

PENNIES ON THE SILL

A story of natural beauty, treasure and betrayal in Montreal

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PROLOGUE

The full reality of the cat burglar's position hit him and self-doubt caused his choreographed stealth to freeze in mid step. A superior thief should be meticulous and take into consideration the possibility of any weather anomaly at any given instant.

Citing words of profanity, behind his clenched jaw, the burglar berated himself on this night of the lunar eclipse for not having been as thorough as he should have been. In a decade before Real Time imagery pages were made available on the internet or the option of inspecting satellite and radar images were available from the McGill's research observatory, he would have taken the time to watch the weather channel more closely that afternoon. Artificial intelligence may be the path to human extinction. He attempted once more to budge the window that had been sealed shut by the freezing rain.

Hanging his head steadily with the intent to stay calm and focussed, he inhaled deeply, dismissing the sweat that was accumulating on his brow. Every calculated breath thundered in his head to accompany the rhythmic drumming of his heart. He was not in the mood to be forced to calm the inner foe that was always raring to run him down. For now, his conscience would have to wait. The societal avenger was racing against time.

Many months can be spent planning out a heist, anticipating all the variables that can go wrong. He mentally worked through the tactics of the planned robbery with every breath, bite, step and dream, visually recreating the entire operation right down to the crack on the wall beside a concealed hatch. When the eve of the actual caper arrived, a myriad of optimum solutions to accommodate every imaginable circumstantial error had been racked up and filed in the mind's database. And yet, somehow, he had failed to prepare for a case of freezing rain in January, the coldest month of the year in one of the coldest countries in the world.

The owners of the opulent, Victorian home that the cat burglar was gaining access to, were out at a soiree with some country club members at the planetarium and were not expected to return until well after the presentation and all of the wine and cheese was consumed.

When the crook clad in a black, wool toque, had first made his way to the third floor porch at the back of the house using his climbing gear, the January sky was dark and gusty but the air was unusually mild; excellent conditions for quick entries and faster exits. Without tripping the alarm situated by the inside door, he was immediately granted access into a vacant guestroom by removing a pane of glass in the large storm window to reach the hook in the protected porch. Using his diamond core tool and suction cup, he was grateful that the glass was standard window glass and not that laminated safety stuff which would have had a second pane sandwiching clear plastic. Once inside the lavish Westmount townhouse bordering the North east edge of the omnipresent Murray Hill Park, or officially King George Park, he followed the upstairs hallway which spread itself to five other stunning rooms, including the study and the master bedroom. He stopped at the door of that

room for it held a lingering fragrance that was strikingly familiar and solicited memories that he believed to be long buried. *Stay focussed, you twit.*

He willed his legs to move forward, then, with masculine poise, made his way down the grand central staircase. He stepped through the dimly lit foyer and past a massive family room that overlooked the steep downward slope of the park and beyond to the cosmopolitan high rises of the city of Montreal. Further along the passage stood the lustrous hardwood framed, leaded glass French doors of the conservatory.

He stood still, his breathing inaudible. On the other side of the glass, the greenhouse division unfolded before him under the sporadically clouded moonlight leftover from the eclipse which was emanating through the glass ceiling like a majestic, yet unsettled, jungle in a fairy tale. The banana tree that stood at the far corner with two voluptuous bunches of yellowish green fruit hanging beneath the top branch, loomed over a finely manicured labyrinth of exotic flowers. Most blossoms had taken their shut-eye stance for the night, but some, like many of the orchids, remained open.

Resembling a shadow lurking in the darkest cavity of a cave, the burglar and his soft light strands of hair escaping the hat at the back of his athletic-like toned neck, moved with composed fluidity in the stretchy black nylon clothing that clung to him like a second skin. He took note that the alarm was set to secure the indoor botanical masterpiece but not the dining room with the Royal Crown Derby china set on display in decorative detail or the living room with its priceless *objets d'art*. A sardonic grin tainted his statuesque air. The second floor window had gained him such swift and painless entrance. If he would have been there to supplement his finances, he could have been on his way out at that very moment with a fortune in valuable jewels and personal items alone.

But the intruder was not that kind of thief. He was there to get something far more rewarding, a metaphorical fiery substance possessing many colours that heated his heart and fuelled his soul. Revenge.

With a racing pulse, he put one sleek, gloved hand on the brass doorknob of the finely adorned glass door. Inhaling deeply, he turned it and felt the heart engaged behind his ribs rattle his chest with rapid beating. Was there an alarm for the greenhouse? He was always anticipating the day that his overconfidence would be his downfall in that dangerous form of cockiness. But tonight, although his scarred heart was not surprised to find the doors were locked, he was relieved for the second time that the alarm had not been triggered. This caused him to unexpectedly surrender to a fair amount of guarded affection towards the indoor garden's owner. It would seem that she only bothered to lock the doors of the room containing items that she considered to hold value.

