn't seen me, of course, and by the time I was back she was gone. Naturally I had to tell the story, but the coincidence bothered me.

“Jim,” I said “it’s like getting a new car, when you do, you notice all the other cars that are the same make. They were always there but you’re just noticing them because you’re thinking about them.” Jim just shrugged and kept cooking the home fries. The strange thing is that I really didn’t notice many coincidences when I was away from the lunch counter, but I still wasn’t convinced.

That was when Ray Keen walked into the place. As I stood up to give him a piece of my mind for what he did to Tilly Cleary, getting her pregnant and telling her she couldn’t get pregnant if she was a virgin.

Two things happened, first, Ray turned and looked at me and before I could say anything, he said “I really did think you couldn’t get pregnant the first time. Now I know, Jim had a chat with me and I’ve got condoms with me all the time”.

As he was talking I felt a coldness on the back of my head, I thought it was sweat because I was angry, but just then I saw Ray as a fox. Another damned trickster, the place seemed full of them. As I saw that, I also seemed to understand that he could no more change his nature than an oak could become an ash. He was trying, I believed him when he said he was going

to use condoms, but it was in his nature to bed any girl he could talk into it.

I also understood that he wasn't mean about it, that he never wanted to hurt the girls, but he was just a bit confused about the modern ways. I mean, if I remember my mythology correctly, he's been around since the Medieval times when girls losing their virginity and getting pregnant wasn't a big thing like it is now.

I almost felt sorry for him, almost. But as I started to open my mouth, the chill left my head, and it was just Ray Keen in front of me. I looked over at Jim and he was nodding at something behind my head.

I looked back at Ray and said "OK, good, use the damned condoms now, and if you've got any questions around things like permission from the girl, ask Jim. You can't act like it's 1200." I wasn't sure why I said that last, but Ray nodded and sat down.

Jim had a big grin on his face and turned to Ray "Seems to me you could ask Arthur if you can't find me".

I gave Jim my best "Oh thanks!" face. One thing I didn't need was to be giving some kid dating advice, I wasn't so good at it myself.

I was also just a little bit more ready to believe in Lunch Counter Ghosts and I was a bit disturbed to realize I

remembered Ray as a fox. I was going to advise shape-shifting
trickster foxes on matters of love?

Damn Jim and his grin.

Ray Keen and the Baby Shower

It turned out that Ray Keen became a bit of a regular at the lunch counter. I could still see him as a sort of fox and human combined, like a double exposure, and it only went away when I looked at him with focus. Then he was still the old Ray I'd known for years.

It turns out he did ask me for advice once in a while, and I did my best to let him know what was allowed and what was over the line, although I sometimes thought that he was putting me on. There was the time he seemed serious about fighting a duel with some guy over a girl and half way through my explanation that duels were no longer a thing and that one should let the girl decide for herself, Jim was doubled over laughing.

Then there was the time Ray asked if it would be OK to have sex with both a girl and her grandmother. Again, I got sucked in, but this time I figured it was with good reason.

A few days earlier an older lady walked by the place, then doubled back and came in to the diner. "Raynard Keen!" she said "I haven't seen you for a very long time, you don't look a day older you bastard, and look at me."

I looked, and she seemed to be about 75. Ray turned around and stood up quickly saying "Lonnie, it's wonderful to see you, I'm so happy you look just like you did when I saw you last".

“You jerk, you mean I looked like an old woman fifty years ago? Thanks a lot.”

I had never seen Ray squirm but his face went red and he dropped his eyes before flicking them at me, as if to say “what can I say now?”. Before I could even bother to think of something, Lonnie was laughing. “Boy, you are still a sucker for being teased aren’t you.”

“So what have you been doing?” Ray asked quickly.

“Well since I left you for being such a womanizing shit, I have had a pretty good career, got married to a lovely man, had three kids, a grandkid, and been widowed. That’s about the sum of it, basically I’ve had a great life with amazing sex I might add, but then again, I had a good teacher didn’t I?”

There was nothing shy about this woman, she was laughing again, and it was a wicked laugh, the rest of the diner was grinning just to hear it.

Jim asked if she wanted a coffee and she said no, “I just came in to say hello to my little trickster here, and now I’m heading to the gym for my workout. It really was good to see you again Ray, and since I’m back in town, drop on by if you get the urge.” She put the emphasis on urge as she handed Ray a business card.

When she had gone, Ray stood looking at the door for a moment and then said “Maybe I will do just that”.

I said “Ray don’t you think there’s a bit of an age gap there?”

“You think she’s too young for me?” said Ray as I remembered that he’d have to be at least a thousand years old if he was who I thought he was.

“OK fair enough, but she seemed to know who you are, she called you a trickster.”

“I’ve never bothered to hide what I am” said Ray, “it’s just that most folks don’t remember after I tell them, but Lonnie caught on really quick and always remembered. That’s what kept me with her for two or three years, and they were good years. She must have some of the old blood in her to remember me, and frankly, for me to remember her. I often don’t remember the people I was with. It’s too painful.” Jim was nodding as he said that.

I got the impression Ray was really going to visit Lonnie, if just to talk with someone who knew him for what he is. It sounded like they had a lot to talk about.

I didn’t ask him, maybe one day, but on this day I was distracted by Jonah coming through the door with a big grin on his face. Jonah and his wife Lila were the couple that Jim helped get pregnant after years of trying.

Apparently the baby had been born about a week before. Jonah couldn’t stop grinning. “Coffee for everyone Jim, we had a

lovely baby girl, and she came out all bright-eyed. The nurse, an old Bajan woman, said she was an old soul. She might be right, that girl is keen to take on the world.”

A couple of stools down I was sure I could see Ray’s ears swivel to listen, but he kept very still. This was the baby that he and Tilly had made, that Jim had switched into Lila’s womb. And yes, I now believed that story of the fairies switching the baby, I mean I was looking right at a fox drinking a coffee. A fox who was at least a thousand years old and who asked me for advice on dating for heaven’s sake. I was actually happy to see that Ray was interested in the baby, it made me like the guy all the more.

Jonah was going on “We named her Kit, short for Kitsune, because she looks just a bit like a sweet little fox pup, I mean she bounces around in her crib and when she’s happy she yips as much as she laughs. We saw it in an anime, Kitsune is Japanese for fox, and it sounds pretty, just like our girl.”

“Well here’s to baby Kit, and to her parents,” said Jim, raising his coffee. We all drank, including Ray who was looking rather more proud than he should have.

Jim reached down behind the counter and pulled up a box that we had filled earlier with baby things. “We heard you had little Kit, so we gathered up some things for you, sort of a lunch counter baby shower.”

There were the usual things, diapers, stuffy toys, a cross stitch kitten that “Mad Dog” Murphy had done. And didn’t that surprise the rest of us.

Ray hadn’t been around when we collected for the box, but he frowned a bit and then untied something from his wrist. “I didn’t get to contribute to the gift box, but I hope you will save this for when she gets a little bigger Jonah, it’s sort of a good luck charm and it seems appropriate.”

It was a tiny silver fox on a string that looked a bit like woven silver and it was beautiful. Jim’s eyes got a little bigger and he moved down beside Ray saying “That looks like a really thoughtful gift Ray.” but with a hint of warning in his voice.

“Oh my that’s too much Ray” said Jonah “it looks like you wear that yourself, are you sure?”

“I have another” said Ray to Jonah, “and I’d be honoured if little Kit had that one, like I said, it seems right that your little fox has a fox charm.” Then, looking at Ray he said “It’s supposed to bring good luck, to guard against evil influences.”

Ray nodded and turned to Jonah, “I’ve seen those before Jonah, they are traditional in some places, be sure to keep it for when she’s old enough to understand it’s valuable”.

Jonah nodded and the baby shower continued for another half hour or so before Jonah took his box and went back to the family.

After he'd gone, Jim looked hard at Ray, who lifted his hands and said "No tricks, Jim. She's my kit so she's going to get into some serious trouble when she's old enough. I'll know when she needs more help than her Mom and Dad, to get her out of it, and I'll help. Nothing more, I swear."

Jim nodded and said "You're probably right, just be careful, kids aren't playthings, stick to adults when you're being Raynard."

Ray nodded and said "No problem, I'll ask Art here for advice when I need it." He looked at me and I looked at Jim who snorted.

The Wild Hunt

Her name was Ingrid, although she insisted it was spelled Yngrid. I thought that was a bit pretentious, but then again, she was that sort of girl.

I met her in a coffee shop and we hit it off. By that I mean when she was there I never got a word written, we'd simply talk for the entire time. If it wasn't so pleasant talking with her it would have been extremely annoying.

Eventually I suggested lunch, and we would walk over to Jim's place. Now I know this sounds a bit strange, but on the days it was raining, I would get wet and she would be completely dry. It wasn't that she would hog my umbrella, she didn't, it was more like it rained on me to avoid raining on her. It was quite funny really, and we would laugh about it.

Did I mention she was a big girl? She was taller than me, and I'm not short. She was strong too. She had no trouble opening Jim's door, which makes me rock a bit on my heels when I pull, it's a heavy door.

She's damned good looking, with a Swedish Blond sort of vibe, which may indicate some sort of Viking blood which, I think may explain her size.

At any rate, we got along pretty well. Jim seemed a bit surprised to see her with me when we first showed up at the

diner, and he said “You watch out there Arthur, she’s likely to break you in half” which was pretty funny considering I’m no slouch in the size or strength department.

She had a pet pig, which wasn’t too common. It was one of those little pot-bellied things, and she walked it around town on a leash. Happy little thing.

I met her one day as she was walking Hildy (the pig) and thought I’d join them for their walk. Ingrid wasn’t as welcoming as I would have liked, but she shrugged and said “sure, come on, we’re going into the Arboretum at the University”.

The Arboretum is an nice walk, you can use quite a few of the trails there and end up walking for over an hour without crossing your own path. I go there quite a bit.

This time it was nice to have company, and we kept to the outside paths to avoid all the traffic. I’m not the only person in town who likes the place.

Hildy was having a great time, snuffling around trees, especially the oaks, digging at the roots. I suppose he was looking for truffles, although I wouldn’t think the trees were old enough to have the fungus. There were a dozen types of oak but none of more than a foot in diameter.

At least none I’d ever seen, but along one path, just before we hit a boardwalk over a swampy area, Ingrid turned onto a tiny

footpath I'd never seen before, and then turned onto another and suddenly we were in an area I'd never seen before. It must have been a leftover woodlot on the farm that was donated to the University and planted with trees. It was much older, and dense, and OK I admit it, gloomy to the point of being a bit spooky. The temperature was a lot lower and there was a mist near the ground, so the humidity must have been high under the canopy.

Hildy was in hog heaven, and Ingrid let him off the leash. You're not supposed to do that, but there didn't seem to be anyone else around and Hildy was a pretty well behaved little guy. He never went out of sight of Ingrid so I didn't worry too much about it.

I wonder now if we had actually wandered out of the Arboretum and into some sort of private wood, although that would have meant crossing a road, and I'm sure we never did.

At any rate, somehow a bunch of kids had managed to get some ATVs into the woods, I could hear them roaring and snorting around. Very hard to miss that sort of noise and stink, really. I was sure they would have been tearing up the undergrowth as they came toward us, which was a shame, the place looked untouched.

Ingrid had heard them too, and looked at me with some concern. She seemed to think for a moment and then her face set in a rather frightening look as she whistled to Hildy to come back.

This is the strange part, I watched Hildy come back and I swear he turned from a little pot-bellied pig into a massive boar. So big that Ingrid could swing a foot over and ride him.

That wasn't all, Ingrid's coat and hat became armour and a helmet, and her walking stick became a massive spear.

If I hadn't spent all the time in Jim's lunch counter I would have thought I was drugged, but hell, I saw trickster foxes sitting beside me most days, and I'd seen hungry ghosts. A friend turning into some sort of wild huntress was just another walk in the park.

Walk in the woods then.

Ingrid told me to stay put and with that look on her face, I did just that. She wheeled Hildy around by the leash, which had become reins apparently and headed directly toward the sound of the ATVs coming through the wood.

Only that sound had become the sound of horses, horns and dogs like some sort of fox hunt. I hoped they weren't going after Ray, but I could understand that they might be, with all his womanizing he may have upset the wrong people.

At that moment, Ingrid let out a bellow "He is mine, you shall not have him" and lowered her spear. That's when I saw the hunt, and hunt it was, dogs to the front, riders following. They seemed to go through the trees, which were quite thick,

although they went around the old oaks, the ones that were over five feet across.

Ingrid and Hildy were amongst the dogs and Hildy was tossing them to both sides with some nasty tusks that had appeared in his mouth. The dogs tried to fight but they weren't fast enough and they soon broke and ran.

Then the riders were there, and Ingrid turned savage. I saw her spear both a horse and rider and toss them to one side, then she was in a mob of riders, swinging and slashing, clubbing and stabbing with that spear of hers.

Hildy was doing fine, ripping and tearing at the horses, toppling their riders onto the ground and trampling them, but there were too many riders and I began to fear for my friend. Before I could find some sort of club to go help, Ingrid seemed to suddenly have a feathered cape and she lifted off of Hildy into the air. At about the same time a sword I hadn't noticed before, jumped out of its scabbard and began fighting on its own.

I was seeing things I really didn't want to see, but that didn't matter, the fight was starting to turn in Ingrid's favour and she bellowed "Husband! You shall not have him"

With that, the fight seemed to go out of the horsemen, they were being attacked from below by Hildy, from above by Ingrid and slashed to pieces by a sword. They broke off and

turned around, soon becoming the sound of the ATVs as they got out of sight and then nothing.

When I looked back to Ingrid she was just Ingrid, not some vengeful Earth goddess with sword, spear and armour. And Hildy was just his cute little pot-bellied self, happily snuffling around the oaks with a mouthful of truffle.

I wasn't sure about what had happened. When she got to me Ingrid took my arm and smiled for the first time that day. "Let's go get a beer Art, I suddenly have a major thirst" as she turned me around and we headed back through the woods.

We were soon back to the part of the path that we'd stepped off and then walked downtown where we found the Woolwich Arms open. Ingrid had a mead beer, which, thinking back, I should have expected her to order. I had my usual stout and we shared a plate of wings.

