

Strange loops: a biochemical study of the inevitability of attachment between Benton Fraser and Ray Kowalski in an alternate Due South homoerotic fanfiction setting. Ann. Slash 2001; 1-325.

Soundtrack: *Windpower*, **Golden Age of Wireless**, Thomas Dolby; *All Eyes on Me*, **Dizzy Up the Girl**, Goo Goo Dolls; *Fumbling Towards Ecstasy/Possession mix*, **Fumbling Towards Ecstasy**, Sarah McLachlan; *Some Fantastic and One Week*, **Stunt**, Barenaked Ladies; *Trust*, **Touch**, Sarah McLachlan; *Song for a Winter's Night*, Sarah McLachlan (so sue me, she writes sad slashy songs); *Airwaves* and *She Blinded Me with Science*, **Golden Age of Wireless**, Thomas Dolby; *Mind*, Vibrolux; *You Are The Everything*, **Green**, REM (come on, you knew it was coming); *Man on the Moon* and *Sidewinder Sleeps Tonite*, **Automatic for the People**, REM; *True*, Spandau Ballet; *Head over Heels*, the Go-Go's; *Mystery to Me*, **Nickels For Your Nightmares**, Headstones; *I'm on Fire*, **Born in the USA**, Bruce Springsteen; *Back on the Chain Gang*, Pretenders; *Trust Me* and *New Day*, **Let It Bee**, Voice of the Beehive; *At My Most Beautiful*, **Up**, REM; *I've Been High* and *Imitation of Life*, **Reveal**, REM; *Toy Store*, **The Wanderer**, of a revolution; *I Could Be Happy* and *See Those Eyes*, Altered Images; *Take My Hand*, **No Angel**, Dido; *Hanging By A Moment*, Lifehouse; *Cherry Beach*, Paul Gross & David Keeley; *Round & Round* and *Dream Attack*, **Technique**, New Order; *Perfect Place*, **Honey Lingers**, Voice of the Beehive; *Scary Kisses* and *Love Locked Inside*, **Sex & Misery**, Voice of the Beehive; *Strange Loop*, **Exile in Guyville**, Liz Phair (just because); *Quick*, Eddie from Ohio.

Strange Loops

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Switch off the mind and let the heart decide

there is no enemy

“Windpower,” Thomas Dolby

Introductions are over, and, as far as I can tell, went mostly unheard. Words were bandied about such as “grant writer” and “master’s from Columbia” and even the dangerous “research associate” but he seemed to pay little attention, either to Dr. Thatcher or to me.

“Nice dog.” He is staring at Diefenbaker as a child might. “Wow.”

I look around involuntarily for the arrogant, self-righteous genius whom I know is lurking somewhere in the shadows. This... overgrown graduate student with hair trimmed no doubt by a spare dissecting scalpel – a dull one – is not the man who has done the research I’ve spent the last week or so reading.

“He’s... he’s half wolf, actually.” I’m so used to the correction that it comes involuntarily, automatically, and is useful in this instance for filling an awkward gap.

“Really? Cool. He comes with you to work?”

“When possible.”

“I like dogs. Wolves. Whatever. He can’t go in the lab.”

“Naturally.”

“Does he like pizza?”

“Quite a bit. Unfortunately.”

“Me too. We’ll get some in a little while.” He talks softly, rapidly, almost indistinctly, quite clearly too slowly to keep up with his brain. “Look around. Find a desk. That’s mine.” He nods at the corner, at a drafting table, a laptop computer next to it on a flat table. “And that’s my closet. You’ll have to find your own.”

I frown, bemused, following him. A young man sticks his head out of another door, studies me curiously for a moment and disappears again.

“You sleep here?” I turn a full circle, not easily, because the closet literally is one and was probably no more than a supply closet at one point. There’s a cabinet at the far end, a sink with a spotty mirror above it and a bare light bulb, and an Army surplus cot with olive green blankets pushed down at one end and a bare blue-ticked pillow at the other. Books are on every available horizontal surface, tottering piles, stacked under the cot, even two on the edge of the sink.

“Yeah.” Statement of fact. “Sometimes. It was extra space. They put a sink in for me a while ago.”

“I think perhaps a renovation is in order.”

“Hey, it gets the job done. What can I call you? I love your name. Benton Fraser. Fraser.”

“Call me whatever you feel comfortable with.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Cool. Cool. Fraser.”

“Yes?”

“Cool. You’re from Canada, huh? Wolves. Names. You don’t find that in Chicago.”

“Yes, I am – how did you know?”

“You got an accent.”

“Very few people notice it.”

“They’re not me.” He says it simply, the lack of humility robbed of arrogance by matter-of-factness.

From the door, Dr. Thatcher says with false brightness, “I’ve got a meeting, Dr. Kowalski, so I’ll leave you two to get acquainted.”

He nods absently, his attention seemingly caught by one of the books on the sink. I follow her to the outer door, saying in an urgent undertone, “What –

“Look, Mr. Fraser, the last two times I brought candidates in he bolted into the laboratory without a word and sent Carlo out to tell me he was at a delicate stage in an important experiment. Same excuse both times. He’s talking to you. It’s an extremely promising start. Keep the dog.”

“Wolf.”

“Whatever. Consider yourself hired. We’ll talk later.”

Later, over pizza, with pineapple, delivered along with a couple of rock CDs by a man named Sandor who follows Dr. Kowalski’s every movement like a dog, devotion evident, he scribbles a note on a pad.

“You know the problem is no one can read my handwriting. Or understand me. Can you read this?”

It takes me a moment. At first I think it’s because he’s left handed. And then I realise it *is* because he’s left handed.