He relaxed his tense jaw. Dropping his arm back down to his side, he directed his attention to the 14 foot elegant coffered ceiling above him. As smooth as a salamander in soil, the burglar pulled a small line pistol from a black, leather holster tied round his ankle. Eyeing the corner of the square coffer adjacent to the wall with the door, he aimed and shot out a red double-braided rope. A sharp anchor lodged itself securely into the beam. Quickly and nimbly, the bandit scaled the rope and balanced parallel to the ceiling. Soundlessly, he placed one hand on the beam and lifted the tile above his head with the other hand. Raising

it up from the magnets that clamped it into place, he moved it to the side away from the wall where he then then lay it gently down. Extending both hands to the top side of the beams, he pulled himself up through the dark hole, feet first, leaving his head dangling toward the floor.

Just as he was pulling his head up to meet with the alignment of his body, an incident occurred which caught him completely off-guard. From the floor below, A pair of green jewels gleamed up at him within a casement of black lustrous fur. The thief's own green eyes and bright smile greeted the cat with amused respect. *You may be slyer than me but not as creative.*

With a cocky wink adieu, the prowler reeled the rope in and pulled his head up before replacing the tile to its rightful spot.

He was on a mission and felt assured that the night air would still be out there waiting for him when his job was done. Contrary to popular belief, not all prowlers take pleasure in being in a tight position in total darkness. The particular prowler in question on this stormy night was one such inconsistency. He much preferred wide open spaces. Closing his eyes and relying on his senses, he felt his saddle for his miniscule, lightweight flashlight and held it tightly without switching it on. He sat. He listened. At first to his heartbeat and steady breaths. Then to the creaks around the house as the wind buffeted the foundation from outside. And something else. The wind was blowing harder and the snow was getting heavier. Wetter. He listened for several minutes, tuning out the noise of the outside so that he could focus on the sounds of the house itself. Minutes passed by as he breathed quietly. He admitted that the cat had been an arbitrary surprise, but he was certain that there still was nobody else but him inside. For now. Reality and the sense of time kicked in.

Simultaneously he opened his eyes and switched on his flashlight, focussing on the approach to the greenhouse by the two-foot high irrigation tunnel and pipes that were kept separate from the main pipes. Breathing in the dank air, he began to carefully make his way through the tunnel in the ceiling that followed the main beam in the centre of the greenhouse and towards the ceiling sprinkler components, Fortunately, since the conservatory had been heated by the crawlspace all day, it was warm.

He had been in the house before. Having at one time accepted an invitation into the home long ago, the ever inquisitive thief was given enough information during a casual conversation to make him confident that the tiles on either side of the main sprinkler of the overhead encased tunnel in the glass roof were removable in case of necessary repairs. He directed the beam from his flashlight to the area that he estimated would be the access panels. Sure enough he could already detect a discolouration on at least one square. As slow as a snail, he moved toward it then placed his palm firmly on top of it, knowing instantly that it was his door to putting an inner rage to rest.

Finding a secure hold for the hook on his line gun without causing too much damage to the home's inner structure, he once again felt along the edges where to unclamp the magnets' grip and placed the tile aside.

The bouquet of exotic air and intoxicating unseen tendrils of scents that flowed upwards to seduce him were aromatic and humid. Carefully he proceeded to let himself down into

the tropical paradise beneath the panes of glass and the wind and snow outside. As he landed his feet on the cobble stoned floor, a natural concerto composed by the delicate sound of water splashing on assorted stones and plants entreated the soul of the thief. He took pleasure in a creek that followed a path along a handful of small waterfalls amongst a myriad of foliage apt to grow in tropical climates while the northern regions are enduring the dead of winter. He swore that he could hear the plants growing in an enchanting song between the fluttering of invisible wings and unseen droplets of plant transpiration within the confines of moving shadows under the obscure moon.

Well informed on the layout of the greenhouse and the plants, the thief eyed the alarm that was camouflaged on the stone wall behind the red trumpet vine two feet from the inside of the doorway that he had only recently been on the other side. *Better safe than sorry*, he thought to himself as he took measures to disarm it. When done, he turned to reach the other end of the room and was amused to see the green eyed cat standing in his path.