It was just too ordinary for me, so I asked what the hell had just happened.

"I've got a jealous ex-husband" was all she would tell me.

We had a couple of refills on the drinks while Hildy crunched the chicken bones under the table. Yes, he came into the place with us, but nobody seemed to mind. Later that evening in Ingrid's bed she damned near did break me in half.

The next day I went into the lunch counter as usual and Jim had a hard look at me. I must admit I was looking pretty bad, hung over, beaten up, and a stupid grin on my face.

“Lord you have the luck of The Lady, or you’re just one good looking boy. I heard what happened yesterday, and nobody gets away from the Wild Hunt, nobody until now.” Jim shook his head at me.

“I’m not sure what you mean Jim, what the hell is a wild hunt?”

“That’s what was after you in the wood. Ingrid’s old man is the jealous type and he was coming for you because you were getting too friendly with her. It’s a good thing that she took a liking to you, there’s nothing so fierce as an earth goddess with a new boyfriend. I see she took you to bed as well, I did warn you about that.”

I wriggled a bit and winced trying to ease the aches in my lower back. “You were right, she did almost break me in half.”

Jim shook his head again and went to get the coffee, leaving me to wish, one more time, that he’d tell me what was going on before it happened to me.

Steve and Mishelle

Steve walked in with his customary two cameras slung over his shoulder, and he was livid. Before we could even say hello he was ranting. “I swear to god, the people of this town are even more primitive than some of the tribes I’ve shot in the Amazon. You’d think I was stealing their souls, the idiots. I can’t take a shot of a building around here without someone coming up to me panicked and asking if I’d just taken their picture.

I mean Christ, they take selfies and blast them all over the internet, and then get their panties in a twist if they figure someone took a picture of them coming out of a coffee shop!”

Jim poured him a coffee and said “First world problems I guess, they have seen too many TV shows where strange men take pictures of them on the street before kidnapping them.”

I put in “Maybe they can’t figure out why anyone beside themselves would even want to take a picture of them. I mean, they can figure out why they take shots of themselves, but a stranger? It may be something to do with self-esteem.”

“Whatever it is it gets up my nose, it’s not like I’m being sneaky about it, I’ve got a couple of big cameras on my shoulder, they go up to my face when I shoot. I’m not exactly inconspicuous. Hell I have a better reception in the slums of the third world than on the streets of Guelph.”

“You never get turned down in other places?” asked Jim.

“Yeah, sure, I was going to do a project on the cottages that are empty around Cape Croker, the ones where the renters got booted out a couple of years back, but the local band told me to forget it, they didn’t want to be portrayed as mean. They also didn’t, as they put it, need any white guilt shots of plucky natives either. So yeah, I get it in other places. In fact I just came back from the Bruce. I’ve been up there for a couple of months.”

“I thought you said you were refused permission to shoot?” I said.

“I was, but there was an old guy who pulled me aside and told me to go into the woods around Red Bay. I have a buddy who has a cottage near there, and he agreed to let me use the place since he’s rarely there in the winter.

It wasn’t exactly primitive, but there was no running water so I melted snow and beyond that it was pretty good, a propane furnace and a wood stove with solar power for lights. I spent a week roaming around in the woods taking shots, but I never saw anything to justify being there.

Until, that is, Mishelle knocked on the door. Now this place is nowhere, really, it’s deep in the bush, but she must have smelled the wood smoke and wandered by to see what was going on. I invited her in of course, and she accepted a coffee and some pancake-mix bread I had just made on the stove.

She was gorgeous, I mean stunning. She had pale blond hair, and a complexion that looked like she was somehow suntanned in the middle of winter. She had this amazing fur coat and boots she said were lynx fur and when she took them off she had a long dress that was shiny, almost like scales and very slinky with a slit up both legs to let her walk through the snow I guess. Oh and leggings, also of lynx fur.

While we were chatting I told her I was a photographer and she seemed intrigued, so I grabbed my cameras and showed her the shots I'd been taking. She liked them and looked at me as if expecting me to ask her to model. Of course I did, about a heartbeat after she looked at me.

She dressed up in the fur again and we went out to the woods and shot for so long I had to call it quits, my fingers didn't work any more I was so cold. She was just fine but laughed and came back in with me.

I asked if she wanted to stay for dinner and she said she had no place she needed to be so I cooked us up a meal. We chatted for the rest of the evening and it turned out that she stayed the night. Yes guys, in my bed.

In the morning I woke up to find her looking at me and since the sun was shining on her face, I could have sworn her eyes were glittering with flecks of green and gold. I had never seen eyes like that except on a cat I once had. I asked her about it and she said 'of course, they're cat eyes' and laughed.

We didn't get dressed right away, instead we went upstairs to the open plan second floor and spent some time shooting portraits and nudes. She seemed to love seeing shots of herself and insisted on some with her slinky dress as well. I knew she was flexible from our time in bed the night before, but the way she moved in that dress was truly impressive.

Long story short, she stayed there with me for almost two months, and it was great. We did a lot of photography, a lot of hiking in the woods. At one point she complained that I didn't cook with enough meat and said she would get some. She came back with three hares and what she called a fisher. Now I've never seen a fisher but I have heard they were vicious. I thought she must have a trapline nearby but she said no, or she'd have been checking it every day. 'I ran them down' was how she put it. She skinned them and we added them to our meals for a couple of days. The fisher, by the way, was way too strong for me but she didn't mind.

During that time I told her the story of my life and eventually ran out of things to say. She seemed to just soak it up. After about two weeks I asked her about herself.

She came over and sat on my lap in front of the wood stove, put her arms around me and kissed me for a long time. 'do you really want to know?' she asked. Of course I did, and she said 'it may freak you out but my story is yours if you want it'. How could I not want to hear it after that.

She started ‘my name means roughly Great Lynx, and I have been around these parts for a very long time. I usually stay just north of Manitoulin but I came south this winter to see new things. I was walking through these woods for a while when I noticed your smoke so I came for a visit. I’m really glad I did because I like you a lot.’

With that she looked at me closely and said ‘are you sure you want it all? You might just run away.’ Well I’ve been around you lot for a while and seen some of the weirdness you guys get up to so I figured I could take whatever story she threw at me. I was almost wrong. Fire away I said.

Mishelle kissed me again and said ‘Fine, I’m not human’ and stopped. I’m not running I said, and waited. She nodded and looked real serious then ‘I’m what’s called a Great Lynx, or a Water Panther or a lot of other names, but basically I’m a water creature and I’ve been around Lake Huron for longer than any of you folks have. I remember when the first men showed up, or at least I think I do, your memory goes a bit funny when you live as long as I have.

I’m not going to change to show you what I look like, I’d probably kill you because I get a different outlook on life depending on what form I’m in. I’m more or less a lynx with a serpent’s body... well that’s what those who have seen me say, I figure I look like me. The dress and coat I wear sort of gives you the idea.

I'm not sure what else you would want to hear about me, I'm not complicated at all, I live, I hunt, I eat. I actually never changed to human form before the humans came, I suppose it never occurred to me to try. Or maybe they somehow caused me to be able to change. It doesn't matter, I don't change much unless I want to walk on the land, and then I'm either a lynx or a human. Being in human form makes me very curious and also it makes me want company.

So that's it, now you know my story and what I am. You OK?'

I was a bit stunned, but not suspicious, the way she told it, I could tell it wasn't just a story she'd made up. But I did get worried for a moment and asked her if she was going to eat me when she was done with me. She laughed until there were tears in her eyes and said 'not a chance my love, not that way, although I might eat you tonight' and she howled again. She was pretty crude about her lovemaking and not a bit shy.

When she calmed down she said 'I am going to leave you soon, we can't stay together, I think you understand that, and you have to get back to your life, I can't go with you so we've got a while more here and then we say goodbye. I'm not going to make a big deal of it, I'm just going to leave when it's time, but that's not for a while yet so let's get into that bed again, yes?'

Of course I said yes, and our time together became even more intense for me, knowing what she is, and that she was going to leave.

A while later, you know it seemed like years and it seemed like hours, but some time later I woke up and she wasn't there. I waited, but she didn't come back. I looked out the door at the fresh snow tracks and I saw her boot prints so I followed them and about a hundred yards on there were lynx tracks heading toward the lake.

I packed up that day and left. As I was driving down here to give the keys back, I found the story getting a bit fuzzy in my head so I came in here to tell you guys about it. I figured you would appreciate the story and as Jim says, tell it or lose it.

Jim refilled his cup.

Morris and the Oak Tree

“This the place where you know all about the spooky stuff right?” he asked as he came into the diner.

“It’s the place where you get breakfast and lunch” said Jim with a smile. “What can I get for you?”

“Well I am a bit hungry, I haven’t eaten for three days. Can I get the breakfast special and a coffee please.”

“Coming right up, can I ask why you haven’t eaten for three days?”

“It’s a long story, and I came here to tell it to you guys, maybe you could explain it to me. My name’s Morris by the way.”

“That’s an unusual name, you don’t hear it much any more” said Jim

“What, Morris? It’s pretty common, but my dad was a bit of a joker, my last name is Minor, so it’s Morris Minor.”

He paused as if waiting for a laugh, but we weren’t laughing. Jim was grinning, but he grinned a lot. Morris seemed a bit confused, “Like the car?”

“Do you mind telling us when you were born Morris?” Jim asked.

“Sure, I was born in 1949 so I’m twenty-four now. My dad bought his car the first year it came out, in 1948 and he loved it, hence the name. He said he named me Morris so that he could remember my name since it was the same as his car. Sometimes I think the guy is a bit too much of a joker, especially in 1973 when the things aren’t even made any more.”

Jim nodded to himself and said “I know this is going to sound a bit strange to you Morris, but can you tell me what year this is?”

“It’s 1973 of course.”

“And where did you come from to get here.”

“That’s the strange part, I came from a tree by the river where I’ve been for three days.”

“How did you find out about the Lunch Counter.”

“Are you kidding? I used to eat here once in a while, you may not remember me but I remember you quite well.” Morris was frowning now. “Why wouldn’t I remember you?”

“Hang on” I said, “You ate here in 1973 and you remember Jim? Does he look the same now?”

“What do you mean now? Of course he looks the same, why wouldn’t he?” Morris was getting more confused.

Jim waved me down and poured Morris a coffee then turned around to start making his breakfast. “Why don’t you go on with the story you want to tell us Morris?”

“Right, well, when I was a kid, my grandmother told me that when I was being chased by spooks I was to run to an oak tree and put my hand on it, that way they couldn’t get at me. Three days ago I was walking by the river when something came out of the water and started toward me. Don’t ask me what it was, I didn’t take time to look, anything coming out of that river has to be nasty, so I ran

About fifty yards along the river was a gigantic oak, and so I never slowed down as I put my hand out to touch it. Only I didn’t touch it, my hand went right through, and so did the rest of me.

It was insane and I knew it, but there I was, in some sort of half-light in the middle of the tree. Except that it couldn’t be inside because it was a wide field of flowers and there was a girl there who looked a bit surprised to see me.”

Jim was nodding, “I knew that tree” he said, “go on.”

“This girl got over her surprise pretty fast and took me by the hand. She told me I was safe from the beastie, that’s what she called it, the beastie, and that she would take me to her home.

She put a bunch of flowers into my arms and we walked about half an hour to this little shack, only it wasn't, it looked like it was made of willow trees, it was woven and planted and woven and it was a hut plus a bush and a tree sort of all put together.

She took me inside and sat me down and put the flowers into a pot. Then she said she was going to eat but I wasn't to eat anything as long as I was in the Oak, or I'd never leave again.

I believed her, I mean why would she lie and there was no doubt in my mind that I was in some sort of ghost world. The strangest part was that I wasn't panicking. I think it was because she was so matter of fact about it all, she seemed to know I was running from something and that I'd fallen into the tree.

By the way, she was beautiful, very thin, willowy maybe, she looked like Twiggy or Jean Shrimpton. She may have been part Asian because her skin was a bit yellowish, although it also looked a bit like oak bark in the right light.

I did make a pass at her, by the way, but she said the same thing as about food, if I slept with her I'd never get out of the oak, so I didn't.

She did ask me to help her, and I was quite happy to do that, she was easy on the eyes and I wanted to spend time with her. That first day she asked me to take acorns from a hollow in the ground and scatter them around the fields. As I did this I found out that I was indeed in the tree, I could see a hazy sort of

barrier that I assumed was the outside of the trunk. The light filtered through here but I never tried to go back out. At first I thought maybe the beastie was there waiting for me, and later I wanted to spend time with her.

She only had the one bed so I slept beside her that night, and she was as soft and cool as you might imagine. I had to put my arms around her because the bed was so narrow but she seemed OK with that.

The next day I helped her spread compost around the fields and the third day I helped her gather up hay from the fields that had somehow grown up overnight. I asked about that and she just shrugged. We were careful not to cut any trees down in the process so I think we cut the hay just to give the trees more light.

I chatted away while we worked and she seemed happy to hear all about my life, but when I asked her, she would just shrug and ask me another question.

It was a nice three days, but at the end of the third day we went to sleep as usual, and in the morning I woke up on the ground outside the tree. Actually there was no tree, it was somewhere else. So I got up and came here.

Now I would like to know if any of you know where that tree is, I'd like to go back some day and visit. I figure she dumped me out here because I was pretty hungry, so maybe she will let me back in later."

Jim put his breakfast down on the counter and said “Son I’m sorry to have to tell you this, but that oak was cut down last year, that’s why you are here now.”

“What! I was just at that tree, what the hell are you talking about?”

Jim held up his hands “You came here for an explanation, so here it is from what you told me. You went into the tree in 1973, that was more than forty years ago... no, eat and listen. Look at how we’re dressed, look around, you’ve been in that tree for a long time, we don’t wear bell bottom jeans and knitted vests any more... well most of us don’t.

The girl you met in the tree was a dryad, and I’m very sorry to say she would have died as the tree was cut down. She kept you there for as long as she lived, but by not letting you eat or sleep with her, you didn’t die with the tree. I’m sure she was trying to be kind.

So now you’re a young man when the rest of the world is older. You will have to catch up, but on the bright side, people are no better than they were, it’s just the stuff you’ll have to learn about.”