“It’s mirror writing, isn’t it?”

The pizza stops halfway to his mouth. His eyes light up. “Yeah.”

“Cultivated?”

“Nah. Organic.”

“Ah. Did they try to switch you?”

“Yeah. One of the sisters. I had to learn to type early. So you can read it?”

“I like your name, Fraser.”

He laughs, head thrown back. “Cool. Coolness. Hey, Carlo!”

The mop haired young man I saw earlier sticks his head around the door again. “Yeah?”

“This Canadian guy, he can read my handwriting.”

“Thank God fasting,” Carlo says. “If he can cure dyslexia, I’ll say forty Hail Marys. Save me some pizza.” He disappears again.

Oddly Dr. Kowalski flushes and looks down at the pizza box.

“It’s interesting that your brain was able to decode typing,” I say, as matter-of-factly as possible.

He looks up quickly, uncertainly. A hint of a smile appears. “You, uh, you haven’t seen my typing.”

“I think we all find spell checkers useful.”

“Yeah.” The smile widens. “Uh, yeah.”

oOo

It is odd how short a time it takes for my universe to narrow to one disease, one extremely well equipped laboratory, and one loopy scientist. After some mutual circling Carlo has relaxed, having decided that I know my place and, more importantly, appreciate Dr. Kowalski and his work. Rebecca is just as much a mouse with me as she is with Dr. Kowalski, but the coexistence is civil. Dr. Thatcher remains brusque but is much more relaxed than she was at our first meeting.

She and I both smoke, and we have fallen into the habit of taking a smoke break together each morning. I’ve introduced her to the pleasures of Canadian cigarettes, which she claims are far superior to American brands. As it happens, she’s Canadian too, by birth if not by culture: her parents moved to Detroit, which word she pronounces with the lilt that evokes Canada, when she was six. She’s a few years older than me but still quite young to have become a full professor and been chosen as department head, though I gather that position is no sinecure.

At first she tends to grill me about Dr. Kowalski’s attitude towards me; as time progresses, however, she begins to enquire about his work. I’ve begun transcribing some of his notes (as well as having taken over recording data, and preparing research and data submitted by the hospital working in conjunction with Dr. Kowalski for his review), and she seems strangely reassured by this occurrence.

“He hasn’t had a real assistant in years,” she says, exhaling, absently watching the smoke curl into the air. “Almost three.”

“Really? I find that surprising, frankly. He’s not at all difficult to work with. I expected –”

“I don’t pretend to know how his mind works,” Dr. Thatcher interrupts. “All I know is that we managed to keep one assistant here for three months and

that was a record. Most of the time we were lucky if we had them for two or three weeks. Willsie Aebischer were getting restive: they always want results anyway and they were threatening to send one of their own scientists in. The university said, of course, 'No.' ”

“No. I imagine he holds his own patents, and aside from any other considerations...”

Her look is both surprised and almost respectful. “Indeed. At any rate, when Charlie Underhill¹ called and told me about you – he recommended you quite highly, you know – I almost got on the next plane and dragged you here bodily.”

Highly recommended. I stifle a smile; the bitterness would shock her. Yes, tact is certainly my strong point, a hard-learned lesson; that and the ever crucial ability to say ‘Please’ and ‘Thank you kindly.’ “Where did his assistant go? Did you try to hire her back?”

“She died. Car accident. Three years ago.” The words are clipped; her voice is tense. “It was a... tragedy. He was more than a little dependent on her and I was beginning to think he’d never get over her death.”

“That’s... terrible.”

She shoots me a sharp, sidelong glance, opens her mouth, hesitates, and then contents herself with another puff.

“I thought... at the time... his heart was involved,” she says, carefully, after a few moments.

Somehow he didn’t strike me as the sort to be carrying around a broken heart. If so, it’s quite well hidden. But with Dr. Kowalski, I’m slowly learning, a lot of things are quite well hidden. I feel an odd little sharp stab of... pity. I make an encouraging interrogative noise.

“She started out as the Zinkernagel fellow. She was eventually offered a teaching position once we realised that Dr. Kowalski was... unsuited to teaching. She was teaching his classes anyway, except for the special topics course, which never has more than five or six students anyway. She wasn’t brilliant, by any means. But she was very... effective.” She puffs again, says, musingly, “Yes, Stella was... effective.” A few more quick, short puffs. “Soon after the prodementin discovery – right before he got the Rodbell² award – she was killed.” She crushes the cigarette out abruptly in the tall ashcan near the door.

I vaguely recall hearing something about a scandal, or a story, involving the Willsie Aebischer grant that year and I mention it. She sighs. “He wasn’t... functional. He was completely shut off. The only people he would talk to were that pizza delivery man and Marta, who was one of his doctoral students at the time. It took quite a lot to convince the Willsie people that he was the one who’d

¹ This character is listed simply as “Senior Official” in the credits in the pilot. The inestimable LaT possesses a copy of the second to last draft of the script for the pilot, and in that script “Senior Official” is identified as “Charlie Underhill,” the one who said to Fraser, at the end of the pilot, “Everyone says he was the last of a breed. They were wrong. You are.”

² William Rodbell Award for Extraordinary Scientific Research, NAS; awarded to S. Raymond Kowalski in 1993 for his discovery of prodementin 1 and 2, two amyloid precursor protein genes which are involved in Alzheimer's disease.

done the research. As you're aware, we've got an unusual arrangement with them – brand new, at that point – and they need reassuring from time to time. We could hardly drag him out long enough to meet them for the publicity shots. He wouldn't even open his mouth." She winces slightly in recollection. "We lost an executive grant director over it."