How the hell did you get in here? The bandit questioned under his breath. It seemed the animal was mocking his cat burglar aspirations with its superior intelligence. *Okay. You may be smarter than me but I am still more creative.*

Even as he thought it, he questioned the truth of the matter. After all, both cat and cat burglar were standing face to face in a Norman Rockwell image of irony for the second time that night. It impressed on him the idea that a problem must have either zero, one or infinitely many solutions. And in this case, there were at least two unique ways into the conservatory without setting off the alarm, thus logic would dictate that there were infinitely more.

Out of admiration, the pilferer bent forward to pet the animal's head and awaited an approving purr which was graciously endowed. Exhibiting impressive characteristics of a courteous host, the cat correctly sensed the direction that the crook wanted to go, and thus elegantly turned to lead the way along the scenic route. The guest followed.

A number of small paths and trickling streams were webbed to create a sublime stage for a fanciful performance indulging each of the five senses.

The pair of rogues passed by a small tree that made the man momentarily stumble and his heart flutter excitedly. He raised his chin to inhale the fragrance of the African Nutmeg tree, with its succulently scented, orchid-like flowers. As the perpetrators of misconduct continued they passed by green leaves of all varieties and a Pohutukawa tree, the iconic New Zealander's Christmas tree with its crimson flowers, encircled by an exquisite bed of mossy trunks with mesmerizing wandering epiphytes, red lilies and roses flowing towards splatters of brightened bolts of white narcissi leading into a transcendence of pink, white and red amaryllises. These surrendered into a cascading floral tributary made up of a variety of blue flowers that met with intermingled webs of ivy swathing a stone lined pond. Three giant lily pads hovered afloat on the translucent surface, dominating their smaller cousins and their brightly coloured water flowers.

Beyond the pond was a small fountain whose melodic drops of crystalline water flowed from a waterfall into a small pool that was surrounded by an inviting arrangement of the most beautiful of the world's scented jewels; orchids. The gardener's affectionate dedication

to this area of the conservatory radiated with each splash of colour in the delicate petals of the revered flowers and overhanging multi-coloured leaves of the accompanying coleus plants that were placed in between ambitious spaces. He was astounded at all the species on display and recognized that several of them might be rare and perhaps illegal. Gifts, no doubt, from a compensating second husband who lacked in some areas of human fulfillment, but not in monetary wealth. They might want to think twice about inviting the law into this area of the greenhouse if they were to report a theft.

At the edge of the small orchid jungle, there was a lush vine with large, glossy leaves that twirled itself upwards around a topless wood model of a tall tree and was entwined around a trellis arch that went over another trickling stream. His heart lunged as recognition grabbed hold of him. Approaching it with care, he could not help but admire how well the plant had blossomed since having been first cultivated from a mere vanilla orchid cutting. He ran a gloved finger along the rim of one of the petals of the soft, white orchids and inhaled its seductive aroma, tasting its sweet flavour on his tongue. He closed his eyes. Twelve years crumbled down around him as he mentally revisited the day that they had planted the roots in a pot of soil that had been transplanted to the present location. His knees weakened at the recollection of their foreheads touching while leaning over their hands tenderly working together to plant the roots perfectly on the very same day that their heat could not let one another go.

He shuddered. *Times change.* His hand followed the vine down the polished tree to where the base met the soil and where the cat had already found its way. The heister ran his pensive hand down the cat's forehead and rubbed the upper part of its nose between its watchful but warm eyes. *Ah, jeez, you're one of the good guys, aren't you?*

The man gave the cat a full length stroke down to the tip of the tail. *Well, then look away.* The man put his hand in the soil and felt down deep around the roots. He dug carefully for several minutes and then stopped at something that made him smile. The cat had not looked away. When the thief had brought his hand back up in plain view, he was holding something shiny and green.

His heart and soul collided at that moment. He had come specifically to retrieve the hexagonal emerald bracelet that they had wrapped loosely around the vine that they had planted together. The gemstones, cabochon emeralds and diamonds with one mesmerizing trapiche emerald in the middle, were going to pay for their wedding when the time was right. Once a burglar, always a burglar. He had stolen her heart as he had betrayed another thief to attain the bracelet with the sparkling green snowflake. It was her idea to bury it with the orchid to empower their love for one another and keep it safe. Her eventual agonizing betrayal had left little hope in his heart that he would find it still there. But he had taken the risk anyway. How could she have caused him so much pain and at the same time honoured him so? He was tempted to put it back but did not.

With the object of his mission safely packed in his belt, the robber turned to retrace his steps back through the indoor garden paths, in and out both access hatches and out through the top floor of the house. Eager to somehow convey his gratitude for the unexpected company, he glanced at his feline accomplice, deciding whether to move towards him for a

quick pat. The cat, however, was once again one step ahead with a parting gift invaluable to the cat burglar who had been an enjoyable source of amusement on an otherwise uneventful night. His upturned cat's grin suddenly turned downwards as his eyes widened. His pupils slighthened and his ears perked up in alert mode. Both cat and man were locked into one another's emerald gazes for one second longer before the cat dashed off without a single trace.