Morris looked devastated, he looked like he was about to cry. “Shit, I believe you, there wasn’t a Morris Minor in sight out there, and the cars were really ugly.

You know I cared a lot for that girl and now she's dead. Oh hell, so are most of the people I knew. What am I going to do now?"

"You are going to do what any 24 year old can do. I will hook you up with a friend of mine who can fix you some papers. You can get a job or go back to school, or whatever you wish," said Jim softly.

"It just seems so unfair that I only remember three days with her, when I could have remembered forty years. Life sucks doesn't it?"

Jim smiled and said "often it does, but it is what it is. Just remember that if she had let you eat or slept with you, you would have died with her"

Morris looked like he was weighing up the choice.

Amateur Night

Cale looked pretty depressed when he came into the lunch counter. Jim had his coffee at his favourite stool before he got to the counter and Cale nodded his thanks.

“Why the long face” asked Jim after taking Cale’s order.

“I just lost two thousand easy dollars and I could have used the money, tuition and rent are both due.”

“I thought tuition had to be paid ahead of time” Jim replied

“I borrowed it from my room mate and he needs it now, along with the rent. I can scrape by but it’s going to be chicken hearts for a while. Damn I could have used that money.”

“So what happened?” I asked.

“You guys may not know this, but I work as a life model for the Fine Art department, I get about three shifts a week and that helps keep food on the table, but more important, it has made me pretty comfortable with my tackle hanging out for people to see. It’s a fun job, especially when my buddies catch sight of me from the lawn outside the studio. Here I am trying to keep a straight face when those clowns are jumping up and down a couple of floors below trying to make me laugh.

Anyway, the point is that I don't mind taking my clothes off in public. But apparently, my girlfriend does."

"You mean your girlfriend doesn't want to take her clothes off?"

That was Larry, of course, smarming it up again.

"She doesn't want me to take mine off.

Here's the thing, a buddy and I took her to the strip club last night, she'd never been so we thought we'd take her to see how she reacted. Turns out it was a pretty tame night, and in the last half they had a male amateur night with a two thousand dollar prize for the best guy who stripped.

Of course all the guys in pervert row beat it out of there, and the place was almost deserted. They called for contestants and this skinny kid puts his hand up. I started to stand up and my girlfriend turned to me and said 'if you do that I'll never speak to you again'. I couldn't believe it, well I did believe it, we have been having the usual problems but I'm such a sucker, I'm afraid to call her on something like that for fear that I'll lose her. I know, it's stupid, I don't really get along with her but she's there, you know what I mean?"

The boys nodded, we'd all been there.

"So it turns out this kid was the only one to enter, he squiggled a bit and left the stage with his underwear on. I mean I could

have won just by stripping down, it would have been money in the bank, but no, I had to listen to the girlfriend.

The very worst part of it is that she wouldn't come home with me last night, said she was mad I would even consider such a thing."

"Should have gone for the money" said Larry and for once the rest of us agreed with him.

"Didn't you used to bounce in a strip club?" said Jim.

"I did, but not for long, I was the only bouncer in the place, although the bartender had a lead pipe wrapped in velvet behind the bar, said the cops had told him to wrap it up so it didn't cut. It was a pretty rough place. On the other side from the strip club they've got two bouncers on, it's quite a trip down the hall but I suppose they would come if they heard a problem, That bar is so rough they have to time the visits to check the downstairs toilets, more than 30 seconds and the other bouncer has to go check on the first one.

One of the guys last month got knifed down there by his own buddies who thought he'd ratted them out on a drug deal. I worked a few shifts and figured I was going to get hurt for minimum wage and no share of the tips so I quit. That's when I found the modelling job."

"What's that like? I asked.

“A lot less stressful, that’s for sure. Mostly I work on my own, but one of the instructors is a real hoot. He had me working with another guy and a coat rack one day. We draped ourselves around it and each other. Several times I worked with Ellen, an old black woman full of wrinkles, at one point we were in two separate studios, with a long piece of twisted paper like a rope between the rooms, we tugged and twisted around the paper while the students ran back and forth drawing.

One time I did a three hour pose for a printmaking class, I found a print of myself in the art show and bought it, my mother has it framed and up on her wall. Turns out she used to model at one time in London. The things we don’t know about our parents eh?

I did have a problem one class, there was a girl sketching in a really loose blouse and she was leaning over so I could see her boobs, when she noticed me looking she’d shake them a bit. Needless to say I started getting hard, and had to take a break in the change room. When I came out she got to draw my fat hairy ass for the rest of the class.”

“What’s it like to model naked?” I wondered

“I don’t know about most people, but for me it’s amazing. You know how you sometimes get the feeling that you’re not really there, not really a person maybe, that you’re just a meat puppet and someone else is pulling your strings?”

A few of us nodded, it’s a 20 year old thing.

“Well in an art class, with all those eyes on you while you’re completely exposed, there’s no way you could ever think you didn’t exist, and after about ten minutes in a tough pose, you would never believe anyone else was controlling your body, I mean, it takes every bit of your willpower to stay there, especially if you’ve got a fly crawling over your forehead.

I love the attention, it sort of tops up the reserves of self I guess, and lots of other models have told me the same thing.”

“So what does your girlfriend say about you modelling?” Jim asked, setting Cale’s plate down in front of him.

“She wants me to quit of course, says it’s embarrassing. We fight a lot about it”.

“And is she going to support you if you quit your job for her?”

“Are you kidding, she won’t even split the bill when I take her out. She’s from a pretty well-off family and hasn’t a clue what it’s like to be poor.”

“I see,” said Jim as Cale got a thoughtful look on his face.

“Maybe I should have entered that contest” he said and then tucked into his food.

The rest of us nodded where Cale couldn’t see, none of our business really, but it wasn’t hard to see where this was going.

When it came time to pay, Jim pushed Cale's money back at him. "We pay for stories around here and that one was worth a meal."

Wolf Moon

James was a quiet kid, he had been coming to the diner for several years, but never said much at all, just listened to the stories. But today he seemed to have something on his mind.

Jim watched him for several minutes, he was lingering over his coffee after finishing his breakfast and he kept looking up at the far wall and down again.

Jim finally put him out of his misery “James you have something you want to tell us, why not just tell us.”

James looked relieved, as if that had made up his mind. “You’re not going to believe me, but I’ve got a story that has been bothering me for ten years. I don’t know if I can tell it well enough for you guys.”

At “you’re not going to believe me” every ear in the place perked up, and as James looked around for approval, Jim said “you can’t tell a story badly, just start at the start.”

“Well the start would be fifteen years ago, when I was a kid. My parents sent me off to a camp in Algonquin every summer. At first I hated it but eventually got to look forward to it, mostly because of one of the trip guides. I guess I had a crush on her from the first summer I was there. She’s beautiful, red hair, really strong, a lot stronger than the skinny little kid I was

that's for sure. She led the canoe trips every year, along with a bunch of other guides, but I always made sure I was in her trip.

At first I was only allowed on the shorter trips, overnight or a couple of nights and it was like all kid's canoe trips. We had the hard working kids, and then the kids who figured the tripper and the councillor were there to take care of them. This girl, Mara is her name, didn't put up with any of that bull, all of us had to pull our weight or we went hungry, or cold, or what have you. I guess the idea of camp and trips is to become able to take care of ourselves.

On the first few trips I don't think Mara even knew who I was, but by the third trip she started putting me in charge of some of the newbies, so I could show them the ropes. Like how to string the food barrels up into a tree with those ropes.

Right from the start there was no question about who was in charge, the councillor may have been along to hold the kids hands, but it was Mara who kept us safe, who knew the route and the conditions. More than once she kept us out of trouble, although not always, like the time some of us ended up getting chased by a moose. It's funny now, but at the time we were shitting our pants. Mara was too far away to do anything but when she saw we were safe and the moose wandered away, she was doubled over laughing. Funny enough, that made us feel a lot better about getting chased.

In the evenings we would have a campfire and tell stories. Mara always had the best stories, I mean the smaller kids

would be terrified by the time she finished talking. Her stories were not only scary but she told them really well. I saw kids slip off logs because they were leaning in so much.

Another thing she did was talk to the wolves. Sometimes she even started the howl and the wolves would pick it up and answer her. It was like they knew who it was, because when she was in the howl it sounded different than when the wolves were just calling to each other. I'm not sure what it was, but you could sort of feel that they knew who she was. Like they were old buddies. I guess it was just that they had heard her every year, all summer.

Anyway, in my fifth year at the camp, we were on a two week long trip. It was for the experienced campers only, those who had been on several trips and could handle themselves in the bush for a longer time. By this time I guess I'd grown out of a crush and was seriously in love with Mara. I don't think she knew it though, she treated me just like she had always done.

We were about a week and a half out on a big circuit route when we ran into some drunken campers. These are usually guys who do way more sitting around drinking than they do canoeing. They usually plop themselves down on a campsite and more or less destroy the place. Making a huge mess, expecting someone else to pick it up.

By this time I was pretty good friends with Mara, and I stuck close any time we were camped, so I saw her face when she

noticed these guys in the campsite across the river, as we set up for the night. It wasn't pretty.

They kept to themselves over there for the afternoon and the evening, but we were more than half girls and I heard a few comments floating across the water. Mara heard too and her eyes got more and more hard.

When the sun went down you could see it was a nice full moon. Light enough for these drunks to paddle across the river, and they did. They landed and made a lot of noise stumbling toward our site, so we knew they were coming.

Just as they got close, the councillor and I stepped up ready to fight, but Mara stopped us saying just 'guns'. She stepped between the two groups and a large cloud shut off the light from the moon.

I have never seen a night that black in the bush, usually starlight would let you see shapes at least, but there was nothing, just black.

When the cloud moved away, Mara was gone, and standing there was a huge white wolf, with a red mane. It was crazy, the thing just appeared. It was looking at the drunks and they looked at the wolf and started to get out their guns. The wolf growled then, and behind these guys, like they melted out of the bush, about fifteen wolves appeared. This changed their minds and the drunks got back into their canoes and went

across the river, where they stayed, drinking and talking big, like they were going to come back across.

Just like that, the wolves vanished, all except the white one.

By this time the kids were whimpering, and I saw more than one wet pair of pants. The councillor was useless, she was crying on the ground, and Mara was no place to be seen. That left it to me so I started to walk toward the kids. The wolf came with me so I stopped, but it looked up at me and moved in beside so I could put my hand on its neck. The wolf moved again toward the kids so I had to go along.

I guess the sight of my hand on the wolf made it look like a dog, or at least friendly, and as we stopped at each kid, the wolf would snort, or twitch its ears or open its mouth and each kid settled down. Pants were changed, sleeping bags were zipped and I told the kids that I'd stay awake to watch the other camp.

Eventually they dropped off and the wolf and I walked to the river and sat down to listen to them talk tough with each other and eventually drop off. Since the wolf was sitting right beside me I must have leaned my head on it and gone to sleep some time later, because the next thing I remembered was the dawn sun in my face.

I looked around but no wolf, so I got up and went back to the camp after making sure our buddies across the river weren't stirring.

When I got back in camp they were mostly packed up and there was Mara organizing things. Where the hell had she disappeared to? I was furious and was about to start yelling when one of the kids said ‘there he is Mara, you were right, he slept in’.

How would she know that? Then another kid said ‘I was really scared until you and James stood up to those guys’. I was totally confused, it was a wolf, not Mara with me, and there were other wolves. But as we packed and got onto the river, and after we pulled in for breakfast a couple miles later, I listened and as far as the kids were concerned, it was Mara and me that saved the day.

I later asked the councillor if she saw any wolves and she said ‘no real ones, just those drunken assholes’.

For the rest of the trip I was confused. If Mara had run away and hidden, she wasn’t the person I thought she was. If, as I was starting to think, she turned herself into a wolf, the girl I was coming to love wasn’t a girl at all. Either way, I was done.

So when we got back to camp and I left a few days later, I never went back to camp. I never talked to Mara about it, or even said goodbye.

That was ten years ago, and even now I can’t stop thinking about her, and about that damned night on the river. So there’s my story guys, I hope I told it well enough for you.

“You did just fine” said Jim, refilling James’ cup. “Have you ever thought of getting in touch with Mara to talk to her? You seem to be pretty well fixated on your story, and more than a little bit still in love with her. I suspect the camp will have her number if you ask.”

“Oh lord, she’s probably doing something else now, with a husband and kids. I doubt she’d want to hear from me, even if she remembered me.”

“When you were leaving the camp, did you see her then?” said Jim.

James thought for a moment, then said “I did, she was watching me leave. I’d forgotten that, but now I remember, I was just too flustered even to wave back at her, but she waved to me.”

“I just happen to have a kid’s summer camp catalogue here under the counter, do you think your old camp would be listed?”

He set it on the counter and James looked at it for a long time.

Love in the Time of Pandemic

“I went to the supermarket to buy milk yesterday. I had to because the milk fairies had got into my fridge and they made my milk smell bad with their fairy farts” said Larry.

“Larry, there are no milk fairies, if you don’t have the money for a coffee just say so” said Jim as he poured a coffee and slid it down the counter. “Anyone got a story that actually happened?”

Mark, who was fairly new to the place looked up from his breakfast and said “Do you guys talk about supernatural things a lot?”

“Oh yes,” said Jim, smiling

“In that case, I’ve got a story. I think I’ve become unstuck in time.”

“Ah, that may be why you haven’t been around since 2009,” said Jim.

“You remember me? Huh, well yeah, I guess it was 2009 but to me it was yesterday. You see, I think I’m bouncing from time to time and to tell you the truth, I think it’s pandemic to pandemic.

I live in the Farquar street area, one of the oldest in the city, it goes back to the founding around 1830. Soon after I moved in I noticed another house across the lane, my bedroom faces a bedroom in the other house. In that room I happened to see a beautiful woman who would sit at her mirror and brush her hair each evening. I would watch like a peeping Tom, she has long black hair, brown eyes and beautiful willowy arms. Each night one hundred strokes of the brush, I know because I counted.

This went on for about a month, and it was during the first lockdown, so I couldn't go to meet her but boy did I want to. I think I fell in love with her just by watching her. I don't know if she knew I was watching, I would turn my light off so I could see her better.