Irrelevantly I ask, "Where's Marta?"

"She left over a year ago. We weren't sure he would handle that well but he seemed quite all right with it. She had a tremendous opportunity to go to Kaufmann in Switzerland after she graduated, and to his credit I believe Dr. Kowalski encouraged her to go even though we'd arranged a nice postdoc for her. She'd brought Carlo on board a few months before and Dr. Kowalski seemed comfortable with him, although he's not the technician Marta was. Still, Carlo was successful. As you seem to be. Because it's been an endless parade of graduate students too – after Stella died, Marta was the only one he'd deal with directly until Carlo; and, as I said, research associates were a hopeless cause until now. Thank God you have a dog."

I light her second cigarette. "Wolf."

"Whatever. She's one reason we haven't offered you the Zinkernagel," she says. "We will – when we can. But for now—"

"Best not to rock the boat. I understand."

"Your forbearance is appreciated, believe me."

"Working with Dr. Kowalski doesn't require much patience from this end, I can assure you."

"From this end it does. From a purely selfish perspective, when he lost Stella, we lost an enormous amount of time. Stella retyped his notes, organized them, wrote them up. He's done, or tried to do, it all himself since then – Marta was a worse typist than he is – and he's not only excruciatingly slow, he's a perfectionist. Getting him to release data for Willsie can take months. And you waltz in and a few short weeks later he's not only letting you compile the Hines data, he's letting you compile his."

"I'm an encroaching sort."

She smiles at me, almost companionably. "I don't question the means; the results are enough."

So after this heartening exchange I am emboldened, later, to venture disagreement during an impromptu brainstorm.

"No, sir, I think you're mistaken."

He looks up and frowns. Not angrily; he's simply mystified. He is used to being treated rather like Moses by Carlo, and pretty much as the Second Coming by Rebecca. "No, I'm not."

"I think you are."

"Fraser, this isn't rocket science."

"I'm aware of that. I simply think you're theorizing in advance of the data."

"I know how the data are going to fall."

"Probably. But the fact remains that it can't be written that way."

Rebecca has been backing silently towards the door. Upon reaching it, she turns and flees. Carlo simply watches.

His irritation is growing. "Are you saying I'm a sloppy scientist?"

"Not at all, Dr. Kowalski. I'm saying your intellect gives you an advantage that more pedestrian minds need actual hard evidence to comprehend."

He blinks. Twice. "What?"

"Your intellect –"

"I don't get that, what is that? Is that a compliment or are you still saying I'm wrong?"

"Neither."

"Both," Carlo says, grinning broadly. "Anyone want a burger?"

"No," we say together.

"Okay," he says, and disappears, grabbing his coat from the chair as he passes it.

"Do not do that. Do not argue with me just to argue with me."

"I'm not, sir."

"Look, stop that. Stop that. My name's Ray. What the heck do you call me sir for? Is that a Canadian thing?"

"I am not arguing with you to argue with you. Look." I pull a stool over to his drafting table. "Let me show you." I have already determined, from transcribing some of his notes, written and spoken, that pictures and images comprise a good deal of his internal thought patterns. Two or three times I have been able to make flow charts to make sense of his thoughts – and once, while I was doing so, he glanced over, watched me for a few nerve-wracking moments, asked for the paper, and locked himself in his closet office for two hours. When he came out he thanked me, almost shyly. Therefore I know one method through which we can communicate effectively.

I sketch a flow chart quickly, roughly, putting his argument into symbols. He follows the chain, sees the hole immediately, images and symbols meeting, as if our minds are meeting. He points to another. "That's an if-then statement, though."

"Ah. So it is."

"So if you replace that –"

"With a yes-no –"

He scrabbles for a pen and resketches it, staring at it for a long moment, his brain ticking. Then he tears the paper off and starts a new one.

"No," he says after fifteen intense minutes. "You are wrong."

"About the hard data?"

"No," he says impatiently. "You were right about that. No, about this. About this logic structure."

"That was simply an example –"

I'd almost suspect him of redirecting the argument, but his concentration is so single minded that I understand instead that his brain had already grasped, examined, and dismissed my argument, probably in the time it took me to move the stool from the other side of his desk.

"I love these," he says abruptly. "Can we do more of these, can you show me more of them?"

"You've grasped the essentials, sir. Ray."

"I need more than essentials. I need details."

"The devil is in the details."

That brings him up short. He turns and looks at me and frowns again. And then suddenly, his lips turn up, his mouth opens, and a sharp, delightful laugh emerges. "Are you – are you laughing at me?"

"No, Ray."

"Yeah, you are."

"I'm not. I'm simply teasing you."

"It's okay. I liked it. Do it some more."

"I, ah–"

"It's okay, Fraser. You're funny."

"So are you."

"I am? Funny ha ha?"

"Absolutely."

"Cool. Cool. You really think so?"

"I find you entirely hilarious, Ray." Odd that that should be the key to his comfort. To mine. But it is. Clearly a barrier has been overcome.

The day after he asked me to call him Ray, which happened to be a Friday, I stop in at the lab on a whim. I know he spends a great deal of time there. I suspect he enjoys having the place to himself on weekends. Therefore I'm not entirely surprised to find him hunched over his laptop on a stool, music pounding. I knock on the side of the door frame.

He looks up, frowns, and then does a double take.

"Wow. I almost didn't recognize you." He's staring, unselfconsciously. "You look like a real guy. I mean, a normal guy, but you look like more than a suit. Why don't you wear that kind of stuff to work instead of suits and ties all the time?"

"Perhaps I like suits."

He grins, turning the volume down. "Not!"

"Ray, I think you spend far too much time with Carlo and Sandor."