Attentive in his pivoted step, the thief understood at once that the owners had returned and the gig was in jeopardy. The almond shaped eyes had been clear. *Game's over. Get out. Now.*

There was no time to execute his initial exit plan. *Activate plan B*, he thought humorously to himself robotically. The burglar looked up. His eyes followed along the contours of the dome shaped glass ceiling. Two protruding metallic cross beams interlocked at the highpoint. This is where there would most likely be an opening segment for ventilation purposes in warmer months. It was doubtful that there would be an alarm system. After all, it was not as if he had broken into Fort Knox.

Crouching down, he skulked to where he could be the shortest distance between the ground and the window vent. He aimed upwards with his gun, pulled the trigger and latched the line around the cross section of the beams and pulled himself up more quickly and smoothly than before. The transparency of the glass above him alleviated much concern about there being excess snow coverage and complicating his get-away.

The view of the room from the top of the conservatory dome was worthy of savouring one last moment of the protected tropical paradise in the middle of the Montreal winter as he pulled in his rope. The beauty of the gardener's cultivating passion had evolved from one seed of their love and now he had reclaimed possession of a second. He had loved her and she had stolen his right to feel that joy.

He could now hear life in the house; voices and movement, calm and unaware of the intruder's presence. Directing his attention towards his necessary exit, he took note of some hinges on the side of one of the windows. He put his gloved hands on the glass. It would not budge. At closer inspection, he perceived air bubbles compromising the clarity of the glass. Somewhere during his unwelcome visit, the windy, snowy weather had changed to freezing rain. Alert to the situation, he could now hear the rain on the windows and realized that he had heard it all along but had mistook it for the waterfall. Having been sucked into the fantasy of the room's environment, it had not registered as Canadian weather.

As usual, Reality kicked in at the most inopportune moments from Her beguiling world of enchantment leaving him hastening to assemble the fragments of his faculties to cope with the truth of the situation.

Shaking his head and clenching his jaw, he forced himself to breathe. How could it bloody well rain in January? And as that question formed in his stormy brow, he was made aware of the cat again. It was sitting calmly on the inside of the French doors and he was gazing impishly at the thief's ill fortune. *Okay. I admit that I'm in a bind*, the intruder snarled in his thoughts while he glared at the smug animal. *But I'm still more creative.*

The man reached for his trusty utility knife and held it to the lens of his flashlight long

enough for the blade to become heated. Soundlessly he sliced through the opening, melting the ice on the other side. The next time he pushed against the window, it opened without fuss. Without looking back, he pulled himself up and out and quietly closed the window behind him before he slid down the exterior of the greenhouse and to the ice field of a lawn below. His heart jumped with excitement at the realization of how he could accomplish his getaway in a hurry if he ventured to skid-skate the whole way down the steep driveway to Westmount Avenue, and across the football field of Murray Hill Park to the angular path with the tree that had a woman's figure in the trunk that ran down the western part of the park. Taking Strathcona Avenue down from Côte Saint-Antoine would lead him to Sherbrooke Street and Westmount Park then ultimately Ste. Catherine Street, the gateway to downtown Montreal. The raindrops that had vexed him only moments ago were accosting his face like football comrades congratulate one another after a touchdown. They were hitting the frozen ground and making a symphony of different icy chimes. No other sound could be heard except for a city ambulance in the distance.

Ensuring the bracelet was secure at his hip, he took a long breath. With a wild smile and a shake of the head, he leapt.

“How the hell does anybody survive the world out there?” Cole thought out loud to himself as he ran the sole of his foot along the edge of the dock beneath where he stood. “Not the same way I do, that’s for sure.”

Although in many ways it was unnecessary, he nonetheless dipped his toe in the water to gauge its temperature. He had grown up in these waters and could measure the temperature of the water from the colour and tone of the sky and the briskness and scent of the breeze breathing on the back of his neck and the air around him brushing his skin. It was more a matter of letting his warm body prepare for the impending shock of a chilly dive. He quietly admired the lighting on the surrounding leaves, the water’s surface and the way the light even reached down through the clean water and played with the textures of rocks and waving foliage and weeds below the surface.