Sounds kind of sad doesn't it, me sitting in my dark room watching her brush her hair.

Anyway, one evening she wasn't there, it was just about the time the lockdown ended so I thought maybe she was out doing things, but after about a week I realized she was gone.

I missed her so much that I think I slipped the hold of time or something. I mean I felt a bit of a lurch and the neighbourhood was different, trees and buildings and streetlights, all different. But there she was, across the lane, brushing her hair. When I went out of my house I wandered a bit until I found a shop that had a sign on it saying it was quarantined for cholera, which seemed very strange. Then I noticed the date on the sign which was 1832.

I must have fainted in shock. After I picked myself up off the ground, I found another shop and managed to buy some groceries on credit. My money wasn't any good, it wasn't just the wrong date, it was the wrong shape and colour.

That was when I found out that a handyman can find work anywhere, or should I say any time. The shopkeeper let me work off the price of the groceries by cleaning up around the place, stocking shelves, cutting down weeds, that sort of thing. Oh, and I was "from a foreign country" because my accent was very strange apparently.

Anyway, I was in that time, the cholera epidemic of 1832, for about a month, and so was this girl that I seemed to have followed, or maybe it was her great great great grandmother? I don't really know, but she looked the same and since I was in the wrong time, why not her.

After about a month, she was gone again and a couple days later came the lurch and so I was in a different time. I found work and there she was every evening for about a month and then the same thing.

I've been to about ten different times, all of them during epidemics or pandemics. One of the worst was the 1918 Spanish flu, because that one seemed so unfair to everyone, all those boys lost in the war, and then the young men and women dying of flu. The city felt like there were only kids and old folks around, and wherever I went, it felt like people were looking at me just to see someone my age alive and well.

So I don't know what has been happening, but I did notice this lunch counter about 1951 in one of the Cholera epidemics and started coming in, where there was always someone who looks like you, is this a family business?"

Jim nodded but said nothing, so Mark went on.

"I've started to think that maybe I'm causing all these epidemics, I mean I show up and they're in full blast, but I can't think how I would be causing them. I mean, all I want to do is meet this girl... no I guess that's not right, all I want is to be able to watch her brush her hair each night. I could have gone and knocked on her door a hundred times now but I haven't. Maybe I'm just a coward."

"It's not you," said Jim, "you're telling us the story and the one who causes plagues can't speak. Not only that, but you stay in Guelph.

I'm going to tell you this because you need to know it, and because you're half unravelled from the world already. Nessie is the one who is causing the sickness, or rather, she is the sickness. There's no evil in her heart, she just is, and that's why she moves through time. She is at all epidemics, all plagues in all times. You, on the other hand, live here in Guelph so you don't move to all the places she does."

Mark was starting to look pale.

“It’s not quite your fault Mark,” Jim continued “but she saw you looking at her. Mirror, remember, she was looking away from you but she could see you watching in her mirror as she brushed her hair, and doubtless she felt your attraction to her.

Imagine being plague, being pandemic, imagine how lonely that is, so when she disappeared from one time she began to miss your attention and affection so she dragged you along with her.”

“But how can I get her to stop dragging... no, how can I get her to stop killing people.” Mark pleaded.

“She can’t stop being what she is Mark, I’m sorry, and you can’t ever meet her, you would die instantly, she is sickness and death, she’s nature, you can’t change it. She couldn’t change herself even if she wanted to, but she will never want to, she is what she is.

As far as you not getting dragged around through time, that might just be a matter of not watching her. These folk have short memories, if she doesn’t see you watching her, she will eventually forget you exist, and stop wanting you with her.”

Mark thought for a long time and finally said “She’s lonely? She can feel my love for her? Will that change anything?”

“No, I’m sorry Mark, it won’t change who she is.”

“But I make her feel better right?”

“I can’t say, it’s obvious she likes your attention but I don’t know what she feels about it, sorry.” Jim did look sorry “Look, I know you’ve got a choice to make here, but it’s your choice. If you stay with her it will have to be from across a laneway. If you stay with her, it won’t change things and you’ll be living through plagues here in Guelph for as long as you’re with her, and that could be forever, I don’t know.

Whatever you decide, you’ve always got a meal waiting for you here, I’d like to know how you are doing.”

With that Jim let Mark go back to his breakfast and his thoughts. He refilled Mark’s cup and then refilled Larry’s with a warning look at Larry who seemed about to make some comment or other.

The Invisible Ex

We noticed when she walked in. Oh yes we noticed, there was nobody outside and as she came through the door she appeared. We're used to unusual things but invisible women are not what you'd call common.

She sat down at the counter and Jim asked her what she'd like. Coffee and an Edam and vegetable panini was her answer so he poured and started to cook.

"You look a little down" Jim said, as she started eating.
"Anything we can help with? I'm Jim, by the way, as in Jim's Lunch."

"I don't know, if you can help Jim. My name's Rose" she said,
"Maybe, I'll tell you my situation and perhaps one of you can make a suggestion. I was with a guy, Sage, for five or six years, and suddenly it was over. A while after that I needed a place to stay and Sage was living with a few people in a house, one of them was his new girlfriend.

I moved in with them and it seems to be working out. I try not to get in anyone's way, but I think the new girl doesn't like me much. She never talks to me at all, and most of the others only talk to me rarely. When they do they are often not looking at me. It's like I'm invisible.

Still, it's not too bad, my ex talks to me, and at least his new girl doesn't object to me being there. He's pretty careful not to talk to me while she's in the room but otherwise he talks about how he misses me, things like that.

I'm not sure what the others think of me but mostly they leave me to my thoughts. They don't ask me to cook or to wash up afterwards, and sometimes they crowd me a bit at the dinner table if everyone is there."

"So what's the trouble?" Jim asked.

"Well it's just that lately I feel like I'm fading away, and yet I'm getting closer to my boyfriend. I have a feeling sometimes that I am in his dreams at night. I know, impossible isn't it, it has to be my dreams, and I do miss him terribly, but I'd swear I am in his dreams.

And then there's the way everyone else seems to look right through me while they're talking to me. As I said, I feel more and more invisible."

Jim looked thoughtful, and said "Where do you sleep at night?"

"In bed with Sage and the new girl," she said, with a bit of a frown.

"How close were you and Sage, Rose?"

“We were going to get married, actually, very close, but something happened.”

“Do you remember what?”

“I can’t, I’ve tried but I can’t for the life of me figure out what went wrong. One day it was just over.”

“How do you feel now Rose, do you feel like you’re invisible here?”

“No, not at all, you guys are all looking at me, and you’re talking directly at me, just like Sage does. That’s funny, I feel more solid here than I have for a long time.”

“How long, have you been feeling like you’re going invisible”

“Even since Sage broke it off, or maybe I broke it off, I don’t remember who called it quits.”

“Do you remember how long ago that was?”

“I don’t. Just that one day we were together and then we weren’t, that’s part of the problem, I don’t know how long ago that was, or why we broke up. All I know what that I needed a place to stay and I moved in with Sage and his friends.”

Jim turned around to get more coffee for everyone who needed a refill while Rose looked down at her plate and seemed to be thinking hard.

“How come I can’t remember that stuff?” she asked.

Jim put down the pot and leaned toward her a bit. “Can you think of a reason?” he said in a kindly voice.

Her eyes dropped and in a very small voice she said “Am I a ghost?”

Jim nodded and said “Do you want to know what’s happening?”

Rose looked up with tears in her eyes and nodded.

“I think you are a ghost Rose, and that’s why you can’t remember how you broke up, or how long ago that was, you died but when there’s a very strong connection between two people, and a strong will, ghosts can remain. Sage talks to you because he misses you terribly, even after grieving and finding a new girlfriend, he still misses you. You are his ghost.

He may talk to you during the day but at night, you are there in his dreams.”

“But what about the other guys in the house, how come they talk to me”

“Are you sure they’re not just muttering? Like ‘now where did I put that book?’ That sort of thing?”

Rose seemed to think about that.

“The only one who talks to you, who sees you, is Sage, probably because he can’t let you go. As long as he can’t, I’m afraid you’re going to stay with him. Ghosts usually come from those who are still alive, not those who want to stay behind. We all have our ghosts.”

With that Jim looked around the place and nodded to all the ghosts that I could see too.

Rose was crying now “What can I do? I’m dead and I’m still here and only Sage can see me. What am I supposed to do with that?”

“We can see you Rose,” said Jim.

“But what am I supposed to do?”

“What do you want? Are you happy to stay with Sage and the rest of the folks in the house?”

“I don’t know, I really don’t. What happens if I stay, does Sage never move on? Do I never move on?”

“Part of a ghost is a strong memory,” said Jim “but a lot of it is the will of the ghost to stick around. Do you feel that Sage needs you to stick around?”

“Probably not, he should probably get over me and move on with his life. As for what I want, that was what you were asking me right, well I love him totally, and I don’t want to leave him, it hurt a lot to know we’d broken up, but I feel a little better about that knowing that it was because I’m dead. Is that weird? No, now that I think about it, as long as I’m there, Sage isn’t going to get over me is he?”

Jim shook his head.

“So how do I leave? Do I just will myself to disappear, do I go somewhere else? I mean I can come here, can I go to another town or something like that?”

“I’m afraid not, you are tied to Sage by his memories. While he remembers you it will be very hard for you to fade, but if you stay away, and if you have a separate life of your own, those memories will gradually fade and eventually you will be able to fade as well.”

“So what do I do?” Rose said, but at that moment a couple of our ghosts put their hands on her shoulders. She almost jumped off her stool and suddenly she could see all the ghosts in the diner. There were as many as there were customers so the place looked pretty crowded.

That had bothered me for a while, until I realized the ghosts didn’t mind if I walked right through them, or waved my arm through them while talking. They walked through us as well, if

you ignored your eyes it wasn't too confusing. Unless you tried to walk through a customer.

Anyway, Rose asked Jim if she could stay with us while she faded and Jim agreed.

Shortly after that, Sage started to visit the diner, so who knows if Rose will fade or not. She is a lot of fun, full of life, if you can pardon the pun, and she's especially bubbly after seeing Sage. As for him, he seems to be a little more at peace every time he visits.

The Sandwich Run

Thursday mornings were usually pretty slow at the Lunch Counter, after the morning commuter train left for Toronto. That's when a bunch of us got together for coffee and to make sandwiches that we later took around the downtown, to the homeless folks. Jim had been doing this for years, along with a free coffee to anyone who wandered in and looked like they needed a bit of warmth.

It made us appreciate what we had, most of us, those who had a place to sleep and food to eat that is. Jim would say "if you can afford to come here and eat you're a rich man". It wasn't that the diner was expensive, it was that we had enough extra to be able to pay a little more.

I was one of Jim's cases when I was a student. There were times when I didn't have any food and Jim would spot me a sandwich and a coffee. In fact a lot of ex students were regulars at the place and all of us would throw whatever spare change we had into a jar just behind the counter to pay for the Thursday sandwiches.

Ray wandered in while we were working and pitched in while asking what we were doing. He may be a trickster, but he wasn't shy about helping, whatever was happening.

When we told him it was food for the homeless, he said "why not just make them all rich?"

Jim frowned at him and said “doesn’t work like that Ray, quite aside from the damage to the economy, making all those new rich folks, a lot of these guys are more in need of mental help than financial.”

Ray nodded but from the way he did I thought “oh dear, trouble coming”.

Sure enough, Ray soon found Muttering Mitch, one of the long-timers on the street. He usually slept in the alleyway behind the diner and was probably the first homeless man Ray came across. I learned this story later, as Ray told it over coffee.

Ray reached into his pocket and pulled out ten thousand dollars and handed it to Mitch, saying “here you go my good man, take this and find a place to live and get yourself a job”.

Mitch took the money with a great deal of suspicion, and didn’t even say thanks. Ray walked away figuring he had solved the homeless problem, but a week later he passed Mitch at his usual spot.

“What did you do with the money?” Ray said.

Mitch got a crafty look in his eye and said “I gave it to all my buddies, it was counterfeit right? So I figured we could all spend a little at a time and get away with it. We all got new coats and blankets and a great meal so thanks Mister.”

Now Ray is nothing if not persistent. Like I said, he didn't lack energy to pitch in, so he thought maybe the problem was cash and after some thought, he took Mitch to a nice part of town and said "That house is now yours, all paid for, so have a bath and a sleep and get yourself a job."

A week later Mitch was in the alleyway again. "What happened this time?" said Ray.

"Well it was a big house, lots of room, so I invited one of my buddies to live there with me. He invited a couple of his buddies and they invited folks. It got pretty crowded, and then someone decided to have a party and the neighbours called the police and I ducked out the back. Too many people and too noisy, I prefer the alleyway here, it's quiet."

Ray didn't give up, but he figured he needed a bit more information so he asked Mitch if he had any skills. "I'm an engineer" Mitch replied.

Ray was a bit startled, but said "OK Mitch, you've got a job at a firm here in Guelph starting tomorrow. Get yourself cleaned up and here's a new suit for you to use.

Mitch goggled at Ray but took the suit. Ray walked away almost brushing his hands together and thinking "great job".

Again, he found Mitch back in the alleyway a week later. “Oh come on, he said, I gave you money, I gave you a house, I gave you a job, what happened this time?”

“Well, I went to work and I can still do that stuff, but they wanted me to work for 14 hours straight the very first day, they had a big contract to do. I told the boss that he was an asshole and they fired me that very same day. I bet they lost that contract, it would serve them right. Look I left my last job because I didn’t want to work myself to death so why should I want to do it now. I haven’t changed my mind about that.”

Ray gave up. But a month later he noticed that the alleyway was empty, no Mitch. Fearing the worst, he came into the diner and asked Jim about it.

“Mitch decided he wanted to go see his family,” Said Jim “but he didn’t want to show up looking like a bum, so he took that suit you gave him and got himself a job at one of the warehouses, a steady job with stable hours. He got himself a place in a boarding house to live and now he’s gone to visit his brother and his brand new nephew in Regina.”

“But I gave him all the things he didn’t have, and he ended up back in the alleyway.”

“You did, Ray, but let’s face it, you can’t help someone who doesn’t want help. Mitch liked living free and on his own terms. Still, knowing you were trying to help him may have given him some idea of helping himself. He was never

helpless, he's got the skills to do what he wants, and maybe you helped him to want something more than a cardboard box in an alleyway. A little momentum goes a long way.