"I'm serious. We wear jeans. You don't gotta impress us."

"I'm well aware that one has to be an obscure gene or a memory B-cell to impress anyone around here."

"Most genes are obscure. Nice boots. You really hike? I'd like to do that."

"I used to, quite a bit. In Canada. My father has a cabin there on some land. There isn't much to be done around Chicago. One has to drive to hike and I find that psychologically self-defeating."

"Psychologically self-defeating. You always talk like that? Or you do it because you're nervous?"

I consider this. "A little of both. More the former than the latter, although you are of course extremely intimidating."

He frowns, starts to get up, and then looks at me sharply. And grins.

“Yeah.” He does deadpan well. “I can see where you’d be intimidated. I’m a pretty impressive guy.”

I can’t help smiling. I never meant to find him attractive; but his charm is insidious and all the more so for being unconscious. “You are,” I say, seriously.

“Ah, you love me for my mind,” he says, scoffing.

“It’s a very attractive mind,” I say.

“It’s a very lucrative mind,” he says, almost as if he’s thinking out loud. And that’s a very insightful, not to say cynical, thought, and it surprises me to hear it emerge from his mouth, to know that it was formulated in his head. I feel an odd rush of protective feeling.

“There are worse problems.”

He slides off the stool, stretches, smiles. “That’s true. What are you doing here?”

“Diefenbaker and I were wondering if you did indeed spend weekends at the lab, as you’re rumoured to do.”

“Yeah. Yeah. I, uh, I think. I think pretty good here. I go home sometimes too. I stare at the ceiling a lot.”

“I imagine you do.”

He looks at me, puzzled. “You get that? You get that? It’s not that I’m, you know, lazy, or whatever. I... I need to.”

“Yes. I realize that. Creativity is much more an internal process than an external one, Ray. I end up, essentially, writing for a living. And yet the process of writing takes a great deal more time than the actual procedure would seem to indicate.”

He smiles. Slowly. Enchantingly. He lights up the room. I’ve never seen him smile like that. I’ve never seen a smile like that. I could bask in it. I am. I could stare at the ceiling with him for hours. And staring at him like this is quite rude. But he doesn’t seem to notice. He’s staring back.

“Would you like to get a bite to eat with me?” I hear myself saying.

The grin, which was fading in the face of our locked gazes, is back again, full bore. “Sure. Yeah. Just let me – uh, just let me lock up the computer.”

He means it literally. In his closet office he has a small vault in the cabinet, unearthed from God knows where. He often takes the hard drive with him; just as often, he locks it in said vault. His office closet has a motion sensor alarm as well. No one seems to take any notice of his security issues so I gather that they are long standing in practice and not to be remarked upon.

We eat at a small Indian restaurant where Ray is apparently a regular. The waiter only brings one menu; and when Ray nods at Diefenbaker he shrugs and smiles. I tell Diefenbaker to behave, sternly, as he disappears beneath the tablecloth and settles across both pairs of feet.

“No, it’s okay, leave him,” Ray says as I attempt to convince Diefenbaker to move. “Everything’s good here. I usually get the tandoori chicken. I know it’s kinda old hat but I love it.”

“Two, then,” I say, and hand the menu back to the waiter. And I am somehow not surprised when rather more food than two simple entrees materializes.

I am surprised when Ray simply signs the bill. He catches my puzzled glance.

“I, ah, they just send me a bill ‘cause I eat here so much. Rebecca helps me balance my checkbook when we get time.”

“The blind leading the blind. And thank you.”

“The blind leading the dumb blond,” Ray says. “You’re welcome. I bet you can balance checkbooks too.”

“Ah, yes. Would you like me to – “

“Rebecca’ll probably kiss you. Well, she probably wants to anyhow, but yeah. If – if it’s not too much trouble.”

“Not in the least.” And although I mouth a polite fiction, my brain is astonished to realize that it is, in this case, not a fiction after all. My interest in him as a person is increasing daily, as is the desire to protect him from all manner of things, to include bank statements and bills.

We are leaving the restaurant when a woman bumps into Ray. They both step back from each other, the door still open between them, and the woman smiles, apparently genuinely delighted.

“Ray! What a surprise!”

“Hi. Hi. You’re back. I’ve been, uh, wondering when – oh. F-Fraser. Victoria, Benton Fraser. Fraser, Dr. Victoria Metcalf. She’s the, uh, the clinical research... um, data administrator from... Willsie Aebischer³. This is – Fraser’s my, uh, my new grant writer.”

“And general dogsbody,” I say with a smile, extending my hand. She takes it, smiling back, a not unexpected look of assessment in her eyes. She seems younger than she probably is: she’s petite, with an absolutely beautiful cloud of dark hair, sultry lips, and a golden voice. And Ray seems quite taken with her. I’m not overly impressed, but then women, as such, rarely do impress me.

“I’ve been in Germany for our quarterly meeting. I’m very glad to be back. I can’t wait to be filled in – in general terms–” she grins flirtatiously at him – “on the latest discoveries.” To me: “He’s very possessive of his data. It’s like pulling teeth to get him to turn it over to us for preliminary assessments.”

“It, uh, it has to b-be p-p-perfect,” Ray says.

“Yes, well, that’s why you’re the brilliant scientist and I’m nothing more than a paper pusher,” she says.

He blushes. “You’re not b-bad at the science thing.”

Recalled to reality by a patient patron waiting to depart, we all step out onto the sidewalk. Dr. Metcalf catches sight of Diefenbaker. “Oh! What a pretty dog!”

As I open my mouth, Ray says, “Wolf.”