A buzzing sound approaching his right ear from the main body of the lake got his attention, hoping that it might be one of the first hummingbirds for the season. Instead two dragonflies, connected by hip and head, with wings that had tiger stripes, flew over his shoulder and glided with the soft gusts back over the water. They hovered in front of him extensively, drifting in the air from side to side, forwards and even backwards. Whether they were playing or fighting for the ideal tree to proceed with their romantic antics, Cole felt bitter. *Get a room!*

He reached his arms out in front of him and relished the brief moment of nervous anticipation as his heart rushed. Bracing himself, he took a big breath then dove head on to penetrate the crystal surface of the pristine Canadian Lake.

It was cold. But the masochist in him welcomed the sudden invigorating shock that momentarily stunned him as he ploughed through the depth that met him patiently and enveloped him like a scorned lover who was beguiling him to follow her on a perilous path to Destiny.

His powerful arms carried him through the depth quickly and easily. Opening his eyes, he could see the blurred sight of the weeds below him swaying with the water’s movement under an enchanting shaft of sunlight. His heart jumped with passion for the slow motion world around him that moved in the same way that he could feel his own hair flow. The blue sky up above was all but a forgotten memory in those few seconds where his survival depended on the air remaining in his lungs. Kicking hard and exhaling with each stroke, his back muscles alive, he traversed as far as he could under water, revelling in the pure ecstasy of the lack of gravity and the cool sensation caressing every cell of his skin.

Nostalgia attacked him instantly when he splashed up to the surface and breathed in deeply. He continued at the same pace, using a strong breast stroke with mouth submerged and nose skimming the surface. Besides his breathing and the call of a nearby blue jay, the soundlessness was deafening. His heart lurched with the thrill of being in a place that he had been longing for without realizing it. This is where he belonged. In water; a lake surrounded by natural creations of perfection. Cole knew every square acre of the lake and forest in the

panoramic scene that lay before him down to the glimmering ripples on the lake's facade beneath his nose like the back of his hand. He was familiar with each crevice and creek, with each tree that stood from the canopy's peaks down to the roots.

Slowly and steadily, he continued swimming towards the middle of the lake taking care as to move without so much as miniscule ripples. He gazed steadily across to the opposite Canadian Shield cliff laden shore, listening hypnotically to the rhythmic sound of his breathing. The mating dragonflies reappeared alongside him and then sped ahead out of sight after entertaining him as they kept touching the surface and then lifted above it just to fly down and skim it again like a persevering slab of slate being skipped across a body of water. A hawk glided overhead, barely moving a wing. With his well trained eye, Cole took note of the cave that he had hung out in as a child and could not contain a knowing smile when he spotted the old, fallen pine tree still obstructing the view of the entrance. He could see the smoke from Morgan's wood lodge chimney across the lake. He grinned at the awareness that Morgan still honoured Cole by allowing the tree to undermine the tree climber's reputation with the tree sticking out like a sore thumb on the landscape. Morgan knew which of Cole's secrets lay in the under wood as well as the canopy and took care to keep every one of them.

A visit with Morgan had not been at the forefront of Cole's intentions when he drove up to the lake that morning, nor had he even given it a thought as he had scanned the lake before his swim but now sensing Morgan's presence with the cabin's welcoming wooden veranda in full view caused a sudden apprehension in Cole to reach the shore quickly in order to see his old friend once again.

With each steady stroke, Cole was closer to the shore. He focussed on the tip of a black branch sticking out of the water several yards ahead of him. It was only when he noticed a ripple of movement a behind the tip that he saw the tip turn and look at him. Cole instantly stopped in his wake.

"Christ!" flew out of his lungs as he pushed himself back a stroke. He had always heard that there were water snakes in the area but he had never seen one before himself. He had heard that they despite the fact that northern water snakes are harmless, they have been known to dish out a good nip too.

Treading water he watched as the snake altered his path in Cole's direction to take a closer look which likewise gave Cole a better view of the reptile's face. As Cole kept himself afloat he lost himself in the creature's inquisitive, black eyes and watched the ripples following the head to calculate the snake's body length. Probably no more than a foot long. It came closer and closer and Cole kept as calm as he could, aware that the only sudden movement that should be made would be the one to shore if a painful bite would be administered.

He smiled in the water and returned to reality. Presently, Cole watched the snake's head disappear. He knew that snakes were fast swimmers and for a moment longer he remained in one place positioning his chin to his chest as he scanned the area below him to see if the reptile had moved in to get a closer look at the unfamiliar creature in his territory. But the only blackness that Cole saw was the fluttering material of his black swimming boxers and

the darkness further below.

He forgave his cringe at the unknown shadows tickling his toes but quickly fought the notion to recoil back towards the dock where he started. When he turned around, he could tell that he was already more than halfway across the lake at any rate and that it made more sense to continue forwards at this point. He picked up his pace where he had left it and continued across the lake.