We're just about to go distribute some sandwiches and drinks, you want to come along? A friendly face and a bit of food might just be the encouragement some of the other people out there need. You want to help?"

And that's how Ray became a regular in our Thursday morning sandwich runs.

God of Flies

I sat and watched a fly charge the front window of the lunch counter for several minutes. Bang, land, take off, bang, land, take off.

It was getting on my nerves and I said to myself “God never made anything in vain, but the fly came close to it”.

“Sam Clements was wrong,” said Jim. “that white bearded fellow on the roof of the Sistine Chapel isn’t Sam Clement’s god, he’s one of Michelangelo’s patrons from when he was a boy, and he isn’t creating Adam. That fellow did not create the universe or the world, there is no god that did that. The place just is.”

“Holy Mother, Jim, don’t let the church hear you saying things like that, they will run you out of town.”

“But it’s true, there’s no overall god that created everything, I’d know if there was. There are gods, certainly, and they are very real but they exist in the Universe, not outside it. They can be born or created and they can die. Lots have, but the big bearded guy in the sky? No he’s just something men thought up to explain how this thing we live in got here in the first place. Men have been doing that for millennia, for as long as they have been aware that the universe exists.”

“So who did create it?” I asked, more for the sake of arguing than anything else.

“It just is, Arthur, it just is, and it has been for as long as there’s been time. Before that there was no time, and after there will be no time so there won’t be any asking or suggesting or speculating. You want a supreme God? Pick time.

Mind you, time is pretty boring, how about the sky woman who fell through a cloud and landed on a turtle’s back? It’s about the same as all the others, chaos or water, something or someone creates froth or gets mud from the bottom of the ocean, and the land was created. Raven may have created the stars by letting a bag float up into the sky and open. There’s a world of interesting creation myths out there, pick the one you find most satisfying, or just accept that we are here because the Universe is here.

That fly there, it just is, it came from some other insect which came from some other insect. Wallace and Darwin were correct, as you well know. That it’s annoying is in your mind, as it was in Clement’s mind. Let’s face it, why would any god invent a fly? Or a duck or a dog? Those things don’t worship any god, so why create anything except a man? No, it’s the other way around.

A fellow named Protagoras said ‘Man is the measure of all things’ and he was right. Da Vinci drew his picture of a man stretching out his arms and legs to show the measure of a man, but that man is measuring the space around him. Nothing has to

have a meaning, but somehow, man has to invent meaning. Man gives meaning to the universe, which is wonderful, but don't expect the universe, or that fly to have its own, inherent meaning. That fly seems to want to eat, reproduce, and at the moment, get outside. If that fly had any meaning beyond that, it might understand that there's a lot more food in here than out there for it. And that as long as it doesn't irritate us, is a lot more likely to live a long life here than there.

But it's just a bug, it wants to go outside, maybe because it can see through the window, maybe because it wants to go to the light so it can warm up, I don't know. But it is a mug's game to try and figure out why someone or some thing would make a fly. It doesn't have a purpose, it just is."

"Look Jim, a lot of people get a lot of comfort from believing in a supreme god, knowing he sees the smallest sparrow and all that. Your view is scary as hell, there's no meaning, no plan, no purpose? That would mean man can do any damned thing he wants, without a god to punish him for doing bad things."

"Man has already done everything that is wrong, evil, nasty, horrid, or whatever you want to call it, but it is man who punishes man for doing that sort of thing. No supreme god has ever punished or praised or rewarded man.

That doesn't mean that the gods that live here with us don't do that. The gods that live in the woods will punish or reward as they see fit, but you know they are as fickle as man. Best leave

them gifts and hope they never notice you, or hope there is someone to talk for you if you piss one of them off.”

That was as much as I’d got out of Jim, ever. “Are you one of those guys Jim? Are you a shaman? Do you talk to the spirit world and reason with them?”

“I’m from Wessex Art, not the north pole, I’m not a shaman.”

Somehow that felt like it explained nothing and answered less. “Well can you make the window go away long enough for that thing to go outside like it wants to, it’s driving me nuts.”

“What, magic the window away and back again? Have you ever seen me do magic? I tell you how that works, you squash the fly and then clean my window or you catch the fly and throw him out. Magic be damned, you don’t mess around with the universe like that or it might just snap back and squash you. You know what happens when Coyote or Raynard get cute, they almost always get smacked in the face. No, you want that fly out of here you put it out yourself.”

“I’ve never been able to catch flies, Jim, I tried and tried and my granny even tried to teach me. She used to snatch them off of a table laid for dinner but it’s beyond me”.

“So don’t catch him, invite him to ride on your hand.”

“Now you’re shitting me, what just say ‘hop on fly, I’ll take you outside’?”

“Worth a shot isn’t it? What do you have to lose?”

So with a nasty look at Jim I walked over to the window and said “hey fly, you want to go outside, hop onto my hand and I’ll take you out.” and I held out my hand.

Damned if the fly didn’t hop onto my hand long enough for me to carry it out the door where it flew away to annoy someone else.

“OK Jim, so you’re telling me that flies can understand English.”

Jim smiled and said “not a word, but random fluctuation in the brain can lead to just about anything. There was a probability that the fly would switch places as you held out your hand, that it would land on your hand, that it would stay there long enough for you to put it outside.

None of that required anything except chance, but I do advise that you not go to the track today thinking you can influence probabilities with your mind. That has led to a lot of broke blokes over the years.

I think they call that wishful thinking, or is it magical thinking?”

He laughed that big booming laugh of his and turned back to cleaning the grill. I scowled at his back and was just about to

say something nasty when another fly, bigger than the first, started banging against the window.

John and Lillith

John came in the door and Jim yelled out “John, you’re still alive!” We only see John about twice a year. He lives on the road, hitching from one side of the country to the other and when he comes through Guelph, he usually stops in to catch us up on his news.

Today was no exception. “Hi, hi, how is everyone?” That got a chorus of “great/fine/wonderful”.

“Sit, sit” said Jim “the usual?”

John laughed, “When have I ever had a usual, just feed me Jim, you know I’m not fussy.”

“One usual coming up” said Jim and put my order down in front of John, while winking at me. I didn’t mind, I wasn’t going anywhere and Jim started cooking another order for me.

John tucked in like he hadn’t eaten for a while, which may well have been true, he picked up what work he could as he traveled along but the winter is often a thin time.

“Which way are you headed John?” I asked after he slowed down a bit and swallowed.

“I’m going East, into Labrador”

“What? It’s December John, you’ll starve out there in the wilderness.”

John laughed and said “as it happens, I’m heading for a woman’s house, she’s promised to keep me for the winter.”

“Are you kidding? The Romeo of the road captured at last?”

John gave me a dirty look and said “OK I’ll tell you about it.”

“Yes you will,” Rumbled Jim. John always ate well at the diner and he always paid with a story or three.

“Well you know how I’m a sucker for a woman with a big nose right? I found one that is magnificent. I was working in northern BC at a lumber camp last summer and she was there working in the cook tent. At first I didn’t take much notice, except to admire her profile of course, but eventually I got to talking with her. Turned out she was from Newfoundland and has worked the camps all her life. She is as much a traveller as I am, well, a little more settled, she works for a place a couple of years and then moves on.

We got to hanging out together, and glory of glories, she had her own room. I was in the bunkhouse with about twenty other guys.

It isn’t strictly etiquette but we hooked up and I spent a month in her room. The other guys were nice enough to keep the nasty comments to a minimum. Just the inevitable ‘attaboy’ and

‘damn, sure wish it was me’. Actually, there was a lot less of that than I would have expected. I guess their wet dreams were regular enough that they weren’t work-camp horny, either that or the company was putting salt-peter in the food.

You know, bedding the female help is a universal fantasy in a work camp, which is why it’s sort of bad manners to hook up. It can cause a lot of trouble. Still, it was fairly obvious that we were seriously involved, it took us about a month to actually sleep together, we took it slow because we didn’t want it to happen at all.

But it did, and believe it or not, I’m delighted about it. I love this girl.”

We were staring at him with our mouths open. I mean this was a guy who I would have said was incapable of attachment. He had a string of girls he’d been involved with for a couple of days, maybe a week, and then just drifted off. He wasn’t nasty about it, he always told them when he met them that he was a wanderer. He made sure they knew it before he got into their beds and they seemed happy enough about it. As far as I know, he never left any kids behind, he wasn’t the type to do that.

John laughed at the sight of us and said “I’m not incapable of wanting to settle down guys, I’ve just never had the urge before, let me finish the story. First, Lillith is a great cook.”

Jim’s head snapped around and he looked hard at John.

John continued “she is kind, always has a smile and a few words for all the guys working in the camp. And Larry, before you ask, yes she’d good in bed. But I’ve met lots of women who are good in bed.

I think she’s had nursing training, there was one time that a faller was brought into camp with his damned leg half cut off. He got caught in some brush as his tree started to fall and he didn’t get his hand off the trigger in time, cut half through his right thigh. Now that’s three things he did wrong, he didn’t clear the brush, he wasn’t wearing his chaps, and his chainsaw brake was busted. He was just trying to make a few more dollars and that’s always a bad idea.

So he’s unloaded off one of the company trucks and they call for a helicopter but Lillith takes a look and says ‘won’t get here on time’. She has him moved into the cook tent and put onto one of the tables. In no time she’s stripped his pants off and we saw a lot of blood seeping around the wound. ‘Slowing down, a good sign’ she says and then starts issuing orders. The guys really hopped to it. She sent me to her room for her first aid kit and when I got back she had him sort of cleaned up. The guy was unconscious but he sure jumped when she poured alcohol all over the wound. Then she took a suture out of her kit and dove into his wound. She sewed and sewed and managed to close up all the crap that was leaking, then she sewed up the wound itself with big ugly stitches.

‘They’ll open him back up when they get him to the hospital’ she said as she covered her work with gauze and we covered

him up good with blankets. When the paramedics got there about an hour later they had a long talk with Lillith and left shaking their heads, but the guy lived. I heard he'll take a long time to recover, but he didn't lose the leg.

I won't kid you guys, I work in a lot of dangerous places and I've never seen anyone so cool in an accident as she was.

That were a couple more weeks before I was scheduled to quit and move on, and we spent as much of that time together as we could. When it was time to go, she told me that she was going to head for a cabin she owned in Labrador for the winter and that I was welcome to drop by. That was as clingy as she got, and I was prepared to carry on with my usual life.

The thing is, I started to dream about her, like almost every night.”

Jim spoke up harshly “John, look at me, look at my eyes!” They stayed that way for ten or fifteen seconds and then Jim shook his head “Damn, talk about leopards changing their spots, John this girl really cares for you, but you just be careful, she's more than you've ever experienced.”

“I know,” Said John, “and I know who she is Jim, she told me.”

It was Jim's turn to stare open mouthed. “Alright, as long as you know what you're getting in to. You're a big boy, but you've got my number if you need it.”

I was mystified, but I wasn't going to start asking questions right then. John nodded, and Jim nodded, and for some reason I nodded too.

John told us a few more stories about his travels and then he moved on to catch the train through Toronto so he could stick out his thumb on the other side. He had a bit of cash in his pocket and a few sandwiches in his pack from Jim.

Another of the great free spirits gone I guess.

Kurt The Hero

Kurt came into the diner with a thoughtful look on his face. Jim dropped a coffee in front of him and said “You look like you’ve got something on your mind.”

Kurt nodded and said “I do, and can I have a burger please, with garlic mash.”

“Absolutely,” said Jim and turned to his grill.

Kurt sipped his coffee and started to speak “I’ve been thinking lately about how lucky I’ve been in my life. I started out with very little, but I had great parents who supported me as much as they could, in whatever I wanted to do. I got a decent education thanks to government grants and loans, and I came through with only a little debt at the end. I got a job at the University and I’ve been there ever since, decent pay, great benefits and I like my job.”

“It is nice there,” I said, “solid union jobs with almost recession-proof funding”

“Yeah, that’s what I mean, there’s always kids to be educated, although I feel sorry for the kids today, tuition is way up and the grants don’t exist any more, not like when we went through. So we were really lucky to go when we did.

I had a bit of inheritance from my grandparents and eventually my parents. Not much but with the University job I could just invest the money and forget about it. Now it's quite the little nest egg. My gran was right, if you want to make money, do what the rich people do. I also managed to make enough money in the market to put a down payment on a house, and now it's worth about twenty times what I paid for it. Again, lucky to have bought it before they got un-affordable.

You see what I'm getting at? I'm in a really good financial position because I was lucky. It's not just money either, when I was going to school I had a lot of girlfriends, and none of them ended up hating me, we broke up, sure, but none of them wanted to knife me in the middle of the night."

"Uh, what about that girl from South America you told us about, the one that threw all your stuff out the window?" I asked.

Kurt laughed, "Yeah, she had a temper, but remember, she took me back. Made me gather up all my stuff and cart it back up to the apartment while she stood cross-armed and yelled at me in front of the neighbours, but she eventually forgave me. We're still friends.

That's what I mean, lucky, and eventually I found Gail, or actually, she found me. Came up to me in the library one day and said 'you and I are going to be partners for life'. She was right, bold as brass and so definite I figured she had some sort of occult knowledge so I went along with it. Luckiest day of

my life. I asked her later if she knew we would stay together and she laughed at me, told me she just liked my ass and figured she had to get my attention. But it worked.

I have no idea why I've been so blessed in my life, I wonder if I was some sort of big hero in a past life and now I'm coasting on karma."

Jim snorted as he washed dishes in the sink. "Heroes come and go, but dishes are forever. Karma is more likely to reward you for doing dishes than for killing lots of folks on some battlefield."

"So does that mean I was a nice guy in a past life?"

"It might be, Kurt, but I'd bet it has more to do with you being a nice guy in this life. You don't need to be some Siegfried or Gilgamesh to have a good life now, by the way, those guys weren't nice guys.

It's curious why folks figure they were some sort of hero or king when they think about past lives. Nobody is ever a maid, or a dog or an earthworm. You know that dogs can be kind right?"

Kurt was laughing, "OK maybe I was Lassie in a past life, saved Timmy from the well."