She looks slightly taken aback but smiles anyway. “Oh. I see.”

³ LaT. Telephone conversation, ca. 7/17/00

“He’s deaf,” I say pleasantly and she looks even more surprised.

Diefenbaker whines. He’s not overly impressed either, but then he has always preferred blonds.

“F-Fraser’s f-from those great white northern areas, j-just like you.”

“Canada?” I say.

“No, Alaska,” she says. “It was not my sort of climate.”

“L-Like Chicago is?” Ray says with a grin. He seems oddly comfortable with her; yet his stammer is more pronounced than it has been all day. My interest is piqued.

“It’s a little warmer, Ray. I’d offer to buy you both a cup of coffee but my timing is bad; you’re probably full.”

“Yeah, we were, ah, on our way to the park to walk the wolf.”

“Run the wolf,” I interject.

“Not me,” Ray says firmly.

“Well, then, I won’t keep you. It was very nice to meet you, Mr. Fraser. I’ll stop in this week, Ray, and see if I can’t persuade you to part with some of those prelims.”

He laughs. “You can try.”

But once in my car, he is strangely serious. He starts to say something once or twice and then stops. Finally he blurts out, “I can’t go with you. Would you – would you take me back to the lab? Please?”

“Certainly. Is anything wrong?”

“No. No. I just – I have too much work to do.”

“Ah. May I help you?”

He looks at me, sideways, intently. After a long moment he shakes his head. “No. No thanks. You, uh, you don’t get overtime.”

“Neither do you.”

“Yeah, but I get paid a whole lot more than you do.”

“Quite true. Are you – are you sure you can’t manage a short walk?”

He glances up, frowning.

“It sometimes helps the creative process to stare at the ceiling. Sometimes it helps to stare at the lake instead.”

“Oh. Oh, yeah.” He relaxes, smiles again. “No, what I gotta do is just grunt work. Take a rain check, though, if you want. If that’s okay?”

Uncharacteristically, I push, strangely reluctant to allow him to retreat back into his aloneness. “Tomorrow?”

“Uh... yeah. Okay. Um, yeah. If I get my work done. Sure.”

“You’re going to sleep at the lab, aren’t you.”

“Yeah.”

“Ah.”

“What is that, why do you say that all the time?”

“Why do you feel the need to justify your –”

“I do not. I just... I just got work. That’s all.”

“I’ll pick you up at nine tomorrow.”

He relaxes, then, relieved that I let it drop. “Okay. Okay. I’ll – I’ll go. I want to.”

“Well, you certainly sound extremely enthusiastic. I hope your arm heals sufficiently to hold a pencil.”

He stares at me, unguarded for a moment, his mouth open, frowning hard. And then he laughs. “I think it’ll be okay, Fraser. I’m planning to type anyhow.”

In my relief at having made him laugh, that statement almost gets by me. As it is, it takes a couple of seconds to filter through my mind. “Typing? Look, Ray, are you sure I can’t help you?”

“S okay, Frase, I got spell checkers.” He winks at me. “You can take my checkbook home if you really want something to do.”

“All right.”

But later that night, after I have indeed balanced his checkbook and made out the checks for his bills, and, moreover, done some cursory investigation into higher interest bearing accounts on the Internet at his bank of choice, I find myself very restless and I know why. The thought of him, alone in the lab, attempting to decode symbols and translate them laboriously, from one half of his brain to the other and thence to his fingers, twists my heart in an unexpected way.

Diefenbaker raises his head from his paws and stares at me, curiously intent.

“Yes, I know.”

He whines and then grumbles.

“It’s not that cold out. You are an Arctic wolf, for God’s sake. And you need the walk. It’s only fifteen blocks.”

He’s sitting with his chin in one hand, tapping a pencil quite hard on the side of his head with the other. It’s something I’ve seen him do before, almost as if he can force electrical impulses through neural pathways, or, perhaps, knock some cohesion into his brain. He’s staring at a molecular modelling program, music playing as always but not as loudly as usual. I realise it must be playing from the laptop, with its internal speakers, rather than from the external CD-ROM drive.

I knock softly. “Ray, I brought you a coffee.”

He spins around and almost falls off the stool.

“Jesus, Fraser!”

“I’m – I’m very sorry, Ray, I certainly didn’t mean -.”

“No, it’s okay. Sorry. Thanks. For the coffee. You must’ve just got there before they closed.”

I do not regale him with the pathetic tale I had to spin the long-suffering and kind barista who consented to one last cup as long as I asked for nothing fancy and didn’t mind that it wasn’t exactly fresh. “Yes, in a way. How’s it coming?”

“It’s... coming.”

“Slowly.”

“Yeah. I’m running one of its rendering processes. Slow and steady wins the race. I have a turtle at home.”

“Ah. You should bring him to the lab.”

“No. He, uh, he likes it there.”

“I balanced your checkbook and paid your bills,” I offer. “The checks are waiting for your signature.”

“Wow.” He stares at me a long moment, his face unreadable, and then shakes his head and smiles. “Cool. Thanks.”

“If there’s anything else I can do –”

“You’ve done a lot. I can’t believe that I asked you to, ah, balance my friggin’ checkbook.” He smiles, shy again.

“It was no trouble.”

Another hesitation, more silence. The music ceases and he turns back to the laptop, where his screensaver has kicked in.

I clear my throat. “I’ll leave you to it then.”

He doesn’t turn back around. “Okay. Okay. Thanks for the coffee. See you tomorrow?”

“Yes.” I hesitate at the door. “Ray... get some sleep. On the actual cot.”

“On, as you say, the cot,” he says, flashing me a grin over his shoulder.

“I mean it.”