When he got closer to shore, he mentally measured the angle and distance between two willow trees. When he was exactly where he wanted to be situated, he took a big breath and dove down to the lake bed. He knew exactly where he was and swam until he saw what he needed to see. When he reached the sunken rusty, Evinrude outboard motor that had fallen off of the camping peoples' boat 2 decades ago, he pushed propelled himself towards it. When he reached it, he secured a sealed Ziploc bag with a laminated, white message and a lapis lazuli pendant on a silver chain to the handle. Then he swam back up to break the surface and breathe again.

At this time of year, there is rarely a person in sight. But Cole was glad to see a close friend of his down on his vast waterfront, splitting some wood. Maintaining the rhythm of his stroke pace and steady breaths, Cole swam towards his friend. Without making a sound in the water Cole reached the shore within a mere number of minutes. The cool air enveloped him causing arousal of many goose bumps on the back of his shoulders, neck and arms. "Ayyya!" he cried out loudly with an emphasized shake and shiver, catching the woodman's attention.

"You don't creep up on someone with a saw in their hand and yell in their ear if you know what's good for you, stranger." Cole's friend frowned. "Your lips are blue"

Cole laughed and hugged himself close. "The water is cold" and then, "Aren't you a bit surprised to see me?"

Morgan chortled as he reached for a large, folded towel that had been placed on a nearby stump. "Well, I have to admit that I was surprised about half an hour ago," he tossed the towel in Cole's direction, "when I saw what seemed like a human head or perhaps a seal crossing the lake." Cole caught it and smiled gratefully. "I calculated the odds of either scenario and concluded that it was either my crazy, dear friend from across the lake, Cole, with a plan to startle me or a swimming ninja with Sai clutched in teeth coming to assassinate me.

Cole dried himself off and draped the towel over his shoulders. He then pulled a plastic sealed, white envelope from his pocket and handed it to the burly man with the lumber jacket shirt. "Here, this is for you."

It may be that people who live in hot countries suffer seasonal boredom. They have more incidents of tempered crimes than do countries that play host to many seasons. Diversity is a key to a healthy state of mind. Or at least a unique one.

Take Canada as an example, on an unsavoury, cold winter's day it is more gratifying to have a hot beverage and stay warm and be concerned with planning and carrying out a well thought out plan then actually delivering and suffering the consequences for bad behaviour. When the warm weather does come around and remains for seven to eight months in a year, most Canadians would sooner enjoy the heat of the sun and let bygones be bygones than engage in bad tempers and unwarranted crimes particularly when the frosty scars of winter are thawing.

"Bloody hell," Claudia Miler declared with a light smile, blinking a clustered snowflake off a lash and pulling her scarf further over her chin. Overcoming obstacles was a constant feat in the journey of life but it seemed to her that weather was always mocking her efforts. Thank God the cold weather rarely lasted more than three months and rarely was one day's weather condition the same as the next. The duration of the cold days were just enough to fend off the weak at heart and entice the one's harvesting faith.

Her voice was hard to hear. "Nature's designing skills are phenomenal. But why so callously lacking in the department of warmer protective layers for the weaker race?"

"What are you talking about? Animals have fur. Whales have blubber," said Jason Goulet, arrogantly.

"They're not the weaker race."

In Montreal's midwinter, the difference between standing inside rather than braving the outside is a thought comparable to one involving the good things in life versus the worst. It is the difference between allowing a sip of rich, well aged Port to dance around the tongue while indulging one's palette with a morsel of soft Cambozola while gazing out at a painting of a crystalline ice castles shimmering in the midday sun compared to the torture of running barefoot over the jagged terrain of broken ice during a blizzard. One is more pleasing and less strenuous than the other.

The two images swirled playfully inside her unusual mind as Claudia began to feel as if she was braving the second of the two.

"Here, hold my hand." His voice snapped her back to her place in reality.

The cloudless, January sky had allowed nightfall to come early that evening, common for the time of year. From inside, the outdoors had looked more welcoming with the snow's downy softness and slightly sprinkled, but otherwise naked, trees offering little obstruction to the view of white covered rooftops and smoky chimneys. But actually being outside was another story. The brutal night brought cold air and wind that gnashed vindictively at every defenceless part of her skin as Claudia walked down a long, residential street in a western area of Montreal, alongside her lover, or rather the man whose lover she was.

The snow was everywhere.