"Yeah, that kid needed a lesson in not falling down wells. Maybe he was a gopher in a past life."

By now the whole place was laughing. All sorts of suggestions were being made about who we thought we were in a past life. Ray figured he was a weasel on account of him being kind of a jerk. Larry figured he was Sir Lancelot, which was shouted down instantly, causing him to suggest maybe he was a court jester to Sir Lancelot and that was approved by all.

I suggested I was actually King Arthur on account of being Arthur now and Jim said “Funny you should say that” which caused a fresh round of laughter.

When it all died down and coffees were refilled, food was eaten or ordered, Kurt said “well it was just a thought”.

Jim wiped his hands on his apron and sat on the edge of his stool. “I’ve talked to a few guys who should know about reincarnation and most of them are pretty much agreed that your next life is a bit of a crap shoot, as were your previous lives. If there was some sort of lesson to be learned there would have to be a big god to keep track, and there would have to be some sort of remembering the past life. Neither of which goes with their beliefs or with reality. We don’t remember past lives any more than we remember future lives.

But that doesn’t stop folks from treating reincarnation like Heaven and Hell, behave now or you won’t get a nice new life, you’ll end up as an earthworm. It’s useful for keeping the kids and the citizens in line, but it has some strange side effects.”

“Like what?” Kurt asked

“Like those folks who figure they can buy their way into a good new life by throwing a bit of money at a charity once in a while, or like those who will go along with all sorts of bad behaviour on the part of their rulers because they figure they will get a better spot in the next life. Those leaders tell them that the way to a better life is to obey, to go along with what’s happening, and we know what that can lead to. It leads to horrors as much as to good lives in the present.

It’s not a game, not a contest. If Heaven doesn’t exist, if your next life is a crap shoot, then you are suddenly on your own. It’s largely up to you whether you get a good life, a worthy life in this one or not. If you’ve got a good life now than part of it is luck, as Kurt said, but a lot more of it depends on the sort of person Kurt is.

It was lucky that Kurt went to University on grants, but poor kids still go to University and they can still improve their lives because of that. If there are more rich kids in University these days because of higher tuition and fewer sources of financial help, it’s still up to those rich kids what they do with that education. They aren’t rich and educated because some god likes them, or because they did well in their past lives.

Kurt says he’s well off monetarily, part of that is luck, his education wasn’t too expensive, so he got a decent union job with decent pay and benefits, that let him buy a house and let

him invest what chunks of money he came into. That willingness to invest wasn't luck, it was a decision Kurt made.

As for his luck with girlfriends and Gail, does anyone who knows Kurt believe it was luck or good karma? It's because Kurt is a good guy. I would have heard if he was abusing his girlfriends, or if he was Randy Andy like Ray here and just looking to get laid."

Ray was looking offended as he heard that, and said in a small voice "that seems a bit unfair".

Jim grinned at him and Ray looked a bit less upset.

"What I'm saying Kurt, is that rather than put your good fortune down to past lives or supernatural favours, maybe you should give yourself a bit of credit for being a nice guy. It could perhaps be as simple as that. Maybe you should stop beating yourself up."

There was a round of "here, here" which sounded odd from this scruffy lot, and Kurt ducked his head in embarrassment.

The Background Artist

As she walked into the diner the place exploded like a TV sitcom “Mara!”.

Mara was living with James these days. It seemed that James did call up his old camp trip leader, and she was interested enough to visit him. She hadn’t gone home yet so maybe they found something together.

“What are you working on these days Mara?” Jim asked

“You know I can’t tell you that, I sign an NDA every time I start a job.”

“NDA?” said Morris. Morris had 40 years of catching up, so he often needed some help with the discussions.

“Non Disclosure Agreement,” said Mara, “I’m a background artist for animation shows and they don’t want anyone telling anyone what they are working on, it’s a standard business practice.”

“Yeah but no law against asking” said Jim.

“No, just against answering, and if I answered my arts career would be down the tubes. But to tell the truth, I’m not working on anything at the moment, I’m just doing the freelance dance,

sending out my resume to as many companies as I can. Sooner or later someone is going to need my skills.”

“That must be tough,” said Morris, “looking for work constantly.”

“Not as bad as you’re having it,” answered Mara “trying to get a job after so long out of the workforce.”

“Ah, I just have to lower my expectations far enough, like maybe short order cook.”

“Hey,” roared Jim with a chuckle. “Mara do you still work at the camp as well?”

“I do, I try to arrange my jobs so that I’m drawing in the winter and working in the bush during the summers. That would be my ideal work balance.”

“What about life, is it in the balance somewhere?”

“Sure it is, and stop fishing. Yes, James and I are getting along so far, even during ‘that time of the month’ when he’s got a big wolf flopped on top of the blankets at night. It’s a work in progress. That answer the question?”

Jim laughed and nodded. “Listen, I’ve got a question for you Mara, those backgrounds of yours, the ones I’ve seen so far, every one of them has a door somewhere in the background, or at least most of them do. Tell me, what’s behind that door?”

The guys in the diner laughed, but Mara had a small frown on her face, and she was looking hard at Jim.

After a while she nodded and said “You’re serious aren’t you? How did you know about the other side?”

OK now Jim was the focus of every eyeball in the place, but he just shrugged and said “A door has another side right?”

Mara sighed, “Alright, here it is. What’s on the other side is what’s inside my head. It’s not a nice place, there are no kindly people or creatures there, just a lot of blood and torn flesh. The inside of my head is where my better nature and my worse, smack together like a couple of sumotori on a hot August day when the arena air conditioning has failed.”

I don’t know about everyone else, but my head was spinning at that analogy.

“It smells that bad?” asked Larry

“Worse, but it’s what I am so I keep it behind those doors in the backgrounds. It puts it out of the way so things can go nicely on this side of the doors.”

Jim scratched his chin. “You ever take James through one of those doors?”

Mara's jaw dropped, "Are you freaking nuts! I like the guy, if he goes in there he won't get back out, he'll be dead in half a minute. Not a chance!"

"But what if he goes with someone to help him? What if you go in with him?"

"I'm going to go with James, into my own head? How is that going to work?"

"You obviously compartmentalize your head, I mean you draw doors in those backgrounds right? Who is doing that?"

You could tell Mara was thinking about it, she wasn't eating.

A few days later she was back.

"Jim you know what you suggested? Well I tried it. I've been working on a couple of boards to submit to a possible client, and I ended up drawing another door.

I asked James if he wanted to go through, told him what was in there, and the idiot said 'will you come with me?' What was I supposed to do, so I tried it. I took James' hand and reached for the doorknob with my other and of course all that cheesy animation stuff happened, my hand shrunk to doorknob size and we followed. Real Alice in Winterland stuff.

Well we went through and I guess I was my human self in there, we hadn't got ten steps from the door when the monsters

closed in and they were looking at James. Of course they weren't looking at me, it would have been like looking in a mirror.

Well James looked back. Just like that, he looked back at all the nasty things in my brain, all the monsters, all the wolves, all the blood and guts. Only when he looked, it changed, there was no blood, no ripped apart corpses, just wolves. Even the worse monsters were gone.

I suppose that's how James sees me, as a wolf, a big, floppy, friendly, slobbery, roll over for a tummy rub sort of wolf.

I was horrified. Is that really how he sees me? Not only that, but when I looked, that's what I saw too. Not what I am, but what he sees in me."

Jim was smiling. "Yes, I suspect that is how he sees you. He was in last week and told us about that trouble you two had out by the old ruins."

"What, you mean the Gryphon? We just got too close to its nest I suspect. Honestly, what was the University board thinking, you come up with a mythological beast as a mascot and a couple of generations of students later, you're going to have a real beast wandering around."

"Yeah, and it would have torn the two of you apart, James said, but you turned into the biggest wolf he'd ever seen, slavering jaws and all, you backed that beast right down."

“Yeah, I told James I was sorry about the slobber, but he was right under my chin before I pushed him behind me. It was no big deal, I just had to be bigger than the Gryphon to back it down. We backed off and went around and all was fine.”

Jim looked at Mara a moment so she would think about what she’d just described and he said “So what would have happened if you’d encountered the Gryphon by yourself?”

Mara thought a bit “I’d probably have fought it just for the hell of it, and maybe lost.”

“So what was different?”

“James was there, obviously, if I’d fought he might have got hurt, and if I’d died, he would have been upset.”

“More than just upset, I suspect. Think about it Mara, he grew up with you protecting him, that’s what he sees, so if you take him through one of your doors are you surprised that he sees your mind as a bunch of sweet wolves? No monsters? He saw you change to a monster, not to fight and destroy, but to protect a bunch of kids on a canoe trip. He saw you back down a Gryphon to protect him. I don’t think it’s any wonder he sees your mind as he does, but the bigger question is why did you see what he saw?”

“Oh hell, Jim, you would know I’ve been thinking about that wouldn’t you? The answer, and I think this is true, the answer is that I’m seeing myself through his eyes.”

“Yep, the eyes of someone who loves you. That’s a scary thing, isn’t it Mara, to see yourself as he sees you. Did you ever think that maybe his way of seeing you is more accurate than yours? Are you really the monster you’ve decided you are? Would a monster take several generations of kids out into the woods... and bring them back?”

Jim held Mara’s eyes for a few moments and then she said “hmp” and dropped them to her food, which might have got a bit cold, but that didn’t stop her eating with her usual gusto.

The Great Zamboni

“Well, well, here’s the Great Zamboni!” yelled Jim.

The large man in the doorway winced but with a smile said “I have been in no arena in this town since the University got rid of Pygmy Gardens”

“Who is that” Morris whispered to me.

Hearing this, the big man made a movement with his hand and suddenly we were all holding fancy business cards reading ‘Hugo Zembini, Magician’. Another wave of his hand and the cards exploded into flames that somehow didn’t scorch our fingers.

“Still playing the circuit Hugh?” Asked Jim, “I thought you retired a hundred years ago.”

Hugo shrugged off his cape, of course black with a bright red lining, and hung it by the door. “I did, dear boy, but after fifty years of peace and quiet I was bored out of my mind and decided to get back onto the horse. No more big venues for me though, I play small houses these days, intimate spaces.”

“Surely that woman has passed on by now, Hugh, and the statute of limitations must have run out.”

“No, no, I just realized I like small venues better, they are more challenging than the big halls. After all, if someone is hundreds of feet away, any trick looks like it’s just another trick. It’s so much harder to make close in magic look like an illusion.”

“What?” Said Morris.

“I’ll second that” I said, and Jim smiled.

“That’s right, you fellows won’t have met Hugh, he hasn’t dropped in for, what, seventy years?”

Hugo nodded, “about that I guess. The last time you chased me out of town. I’m working a couple of the clubs in town this week.”

“Right,” said Jim “well I’m glad you dropped by again. Fellows, you are looking at one of the rarest birds out there, an actual sorcerer who pretends to be a magician. His biggest skill is to make real magic look like it’s an illusion. You guys noticed the flash paper business cards right? Well it wasn’t flash paper, it was solid paper and the flames were hellfire.”

There was a general ‘oh sure’ sort of nodding followed by rollings of eyes as we absorbed yet another of Jim’s stories. But Hugo wasn’t laughing. In fact he looked a bit irritated. “Look Jim, you’re making my job harder, now these guys will be looking extra hard at what I’m doing rather than looking for the equipment. Are you still mad at me?”

“Damned right I’m mad, I really liked that girl you jerk.”

“Oh get over it, neither of us would be with her now.”

Jim grumbled and grabbed the coffee pot to refill us, and gave a cup to Hugo. “What do you want for lunch?”

Hugo looked and said “How about one of your swiss and bacon Panini’s, they’re new, maybe you’ve found something that you can cook.”

It was becoming obvious that these two had history, and that it was a bit personal between them. I for one was looking forward to the story. “Girl? I’ve never known you to have a girlfriend Jim?”

Jim looked at me sideways.

“Well I haven’t,” I said.

Hugo spoke up “Oh yes indeed young man, Jim here was once a real ladies man, why half the grannies in this town might just be his offspring, if it wasn’t for our rather unique methods of birth control.”

Jim was scowling, but he told Hugo “Go ahead, tell them the story or they’ll never stop asking.”

Hugo cracked his fingers theatrically and said “Well, it was in 1922 or three I think, I was in town entertaining, mostly at the Royal Opera House.”

OK I was willing to overlook the dates, but I know for a fact that the opera house was demolished in 1953, this guy was as bad as Jim for tall tales.

Hugo continued, after glancing at me like he was reading my thoughts. “That was a great old place, converted to movies by then, but there was room on the stage for my show. Well, I needed a lovely assistant and Jim here wasn’t pretty enough, however, he did have a girlfriend who was. She was from the upper crust in town, so who knows what she saw in Jim, but there she was, sitting right where you are young man, when I came in to say hello to Jim.

I asked her if she would be interested in helping my magic act and before Jim could stop her, she said yes.

Emma was a pretty good assistant and we did several shows. I would make her disappear and she would be backstage, she figured I did it with mirrors. It was all good until one matinee when Jim was working and couldn’t come. If he’d been there he might have noticed the weak spot.

You see, up to then Guelph was one of the most stable places in the country, but something was changing and a weak spot showed up right there on stage. I made Emma disappear and

she moved right through the spot, putting her someplace else, not backstage.

I finished the show without bringing her back onstage, and then ran for Jim. We both took a good squint and figured out where the spot was and at that point we stepped through. It wasn't the worst place I've ever seen, but it wasn't good. Emma was smart enough to have stayed put and we got there just as the locals were starting to get curious. It was frightening for her, to say the least. We snatched her up and stepped back before anything bad happened, but Emma never forgave us.

She had her father charge me with one of those cute morals laws that were around at the time, and then she left town, never to return. I left town too, in the opposite direction, because Jim was ready to beat me black and blue.

That's when I retired from the stage, and I've mostly stayed away from Guelph until now, when I got a letter from Jim telling me he wasn't angry any more. I guess he still is, but I'll settle for not wanting to cut me in half any more."

"I've got another reason for wanting you around Hugh, the weak spots are turning up again, so just in case, I wanted you to feel like you could come help with them when they get too loose."

"Glad to help when you need me Jim."