He turns this time, cocking his head quizzically. “Okay,” he says softly. “I promise.”

And he keeps it. When I arrive, a little before nine, he is still sleeping, on the cot, everything put away carefully, the outer door locked for once, his office door open. The blanket is wound around his ankles and half on the floor, and the pillow and one arm are hanging half off the bed. The cot was not designed for a tall man who is mostly arms and legs. I shake my head as I shake him, gently.

“Oh, damn!” He sits bolt upright. “I overslept!”

“It’s quite all right, Ray. We’ll get breakfast first. I brought you a coffee.”

“Thanks. I’m sorry,” he says. “I meant to get up. Meant to swim. Lemme go get a shower.” The lab has its own bathroom, another source of good-natured friction between Ray and Carlo. Ray insists on using various beakers for tooth glasses and such and Carlo is always rescuing them and replacing them with sanitary paper cups.

He pulls some clothing out of the cabinet and bolts for the bathroom. I put the bills on his desk with a large post-it with a dollar sign on it on top of them, knowing that will make him smile. I kept the checkbook and started a file for the bank statements, which might perhaps be presumption on my part, but I rather doubt it will be regarded as such by Ray.

I flip through the CDs on the flat desk. I realize after a moment that the stack is sorted by colour and I smile. He always has a different take.

He comes out of the bathroom, running a hand through his hair, over his stubble, clad in a plain white t-shirt and jeans. “See anything you like?”

“A few.”

“You can borrow them if you want. Sandor’s lending library. He’s kind of convinced that I’m deprived or something.” He takes the coffee from me, sips, then gulps.

“He keeps you well supplied.”

“Yeah. I like it. I need it. Need it to think.” He hands me the cup back and pulls on his leather jacket.

“Ray, it’s chilly out.”

“I’ll be okay.”

“Ray, it’s cold out.”

“I don’t have anything else here. Carlo usually picks up my laundry on Fridays but we’ve been so busy we both forgot about it.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I feel a little surprised at myself at the sudden impatience in my voice.

His eyes widen; it takes him a moment to respond, and when he does so, he sounds confused. “Fraser, you’re not supposed to balance my checkbook, pick up my laundry... or entertain me.”

“I dislike extremely being told what I can and can’t do. I believe I mentioned that to Dr. Thatcher. She may have neglected to mention it to you. If I don’t want to balance your checkbook, I won’t. If I don’t want to pick up your laundry – although, frankly, Ray, I intend to find a laundry that delivers – I won’t.”

I am fairly angry by the time I finish talking and I am not sure why. Neither is he.

“I – okay, I just... Fraser, I didn’t want you... I want you to...” His words are stumbling, his face pale, his jaw set.

“You didn’t want to be friends?”

His eyes widen, huge in a suddenly triangular face.

“Are we friends?” His voice is so quiet I can barely make out the words. “You like me?”

“They can’t pay me enough to ‘entertain’ someone I don’t like, Ray.”

He stares, dumbfounded, which oddly makes me angrier.

“And, furthermore, you are not utilising our partnership effectively. I am good at checkbooks and organisation. For God’s sake, Ray, take advantage of it. You can formulate hypotheses. I can’t. I can help you prove them and I can balance a checkbook standing on my head with both hands tied behind my back in a dark closet!”

“Without a calculator?” He tries to smile.

“Yes,” I snap.

“Can I watch?”

“Yes!” I say, trying, with limited success, to repress a smile, wondering how he can induce me to replace anger with affection so effortlessly.

“I hate you.” Said without animosity, almost with affection, completely disarming me. “Don’t be mad, okay?” His incoherence is gone, his smile is blinding. “I can’t even work a calculator. I don’t... sometimes I just close the account and start over. You can buy lunch.”

“Thank you.”

“Okay, then. Let’s go, I’m starving.”

“Have you no other clothing here?”

He shakes his head.

Residual anger makes me act without further thought. I set both coffees down on his desk, and, fingers flying, strip off my flannel shirt and hold it out to him. I have both an undershirt and a long sleeved Henley on beneath it. “We Canadians know how to dress in winter,” I say.

He looks from the shirt in my hand to me and then to the shirt again. And then he smiles, slowly, sweetly, and shakes his head. But he takes the shirt. And he says, awkward again, as he shrugs out of his jacket, “F-Fraser, you... uh... thanks.” Of course he doesn’t tuck it in, but he does button a few of the buttons and as he does so I stare at him, at the long fingers moving down the plaid flannel of my shirt, and I suddenly, quickly, firmly tamp down the heart in my throat. I push the edges of my own jacket together with my hands in the pockets as he pulls his jacket on again. To give my hands something further to do, and to compose myself, I light a cigarette on the way to the car, my fingers not quite steady.

Ray shakes his head. “You smoke, you run. What’s the point?”

“I live in the blissful delusion that the benefits of one will outweigh the health risks of the other. Furthermore, I have no choice about the running. Diefenbaker sees to that. Five miles this morning, before coffee. Tenacious. So, no, I have no choice.”

“You do about the other.”

“Quite so.”

He says, “You like it?”

“Evidently.”

That garners a short laugh. “I’ve, uh, never tried it.” He leans against the hood of my car next to me, watching me curiously. “It’s not politically correct. The, uh, lab rats are all too serious . . .”

I choke and gasp. “Dear God! Lab rats?”

He grins, a little shamefacedly. “Yeah. Not original. My... a research associate I had a couple years ago⁴.”

“It’s excessively apt, although Rebecca is somewhat of a lab mouse.”

“Can I try it?”

“Absolutely not, Ray. It’s a filthy habit and one I ought to break.”