Being that the winter season had started several weeks beforehand, the accumulation of

different layers and types of snow from separate snowfalls and varying weather systems was already piled high on each lawn. The sidewalks were covered with a mixture of old, stiff snow, new, wet snow, black ice, and hard, icy chunks that did not budge when kicked and had a tendency to injure toes when accidentally tripped over. Snowploughs, in their obligation to clear the snow off the roads, pushed the snow into long, high banks on either side of the streets which ultimately blocked the bottoms of all of the driveways. The homeowners that had already shovelled had removed the snow from the bottom of their driveways and disposed of it onto the sidewalk alongside of them. This final transfer made walking difficult. If pedestrians were not slipping in or tripping over the snow ahead of them, then they were climbing over snow banks.

Claudia and Jason were walking single file because there was no room on the sidewalk to accommodate anything else. His lead was creating big army-boot footprints for her to place her foot steps and ease the effort. He stretched out one arm behind him as he was reaching for Claudia's hand.

"What's the matter? Take my hand," he repeated.

She found difficulty answering him without a tone of annoyance. The timing was lousy. Romance in the winter should strictly be reserved for the indoors, preferably near an open flame, in one form or another. "I can't reach," she feigned.

Breathe. In through the nose and out through the mouth. If the nose will not allow any air to travel up the nasal passages due to excess "stuffage" then take breaths through the mouth. Let the cold accost the lungs and then watch the exhalation in tangible form as a cloud of condensation. But just breathe.

The air was biting. Her cheeks and the tip of her nose stung painfully. The cold air accosted her elegant eyes allowing tears to form and her eyelashes to crystallize. This delayed the typical process of her blinking as the top and bottom lashes would make an icy "clink" that was felt rather than heard, then thaw enough for them to connect and refreeze together, only to be pulled apart again as the act was completed.

Even though she had been born and raised in the province of Quebec, having experienced the northern winters in the city of Montreal year after year and knowing the comfort of warm duvet coats and wool hats and mittens, this winter she chose to go with fashion sense instead of health and comfort. Like many of her peers, she had opted to rely on her hot, youthful blood for a sense of freedom from the clumsy oppression that multiple, warm layers and puffy, bulky coats would have delivered. The chill may indeed be penetrating the material of her thin, black, knee-length jacket and black-stockinged legs, but her reflexes and movement were quick and graceful. Her ears were red and numb, but her hair was free from static.

Jason was still grasping out his hand behind him, reminding Claudia of a high pressured water hose that has gotten loose from its master's grip. She tried to calculate how she could still possibly satisfy his demand in comfort without it being awkward. She knew he was needing attention and desiring his ego to be stroked. That was how he was and Claudia was the prize that he displayed on his arm to make his friends envious. But at the end of the day, there seemed to more sympathy than anything. *Squeak, scrunch, squeak, scrunch, squeak,*

squeak, crunch. He stopped then looked back and down to where he caught her hand then turned back to continue along. Claudia could no longer view the irregular terrain before her.

There are three things that are common knowledge in a winter climate. First, if the sun is shining, then it is going to be excruciatingly cold. Basically, if the sun is shining, then there is no cloud cover keeping the warmth from the sun rays near the ground, thus it is very, very cold. Second, even a good winter is a horrible winter. And the third is that on these horrible, cold days, the snow squeaks under your boot-steps.

It was night time now but the only sound that Claudia's frozen, throbbing ears would allow was the loud squeak of Jason's boot steps and her own.

The reason for the squeaking of boots in cold weather has to do with crystals. Not rock crystals but ice crystals. When snow is not really cold, the boot pressure slightly melts the snow on contact, allowing it to flow soundlessly beneath your boot. When the temperature falls below twenty degrees Celsius however, it is too cold to melt the snow so the ice crystals simply get crushed and moved and causes a squeaking sound. Incidentally, without melted snow beneath the boot, friction is compromised, thus so is sure footing. This is how Claudia's attempt to avoid holding out her hand caused her to lose control of her tread, slip with feet high into the air above her back and tail bone which thumped hard on the ground.

The unhappiness of the situation in that quick moment, from the coldness to Jason's company to the pain in her back was enough for anybody to want to be suddenly elsewhere. It was the impact of her head slamming down onto the ground, however, that released her energy above her physical form into the surrounding air.

In-depth cell biology is a fascinating matter. Believing that there are trillions of cells in each of us that are individual single cell organisms all living in our own distinct bodies in our own separate environments with our own energy and DNA is as simple as believing in the infinite boundaries of the universe. When you talk to your cells, they listen. If you convince your brain cells and your eye cells and your ear receptor cells to do something for your own good and it's all positive and realistic, you have over a trillion personal single cell computers at your beck and call. Therefore, if you ask them all together to release your energy out of your body for an out-of-body experience or astral projection but stay together, it should be simple enough. Right?