“Wait,” I said, “you can both do magic? I’ve never seen Jim do any.”

“I don’t,” said Jim, “which is why I might need Hugo some day, I wanted him to come without hesitating if I call. I’m not a sorcerer, except in the kitchen.”

Hugo waggled his fingers and instantly all the food Jim was cooking became black as coal. Hugo waggled his eyebrows at us while Jim grabbed a cleaver and headed toward Hugo, who quickly waggled his fingers again.

“But what was this amazing birth control method you mentioned Hugo? Some sort of whisking things from one place to another where they won’t get you in trouble?” said Larry.

“Condoms,” said Jim. “Just condoms, Hugo likes to make things seem mysterious.”

“And the weak spot in the Opera House?” I asked.

“Gone when they tore the place down, that took care of the ghost stories and the disappearances, it was the architecture that caused that one, change the building and you change the vibrations.” Said Jim.

“But there are more in the town?” I asked.

Jim nodded, and then I did, it might explain some of the stories I’d heard.

Jim Takes an Apprentice

“Arthur what are you going to do with your life?” Jim asked.

I was helping close up the shop, it was just Jim and I in the place, plus the ghosts of course, but they weren't much help with the cleaning. Mind you, they didn't make a mess either.

“How do you mean?” I said “What should I do with my life?”

“You've been hanging around this lunch counter your whole life, you practically grew up here. You have a couple of degrees, you've got a job, but you're still here. You have girlfriends but nobody has stuck around, you don't travel much, what are you waiting for?”

“Jim I'm not waiting for anything, I'm quite happy here in Guelph, never really thought about moving out. I like my job, I like the company here in the diner. As for women, they move along, what can I say, maybe they figure I'm not marriage material, I dunno, I'm still friends with most of them, a lot of them have got married so it's not that I find girls who don't want a relationship, it's just that they don't want one with me.

Look, Jim, I could say the same thing about you. When was the last time you went anywhere, you're open seven days a week, I've never known you to skip a day. You don't have a girlfriend that I know about, why are you asking about my life, it's pretty much the same as yours.”

“That’s what I’m worried about Art, that you seem to be stuck in my life.”

“What’s wrong with that! Jim you’re a second father to me, what’s wrong with hanging out with your father?”

“Nothing at all son, nothing at all. Look, I’ve got something to ask you, OK? It’s a favour. I’d really like to go back home for a visit. Could you take time off or arrange your work so that you can do it while taking care of the lunch counter for me?”

“Is that all? Of course I can Jim, I’d be happy to. Couldn’t you just close up shop for a while though?”

“No, it doesn’t work that way I’m afraid, if you own this place you get certain perks, but you also open every day, no matter what.”

“Competition isn’t that tough is it?”

“No it’s not that, but do you figure we’re here to sell food and coffee? We’re here for the folks with stories, the folks who walk in needing help. This place was set up to match solutions with problems, to explain things to those who can’t get over unexplained things. We’re a public service, you might say.

Look, you know there are ghosts here right? You are one of the very few people who can see them, or after seeing them can remember them. You are friends with a trickster fox, and you

remember what he is. You have seen a lot of strange things around here, and that's not unusual, but remembering them is."

I looked at him and then did my little bunny face and said "are you my real dad?"

He tossed a dirty dishrag at me which I caught easily and grinned at him.

"All I'm saying Art, is that you have a special talent which is rare in people. You pay attention to what happens around you and you don't allow your preconceptions to stop you seeing things. What I'm saying is that you could take care of the place if you are willing, while I go back home for a while."

I was starting to get worried "For how long Jim, you're not retiring are you? I'm pretty sure I'm not ready to take on all the nonsense that goes on around here, not permanently. Is that why you were asking what I wanted to do with my life?"

"No kid, I'm not retiring, and I don't figure I will be visiting home for a few months, but I could use some help around here, I'm not getting any younger you know."

"You're not getting any older either!" I said "All that story about buying the place and taking on the last guy's name is bullshit isn't it?"

"I said there were perks, Art."

“I’m not going to stop aging if I sub in for a couple of days am I?”

“Well, yes, but only for the days you are working. It doesn’t last.”

“Hold on, that means if you retire you start aging again right?”

“Um, well no,” said Jim reluctantly, “if you must know, I am one of the old ones, when I told you I was from Wessex, I meant it. I’ve been alive for a very long time on account of being what you might call a halfling, my dad was a local god. I grew up to about this age and then stopped. That’s when I started with the ‘medicine man’ thing. You once called me a shaman and I suppose that’s as good a title as any. When shamaning stopped being a profession, I would do other things and eventually I washed up here as a short order cook. It’s funny, but Guelph is one of those places you have to make an effort to leave. But you know that don’t you.”

I was a bit gobsmacked as they say, not so much that Jim was what I suspected he was, but that he would come right out and tell me. “You’re not sick are you Jim?”

“Damn it, no, I’m fine, don’t be so dramatic, look I’ve watched you grow up, I know you can see things and remember them. You could run the place and give me a break, it’s been a long run for me, but if you are going to take care of the diner you need to learn what is involved.”

At that moment there was a tap on the door. I looked over and saw a big crow who looked almost like he wanted in. Jim walked over and unlocked the door saying “crap out there before you come in, we just washed the floors.”

“Hey, it’s perfectly good fertilizer” the bird said, and I went weak in the knees, in fact I just about fell over. Suddenly I was understanding crows?

“The idea is NOT to grow things in here.” Jim said to the crow, and then he turned to me “Sorry art, should have warned you that by agreeing to take care of the place, you were going to get some extras. This is Caw and he helps me keep up with the gossip in town. Caw this is Art, he’s agreed to help out.”

“Good to meet you kid. Jim, Megan is back in town, that mate of hers got a pretty good nip on his ass when she found him in bed with someone else. Ray is shackled up with a real pretty young thing at her place, she’s not complaining. Your buddy the magician is still in town, he’s behaving himself but he’s looking for weak spots. I showed him a couple I noticed and he closed them up.

The Gryphon and her kits are doing well, she hasn’t eaten any humans lately, but she’s taken a couple of crows for the kids.”

“I’ll have a talk with her,” said Jim

“Don’t bother, those guys were jerks anyway, and stupid enough to start squawking at the kids. They deserved it we figure, and babies gotta eat.”

I shuddered a bit at that, but remembered seeing crows eating a road killed crow. Nature bloody in tooth and claw I thought. The crow looked at me and tilted his head “more like eat your food when you find it, kid” and turned back to Jim.

“There’s rumblings up at the University, don’t know what’s happening but we’ll keep an eye on it. Somebody is running ghost trams on the old radial line but it doesn’t seem to show up to the humans so no bother. The wild hunt seems to have moved on since loverboy’s girlfriend kicked their asses.”

I suddenly remembered Ingrid, I had seen her a few times since then, and each time I was grateful that she had never given any hints that she’d like to move in. I don’t think I could have taken the battering every night.

Caw cawed and said “you asked for it kid, lucky you heal fast.”

“Anything else?” said Jim.

“No it seems pretty calm, except I’m a bit worried about the University but we’ll know when we know.”

“OK thanks Caw,” and Jim flipped him some meat scraps.

“Oh yum, fresh meat, I’ll drop it on the broken bridge and let it mature a bit. See you later Jim, kid.” and he hopped out the door with the meat hanging obscenely from his beak.

“I’ve never seen him coming in here before.” I said to Jim.

“You wouldn’t have, no reason for you to see him and he usually comes after closing time unless it’s an emergency.

OK son, it looks like we’re done here for the day, why don’t you go call Ingrid and have a beer on me.” Jim had a wicked grin as he slid a twenty across the counter at me, I could see he figured I would have a story and a few bruises for him to check out tomorrow.

The Man In The Hat

Although Jim had not gone on vacation, it didn't take him long to put me to work. Not behind the counter, but out in the town. There were some rumours and reports of a strange man in a hat wandering around town. Jim figured it was worth checking out so he asked me to track the fellow down.

I asked Ray to go along with me, not being all that sure I could handle a supernatural being on my own.

“You sure you got this?” Said Jim as we headed out the door.

“Hope so.” I said and the rest of the guys in the diner had their serious faces on. It was apparently a big deal that I was heading out on my first mission.

We walked down the main street, checking out each side street as we passed. I looked for small shifts in the pedestrians that might indicate something strange going on, but we found nothing. It was a good hour and a half when Ray said he was getting hungry. We stopped in at the Vienna Restaurant for schnitzel because Ray said he had a serious hankering for meat.

I told him that hankering is not a popular saying any more.

“Really, hunh? It used to be” said Ray.

“Not any more.”

“Okay man, I’ll remember that”

“Not man, either, barely dude, dude” At that point he started to grin so I shut up.

While sitting in the Vienna, I thought I caught a glimpse of a white fedora moving past outside. I was standing up when Ray said “relax, now we know he’s downtown, we’ll find him again”.

I grumbled but sat back down to finish my sausage and mashed potatoes. A bit high-calorie for me, but I figured I’d need my strength.

We finished lunch and I paid, Ray never had any money. We turned in the direction I’d seen the hat moving and started looking. Soon enough I spotted it coming out of a side street and going down another. It looked like the guy was hunting for something.

We scooted along to that street and turned the corner. Nothing. We looked in the windows of the Red Brick coffee shop, nothing. There were a couple of alleyways he could have gone down and we looked hard but we’d lost him.

On going back to the main road we spotted him again, although how he got back past us and across the road I didn’t know. We followed and he disappeared again.

Catching sight once more we turned down a space between two buildings that came to a four inch gap. There was no way he could have gone through that but he was gone.

“Do you see any of those weak spots Ray?” But Ray shook his head.

Finally Mr. White Hat turned down toward the river and at that point it became easy to track him, in fact it was almost like we were being pulled toward him.

Still, he was fast, and we didn't seem to be able to catch up. Until, that is, when he stopped in Goldie Mill. As we jogged up to him, panting a little with our efforts, I could see that he was taking a photograph.

Damn it, we've been following a photographer, someone people think is strange but hardly a danger to anyone and certainly not a magical being. About the worst they can do to you is take a better picture than you can, and make you jealous. Hardly magic.

Still, “Excuse me sir, we've been hearing reports that you have been doing some strange things around town, would you care to explain yourself?”

He turned and looked at me. “And you are?”

Ray stepped forward “He's from Jim's place.”

“Oh,” he said, “I see, well I’m just wandering around town taking photographs. I like the old parts of buildings, you see a modern facade, lots of shiny trim, and around back you have antique doors and shabby block walls. It’s a great town for that.”

I was rather embarrassed. “I see, well thank you sir for letting us know. Do I surmise that you know Jim of Jim’s Lunch Counter?”

“Sure I do, and if you would allow me to take a couple more photos here, I will let you buy me coffee and a sweet at Jim’s for the annoyance of chasing me all over town.”

I bet I was as red as Ray’s hair, but we sat ourselves down on a bench and watched the photographer finish up. With that, we all walked along the river until Jim’s place. Funny, I had the impression that we would have gone along with this fellow whether or not we wanted to. I looked over at Ray and he didn’t seem concerned, in fact he was grinning at the fellow.

When we got to Jim’s I held the door for the guy when Jim shouted “Lorilei, how are you.” At which point this guy took his hat off and became a rather spectacular looking woman.

No supernatural change, just that ‘fedora’ equalled ‘man’ in my mind. I got even more red in the face and Ray had started laughing.

“Art, meet Lorilei, a friend from the old countries. I invited her along to talk about how things are going these days, back across the sea.” Said Jim, who was also laughing.

“I have the feeling I was set up,” I said after nodding to Lorilei.

“Oh you were, my friend, you were. I suggested that Lorilei do some photography around town and then sent you out to check out the ‘strange man’. Now, what do you suppose that was all about?”

“You mean beyond a good laugh,” I said, glaring at Ray who held up his hands.

“I wasn’t told anything Art, just went along to help, but when I saw Lorilei I recognized her, and figured something fun was happening.” said Ray, still chuckling.

“Fine, I suppose this was a little lesson for your apprentice, right Jim? So let me see if I got it right.

I heard ‘man’ and started looking for a man, when Lorilei showed up in a hat, that’s what I saw. I was looking for a bad guy and found a photographer. Someone who is only mildly bad, but could improve with practice.” Weak laughs and groans were heard at my attempt.

“Is that about it Jim?”

“It was indeed a good example of prejudice, Art, in the sense of pre-judging a situation. Once you allow your mind to assume, to be closed, it’s very hard to open it again. Hair stuffed under a hat does not a man make.

Tell me, did you notice anything more while you were chasing Lorilei around?”

“She was hard to catch, she seemed to be able to stay ahead of us and disappear at will, until we got near the river, and then it was as if we couldn’t lose her, yet we still couldn’t catch her.”

“Good,” said Jim “excellent, although you didn’t tell Ray what you were feeling. Trust what you see and feel Art. Lorilei here is a siren, someone with an unfortunate ability to make men want to go to her. It’s especially strong around water, and so if she’s near water and there’s a ship nearby, well, you know the stories.”

“All unintended I hasten to say, which is why I seldom go to the seashore.” Said Lorilei, looking at me with an entirely enchanting face. I started to lean toward her when Jim tapped me on the knuckles with his ladle.

“Down boy. Look the lesson is this, don’t assume rumours are true, don’t assume that suspicious behaviour is bad behaviour, don’t assume all creatures with some power are evil, and don’t ignore your assessments. You will get better at seeing and feeling what is really going on, now that you are starting to remember more things that are happening around here.

But all in all, you did well. Ray did you see any major mistakes?”

Ray shook his head and I settled for a dirty look at Jim.

The Sorceress

Steve sat down and ordered “Coffee, the farmer’s breakfast and some advice please Jim.”

“Coming up, what do you need advice about Steve.”

“I think I’ve been enchanted, I mean really enchanted.”

Jim raised his eyebrows.

Steve continued, “I met this girl, Callie, in the Albion. She was sitting at a table by herself one evening when I went in for a beer. For some reason I felt like I should go over and introduce myself, and so I did.

She wasn’t surprised that some stranger came up to her table and said hello, but instead asked me to sit down. We had a few drinks together and she was charming, I mean usual charming, not magical charming, not then. We finished up and went our separate ways and I thought that was that.