“Oh, come on, Fraser. I’m not a kid.”

“Why on earth do you want to?”

He shrugs. “Dunno. Because I never have. I... I like my life, like my job, love my work... but sometimes I look up and it’s, um, fall, and I didn’t know it.”

Silently, with a hand I manage to keep steady, I hold out my half finished cigarette.

He looks from it to me to it again, grins his swift, disarming grin as he takes it, awkwardly. Puffs, even more awkwardly. Grimaces, not awkwardly at all, but charming all the same.

“I told you.”

“I haven’t gotten the hang of it.”

“You’re not even inhaling.”

⁴ Kellie Matthews. Email message ca. Feb 2000

“It tastes funny.”

“It’s supposed to.” The sight of his lips touching the end of the cigarette, where mine were just moments ago, stirs my thoughts again in directions that are not just unwise but impossible.

He tries again, a few more times, shakes his head finally, hands it back to me. “Thanks. I... I don’t get it. But thanks.”

“I ought to quit.” And yet I cannot keep my mouth from inhaling the smoke, my lips from closing exactly where his were, my tongue from surreptitiously tasting that same area, trying to discern traces of Ray.

“You should. But you look... cool. Way cool.”

“Tobacco company propaganda. Don’t believe the hype⁵.”

“It’s probably the leather jacket.”

“Air Force surplus.”

“I’m a Goodwill kinda guy, myself.”

“I figured as much.”

“Or, really, Sandor is. He scrounges for me. I got no clue.”

“That explains quite a bit.”

He pauses in opening his door and frowns at me, pushing his glasses up on his nose. “I’ll get some of these shirt things, I promise. You gotta get those in Canada?”

“No, and I’m sorry, I wasn’t referring to that.” I lean on the top of the car; he mirrors me, his forearms coming up to brace himself, listening, the frown fading. “I was commenting on your wardrobe in general.”

“Oh.”

“Unusual, Ray. Very much you.”

His face lightens. “Weird.”

“So?”

“If you like weird.”

“It has a tendency to grow on one. Diefenbaker, for example.”

Diefenbaker jumps into the car with a loud grumble and Ray says, “Hey, the wolf’s cool.”

“The one doesn’t necessarily preclude the other, Ray. Now. More coffee, breakfast, the lake.”

“Man with a plan.”

Diefenbaker barks in assent.

We end up, surprisingly, playing chess in the park after breakfast, with pieces lent to us by an old man who watches us in grimly approving silence. Oddly I didn’t expect Ray to be good at it. I’m a solid strategist (which he is as well, unsurprisingly); but since his tactics are unorthodox and his gambles are often risky, the game is absorbing.

“Very nice,” the man grunts as we gather his pieces. “Give me a game some time? I’m here most Sundays, even in the winter.”

“Yeah. Sure.” Ray looks startled for a moment but recovers quickly, his grin at the ready.

⁵ Rowan Fairchild. Beta note, ca. May 2000

“I could take him, “ the man says to Ray, nodding at me. “Not sure about you.”

“We’ll see about that,” I say, rubbing my hands together, sublimating in that manner the insane urge to rub Ray’s instead, part of my brain trying to figure out Ray’s surprise and pleasure in the man’s comment. I imagine it’s because, at least in part, he is simply Ray here. Ray, who happens to play a mean game of chess; not Dr. Kowalski, who is virtually unapproachable behind his walls of shyness and reputation.

The old man scoffs good-naturedly at my assertion and sweeps the pieces into a box. We exchange farewells and as we walk to the car Ray laughs out loud, for no apparent reason.

“I don’t guess you wanna get some Indian with me?” he says, recovering his composure, almost shyly, as if a day spent in his company was asking far too much of any reasonable person’s tolerance levels. “Or pizza?”

“Indian is fine. How did you become friends with Sandor, by the way?”

“Oh. Wow. Well. We were – one of my assistants – the lab rat one – she came from Tony’s neighborhood so, you know, she always ordered, always got it from Tony. And she knew Sandor – I guess he was a friend of her brother’s godmother’s sister’s nephew or whatever. Our Chicago neighborhoods can get kind of... insular.”

“Rather like small Canadian towns.”

“Yeah. Yeah, probably. Everyone knows everyone else’s business, little newspapers published in Polish or Ukrainian or whatever. Even my dad can – could – talk to everyone, his customers, the barber, his parents didn’t know any English when they came over and they said my grandma never did learn, so... No, you have to go left here. I mean right.”

“Just say the other left, Ray.”

“That way.”

“That works.”

“So Sandor... he started being the regular, maybe because we ordered regular or maybe because he didn’t mind the Fort Knox stuff he had to go through to get in. Now, of course, they just know him; I tell him he ought to just get a badge. Anyway, so sometimes we’d get a late one and he’d, uh, stay and listen to us. We started – we had a good team, not as fun as you and Carlo, but M – Marta was, um, funny – so we’d kind of loosen up every Friday and Sandor’d just stay. And he’d talk to me. I mean, he’d talk. I think he thought I was just another fellowship guy or even a grad student at first. So he’d tell me about Tony, and about the right kind of tomatoes for pizza sauce, and movies he’d seen. And he’d ask me about my life, which, you know, so I just, um, said, you know, I worked a lot and I didn’t know this movie or that CD. So then he started bringing CDs – he said I could listen to those while I was working but movies would take away too much time.”

“He was undoubtedly right.”

“Yeah. And, yeah. I loved it. I... well, I think, you know, I think I think better with the music. I don’t know why. And I... I got kinda superstitious, I think, because a few months later we made the prodementin breakthrough, so,

you know, I really encouraged him after that, started having opinions about the music and... and... and we're... we're friends now."