For most of us, it is not that easy. For Claudia, it was a concept and an action that she was making herself more and more familiar with. As her physical body lay lifeless on the ground, she took a few seconds to revel in the loss of her senses except for sight and hearing. She did not feel cold nor pain. But her DNA still mirrored her own character. The sense of obligation was strong and so she returned her energy back to her body.

Humility is a virtue. As Claudia's muscle below her tailbone and head silently throbbed in complaint, she reviewed the events that had just occurred and decided to let it go. Another futile effort to please the "un-pleasable" once again was lost. She smiled at Jason. He was clearly not amused as he had noticed her absence and had come back to her side. He stood before her now, with arms folded. Her crystallized lashes clicked as she blinked and respectfully transformed her fading smile into an inward laugh.

Jason had long brown hair, often tied in a pony tail and had intricate, anarchist tattoos

covering his arms and back that at that moment were underneath the black hooded sweater underneath the brown knee length coat he was wearing. She had fallen for his “bad boy” charms and political ideals, that he spoke of in comedic monologues or passionate rants and had impressed Claudia who was completely uninformed on the subject. However, the more that she became acclimated to the subject, she began to see that like so many other unhappy, “political” misfits benefiting from the luxuries of a capitalist country, he lacked conviction.

Jason helped Claudia stand back up and then directed her to the middle of the quiet street where they continued their trek to “The Gilded Cave”, a greasy spoon which was a local hang-out for many uninspired youths. He pulled her to his side and kept his arm around her shoulders so that she was tucked in beside him. Within a few steps, her pace matched his. She slipped her hand under his warm coat and placed it comfortably in the back pocket of his jeans.

“Why didn’t you just hold my hand?” he asked her. An answer did not come quickly to her lips since she did not know how to explain that it was his needy hand that led to the fall in the first place.

“It wasn’t comfortable,” she finally said.

“Why are simple acts of affection so difficult for you?” He waited for an answer and was not surprised by her usual silence. “Look. I like having you near me. It hurts my feelings when you won’t take my hand. It’s humiliating. We may as well just be friends if we won’t even hold hands.” His voice was edgy. “Don’t you agree?”

She had heard this complaint from him before. There was truth in his words in that she did not often hold his hand. She considered his words. She quickly became bored with his need for attention and questioned his complaints. They had just showered together and then tenderly dressed one another to go to the Cave. Now she was walking down the street with her hand in his rear pocket beneath the hem of his jacket. Granted, there was a slight piece of denim separating their flesh, but she could feel the heat emanating from his body and his, muscular movement with each step. Could he not feel the warmth of her palm and finger tips? Were these not acts of affection?

Maybe these acts were not simple enough. Maybe Jason had reason for reproach in that although she never had a problem with giving into his desires; she found a simple kiss on the cheek or a touch of the hands more intense. Jason was right. Claudia, at any given moment would choose to connect tongues rather than receive a peck and hold Jason’s rear rather than his hand. She would rather be on the side of the crossed line than the moment leading up to it.

Claudia concluded that it was just another one of her character flaws. She had many. Although she was perfectly confident when alone without the confusing input of other people and their excess of words, she was considered to be too silent. And when she did speak, she got confused looks for inappropriate timing and irrelevant contributions to a particular conversation. She laughed at humour that nobody else thought was funny and she had difficulty cracking a smile at the jokes that made her friends roll on the floor. Her friends knew about souvlakis, double bacon cheese burgers and cocoa puffs. They could recite almost every Saturday Night Live skit and could argue about the virtues of Zig Zags

versus Export or Players. They could talk big about having seen or used hot knives, roach clips, pipes and bongos. Claudia made an effort to absorb as much of their knowledge as she could, feeling shame for having nothing to give back. All she knew was stuff like Chomsky's essays, Goethe's philosophies, names and stories from Greek mythology, the artistic messages of Hieronymus Bosch, Edvard Munch, Pieter Bruegel the Elder and Salvador Dali. She knew Handel's Messiah, Mozart's Requiem Mass, and Rimsky-Korsakov's Scheherazade by heart but was completely ignorant of what interested her friends.

The act of disappointing people was common to her. She did not know how to rectify the particular flaw that she was presently being criticized for by Jason but she would make an effort. It was her obligation if she wanted to continue being accepted. Yet there was still an itch in her veins that suggested that perhaps the problem was more that she simply did not care enough about Jason to stumble for his approval.

"I'm sorry," she uttered with a frozen mouth, her green eyes looking up at him past the cut crystal like snowflakes wafting downwards to the ground.

Satisfied, he squeezed her closer to him, clamping his hand around her icy fingers. Her soul was constrained. "Now, let it out," he said. "What's the matter?"

----- End of sample -----

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