Until I got home, when all I could think about was her. I was obsessed with her eyes, her hair, her mouth. For the next week I thought about her, being with her, and so every night I went to the ‘Bean and looked for her. After about a week she showed up again and came to sit with me.

She told me she'd been thinking about me, and that's when I started to wonder if she had slipped me something, some sort of potion that made me obsess about her. I mean, why would she be thinking about me if it wasn't to make me obsess about her.

So we had another great night and this time she gave me her number so I could call her. I called her the very next day, even though I wanted to be cool, not to seem desperate, but you know, I was feeling desperate to see her again. She said sure, and this time we had dinner as well as drinks.

I'm not sure what we talked about, I know we talked and laughed a lot but I can't really remember, just the way her eyes lit up when she laughed."

About this time in the story I leaned back and looked over at Ray, who grinned and waggled his eyebrows at me.

"All this happened in a week, and on the Sunday we went out to Rockwood to the park and lay around on the beach, then rented a canoe and paddled around. It was Callie who suggested we pull ashore on the other side of the island and sit for a while. The atmosphere seemed magical, all the sounds of the other swimmers were muted, and the air seemed heavy, the trees were a bit soft, it smelled great, and suddenly I noticed that Callie smelled amazing. That was when she leaned in and kissed me big time.

My head spun, I almost fainted. We lay back and she rolled on top of me and we necked for what seemed like hours, I mean I lost all track of time. I think I put my hand on her boob, I'm not sure because I certainly don't remember deciding to do it, I just found it there. She must have wanted it there because when I started to take it away, she pushed my hand back.

Jim that's not the end of it. That night we went for dinner and drinks again and then she suggested that she come over to my place for tea. I don't even like tea, and I sure don't have girls over to visit, I live with a bunch of slobs, but I couldn't say no.

She never commented on the mess in the place, and she even made the tea after I told her where things were. I sat on the couch and was paralyzed. I mean I had to go pee but couldn't move. The bathroom was through the kitchen so I would have had to go past Callie but for some reason I didn't want to do that. I'm thinking she didn't want me watching her make the tea, she might have been putting some sort of potion in it.

After we had the tea, and another tea, and I finally got to go pee while she was in the living room, it was pretty late. Look, I'm not a ladies man, I don't just jump every girl that comes along, but Callie made no move toward the door and it got to be past two o'clock. We were still talking when she looked at her watch and said 'I've got a class in the morning', took my hand and pulled me into the bedroom.

Maybe she put some sort of aphrodisiac in the tea, but I stayed hard until about four in the morning as we made love.

A couple of hours later, Callie got up and dressed. I thought she would head out and go to school for her class. I was too confused to get up and just lay in bed trying to get my head straight. It turns out, Callie made breakfast and while I was eating she somehow made the bed as well, before she left to go to her class.

Jim I don't know what to do, I'm scared, really scared. I think she's a sorceress or something and she's given me potions to make me stay with her. Callie is short for Calypso isn't it?

Can you do something for me, can you check her out and see what she's done to me?"

Jim looked at Steve with a very serious face, "It certainly sounds like she's made you fall in love with her Steve. I'll look into it in the next couple of days."

Steve was visibly relieved, he finished his breakfast and left saying "Thank you so much, I really appreciate it"

When he was out the door and around the corner Ray started to howl, he laughed so hard I looked at him wondering if he was all right. Jim was grinning too.

"You know her" said Jim

“I do,” said Ray “she’s a lovely girl, certainly no sorceress, just a really nice girl who isn’t afraid to go after what she wants, and it would appear she wants Steve.

Steve, on the other hand, seems like a fellow who can’t believe he’s good looking, can’t believe that a normal girl would want his ass. He seems to think that he’s been drugged when all he is, is...”

And the whole place roared “In love.” With that the whole diner collapsed into laughter and shouts of “good for him.”

I don’t know whether Jim or anyone else had a talk with Steve, or whether he resigned himself to being enchanted, but he kept going out with Callie and after a few weeks even brought her into the diner for lunch.

As they came in the door Jim looked up and said “Calypso! Enchanted any good sailors lately?”

Callie looked confused, but the look of panic on Steve’s face was well worth seeing.

Jim pretended to look again and said “Oops, sorry, thought you were someone else, come sit down we’ve got two stools free right down at the end.”

I think Steve finally got it, he gave Jim one of the nastiest looks I’ve seen anyone give him. Jim just laughed and said “what will you have?”

The Wurm in the Tunnels

Mike and Liz came in looking very worried. “I didn’t know where else to go.” Said Mike. “Something nasty has come into the tunnels at the University, some of Liz’ friends have been hurt, along with some of the maintenance crew. The University has been saying that it’s workplace accidents, which tells you just how bad it is.”

“Slow down,” Jim said “tell it from the beginning.”

Liz looked at Mike, then at the the rest of us and began talking. “It started about a week ago, back as far as the tunnels go on the south side of campus. The guys found a hole in the side of one of the tunnels and shortly after that they found some sort of beast coming out of the hole. It looks sort of like a giant lizard but with a worm’s body. It breathes fire, it really does. It comes out of that dirt tunnel and then back in but it’s gone quite far through our tunnels. I’m not sure it likes the concrete and metal, but every time it sees someone it tries to eat them or cook them. From what I can tell, it’s mostly going after wedding rings. A lot of people have been hurt.”

Liz was scared, and so was Mike, which was something. I mean Mike spent two days and nights with Megan. Then I looked at Jim. He didn’t look scared, but he sure as hell looked concerned, and about as grim as I’d ever seen him look.

“Damn it.” was all he said, but that got the message across.

“OK you two sit and have some coffee, calm down, we’ll deal with it.

With that Jim went to the front window and drew some sort of symbol in the condensation and then came back to refill everyone’s coffees.

He looked hard at me and nodded to himself, which worried the hell out of me.

Less than half an hour later the diner was crowded. Mara, Hugo, my Ingrid, Raynard, even Amber with her violin. Jim looked around and smiled, “Good of all of you to come, but all I wanted was Hugo here. The signal must have dripped a bit and it’s interesting that you felt it Amber.”

Amber smiled, “I don’t think it was me, I think Coyote is here and he wants to help through me or something. I mean, I can feel him with me.”

“That’s wonderful Amber, but music isn’t going to help this time I’m afraid. In fact, the pack isn’t going to be going on this one.”

I’d never heard Jim refer to them like that but it was obvious he was talking about Coyote, Ray, Mara and Megan. Speaking of Megan, she and Liz were sharing some pretty intense looks at each other. Without breaking eye contact, Liz reached over and put her hand through Mike’s arm. Megan smiled and nodded at

Liz, breaking eye contact. “I like her,” she said to nobody in particular.

I for one breathed a bit easier. Jim may have called them a pack but I was thinking more of a dog-fight inside the diner. Things could get broken, things like me.

Jim spoke up “It looks like we’ve got the Wyrn here in town. The gods know why, but it has to be stopped. Ingrid, I know you’d like to go after it, but it’s not your fight, it’s mine, and I’m going to take Arthur here with me.”

My bladder threatened to let go as I whipped my head away from Megan and Liz and toward Jim. “What the hell good would I do against a bloody dragon!”

“Art, the worm is traditional, so we’ve got to do this traditionally. It’s you and me, my Thane, don’t worry, we beat it back into its tunnel and Hugo seals it up tight.”

“Thane?” I said, “What the hell is a Thane?”

“You,” said Jim “You’re my shield bearer.”

That was not enlightening. I decided to stop thinking and follow along, there was no chance of backing down with this crew hanging about. Hugo had started searching through his pockets and mumbling to himself. He looked around the room and said “Jim I think maybe these guys were intended to be

here, someone needs to clear the tunnels so nobody else gets hurt.”

“You’re probably right,” Jim agreed after a moment, “OK quick plan of attack. Amber you play where we want people to go, keep them calm. Mike and Liz, you know the tunnels and the people, you go with Amber to gather up folks and reassure them. The rest of you, you’re on scare the people away from the Wyrms duty, snapping and growling is allowed, but no chunks out of asses right?”

And Ingrid, before you start bellowing, you and Hildy will hang back toward us, if it goes south you can get Art and Hugo out and then have your shot at the monster, does that work?”

Ingrid didn’t look happy but she took my arm and nodded. Megan seemed to notice Mara for the first time and gave her a sort of salute, Mara returned it and I was suddenly aware of how different these two were. They were certainly not the same animal, even if they were both wolves.

“Right, let’s get kitted out Art, here is an apron and a cook’s hat, and take this tray.”

I was stunned, but Ingrid shook my arm and I put on the apron and hat, and picked up the tray, which suddenly felt a lot heavier than it used to.

Jim opened a drawer and took out a knife with the tip broken off, the one he used to chop onions, and put it into a leather sheath that seemed too long for it.

Jim left the diner in the charge of the regulars who were left, saying “don’t eat all the food”, and Hugo waved his hands. The counter-top was suddenly clear and scrubbed, you could smell the disinfectant. A large first aid kit showed up at the far end.

Sam, one of the local surgeons at the hospital took one look and started to organize things from the first aid kit. At least we’d be in good hands if we made it back to the diner.

Believe it or not, Mara and Megan changed to very large wolves just outside, and Mike got on Mara while Liz swung her leg over Megan. Good politics, I thought to myself. Those four tore on up the hill with Ray in fox form right behind them, Amber hanging on to his ears. It was not the time to notice things like this, but Ray was grinning and his tongue was hanging out as she squeezed his ears. I swear I saw the outline of Coyote beside them.

“Nobody will see them.” Jim said to me and as I looked back at him, his apron became a set of leather and scale armour, and his hat was now a helmet. I looked down to find the same thing, and the drinks tray was a massive wood and metal shield. The wood looked char hardened.

Ingrid had called up Hildy and pulled me up behind her. Hildy tore off up the hill and Jim was running alongside as if he could

run forever. Hugo had disappeared, I suspect he was in the tunnels already.

As we rode up the hill, Ingrid handed me a short sword saying “Don’t use this unless you have to, your job is to use the shield, but I’m damned if I’ll see you killed today.” As she said that the sword was on my belt in a sheath.

As we got to the top of the hill we saw a large covering in one of the walkways had been flung open. Down that we jumped to be greeted with quite a flow of people heading toward one of the large basements. I could hear Amber playing and then I saw ‘the pack’. I almost joined the crowd myself, they were snapping, howling and yipping. They were having a great time.

Jim, Ingrid and I pounded down the tunnel in the other direction and as we got close to the south end, Jim yelled “here”.

Ingrid grabbed me, swung me around and kissed me hard. “Don’t die.” She said, spun me around again and shoved me hard toward where Jim was slowing down. Hildy was still huge and let out a very loud snort that sounded like a challenge.

Jim pulled his knife out of his belt and it was no longer a broken tipped kitchen knife. I recognized it as a seax and I wondered how old it was.

I could feel the heat and see smoke coming around the corner Jim was approaching, so I knew the dragon, pardon me, Wyrms

was close. As he moved forward Jim started to chant something in a strange language.

Just about then Hugo stepped out from the shadows and started to wave his hands, but he looked at the sword on my belt and his eyes got big, he stopped and stepped back into the shadows.

What Jim was singing suddenly made sense to me, it was a story of some great warrior who fought a dragon, this dragon, many years ago. As I listened, I knew what my part was and I stepped in front of Jim just as we got to the corner. I swear, I have never done such a foolish thing in my life, and I had the Wild Hunt chasing me.

The Wyrm caught sight of my shield and blew out a horrendous blast of fire. I had to lean into it and was glad of all those years of Rugby. I pushed hard and Jim sang louder. As the wyrm paused to breathe in, Jim yelled “down” and leapt right over me to swing the blunt side of that seax down onto the wyrm’s muzzle. I was surprised it didn’t crush the monster, I’d never felt such a blow.

It shook its head from side to side, looking at us with one eye and then the other as I stepped in front of Jim again, covering us both with the shield. Jim started to talk in that strange language, he told the dragon that it wasn’t time, that he could have killed him, that the dragon must return to its home and wait for the right time. Jim told him that when that time came, he would meet the wyrm and they would fight the final fight.

All this time the wyrm had been backing up, and I saw the ragged block wall it had burst through. Jim and I walked it through the wall and well down the dirt tunnel until I saw it, the weak spot.

Hugo must have known where we were, because he was suddenly there making hand gestures and speaking in some tone of voice that made my head ache.

As he started to close the weakness, the dragon relaxed, and seemed to nod his head in agreement.

Jim stopped speaking and lowered his sword. My shield was suddenly five hundred pounds.

Hugo finished, and it was just a solid wall of dirt in front of us, as we went back the way we came, the dirt filled in until we got to the other side of the block wall, which was whole. You couldn't tell if anything had happened there at all.

Ingrid came up then and took Jim and I under her lovely strong arms and helped us back to where everyone else was waiting.

Some of the kids were lying on top and petting the wolves who were lolling around like lap dogs. Ray had turned back to human form and was chatting with Amber in a corner.

Mike and Liz came over and Jim told them there was no more problem, and asked them not to remind people what had happened. "They will forget if they are not reminded." He said.

He looked beat, while I felt like a million dollars. I should have been on the floor gibbering, but I could have taken on three more monsters. I suspect Ingrid's arm around my waist had something to do with that.

After making sure that everyone was all right, Jim ordered us back to the lunch counter. Once there Hugo must have done something because the place was twice the size it had been, so there was room for everyone. Sam seemed happy to pack the medical equipment away, and Jim sat on a stool. "Can you get coffee for everyone please Art." he asked.

I went behind the counter and started to pour. "You know Art, you look good back there with the apron and the hat. I think maybe it's time for me to go back home to visit. Lorlei has told me there are a lot of changes and maybe I'll go look."

I looked hard at Jim and started to tear up. This guy was my second father, and I really wasn't ready to see him go. "I'll do my best." I managed.

"You have a good crew here Art, or should I say Jim."

I threw up my hand and stopped him "NO, not a chance my friend, this place is yours and you need to come back."

Jim thought for a moment, "Fine, I'll come back when I'm done visiting. Don't worry though, like I said, you have a great crew here and they will give you as much help as you need."

And that's how I ended up in charge of Jim's Lunch Counter.

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