He sounds almost surprised, almost as if he's just realising it himself. "Friends. Yeah. Um. So, like, once he showed up and I was out of laundry and I was wearing just a scrub shirt and he, uh... he laughed and laughed but the next time he came he had a brown paper bag with, uh, bowling shirts and stuff. Wouldn't take money. Said he got a grab bag at Goodwill. It – it made me laugh. I – no one ever – so yeah. Friends."

Suddenly, and not astonishingly, my protective instincts expand to include and enclose Sandor. "Quite definitely friends, Ray. He's... unique."

"Yeah. Yeah." He sits silently, pensive perhaps, until we pull up to the restaurant. He shakes himself and says, "I like this shirt."

"If it weren't too large for you I'd tell you you're welcome to keep it."

"I – I can shrink it. I'm – I'm good at that."

"Yes, well, I would have guessed as much judging from the condition of many of your T-shirts."

"You aren't going to do my laundry, are you, Fraser? I mean – what you said – that you'd find one that delivers? Because – because I don't – "

I fully and completely intend to do his laundry and I am well aware of the innate delicacy of our working relationship. "I'll find one that delivers, Ray."

"I'm, um, damaged, Fraser, but I'm not stupid, okay? I can function. I can do laundry. I can function."

"And quite well, I might add, Ray. However, I see my role, both as your friend and as your assistant, as solving some of the problems that you'd just as soon not deal with anyway."

"You're – you're gonna spoil me."

Entirely and deservedly. "Nonsense." Without thinking, I reach over to cover his hand with mine. "Ray, I meant what I said. Exploit my strengths. I like to be needed."

"I'm not into exploitation." His voice is suddenly sombre, his hand tightening.

"I'm sorry. Poor choice of words. I like to be needed."

"Yeah, yeah. I got that part. I'm... um, I'm hungry." Abruptly he gets out of the car and lets Diefenbaker out.

We end up talking shop over our early dinner and then over coffee. I've rarely spent three hours over one meal before, but the time passes very quickly and it's with some reluctance that I offer to take him home.

"No, the lab, okay?"

"You don't need my permission."

"Yeah. Huh. I know. Um, okay, if you don't mind taking me home?"

"Not at all. So you can stare at the ceiling there?"

"Uh, yeah. How'd you know?"

"Lucky guess." I hesitate and add, "You know, Ray, if you ever need company... just let me know. Diefenbaker and I get bored with one another at times."

"Maybe he just pretends to be deaf."

The sheer unexpected hilarity of that remark throws me off and I struggle to remain deadpan, not quite successfully. “You know, it wouldn’t surprise me.” He wrinkles his nose at me, his eyes crinkling too. I grin back. “And I mean it, Ray.”

“I... yeah, I know. Thanks.”

Shy, blindingly beautiful smile, causing an entirely predictable reaction in my chest as my heart attempts to leap into my throat.

“Not at all,” I say meaninglessly, and, unable to attempt innocuous, innocent conversation, leave both of us to our thoughts for the remainder of the drive.

oOo

Carlo nudges me. “He’s off again.”

I stretch, crack my neck, look over at Ray. He’s lying on one arm on the tilted drafting table he uses for a desk. I roll my eyes at Carlo. “Cot again.”

“Need help?”

“Thank you kindly.”

He’s a tall man but he’s not bulky nor is he hard to manage with two of us, though Carlo has expressed gratitude before this for the presence of another strong back: Ray’s sleeping habits are almost legendary. I have heard Rebecca recount, in hushed tones, story of the faculty meeting he once fell asleep in. Apparently no one could rouse him, and they left him there for three hours, until he woke on his own. I don’t know how apocryphal the tale is but I have noted Ray’s avoidance of departmental meetings.

Carlo shakes his head as we stand, looking down at Ray, arranged as neatly on his cot as we can manage. “Guy needs a life.”

“He thinks he has one,” I say mildly. I resent criticism of him.

Carlo snorts. “He hasn’t been out of the building in a week, Ben, not even to swim.”

“True enough.” Ray’s usual and preferred form of exercise is swimming and his usual weekday routine is a hundred laps or so at six in the morning in the indoor pool located in the building behind ours. They even joke from time to time that it was built for him: its construction followed hard on the heels of his winning the Rodbell, and it is rather inaccessible for the rest of campus. “Well, he’ll be up at the crack of dawn to swim. We’d better lock up and plan to be back here as early as possible.”

Carlo looks at me curiously. “Yeah, me, sure. But what’s his grant writer need to hang out at six a.m. for? Coffee?”

“Technical assistant.”

He snorts. “You are getting pretty good at cleaning the mouse cages.”

“I’m multi-talented.”

“You care about his work?”

“I’m paid to care about his work, Carlo.”

“Like to switch paychecks, then, man, because they don’t pay me enough to care about his work at six a.m.”

“Ah.”

“Shut up.”

“You shut up.”

And we lock up in companionable silence. He will be here by six-thirty, profoundly grateful for the coffee. Because, like me, he worships Ray, although perhaps not in the holistic sense that I do.

Another week. Another late night. The two of us, this time: Carlo's gone to Pasadena for Christmas break. Ray expressed no interest in the fact that it was Christmas at all, nor did he mention his family, although I know he's a native of Chicago.

“Ray. Ray. Ray.”

Bleary eyed, his glasses hanging by one earpiece, he yawns. “Oh. Wow. Sorry. Where was I?”

“Going home, I hope. Shall I drive you? You ought to try to stay in your apartment at least one night a week, just to remind the landlady that you do exist.”

“Too much trouble.” He yawns again. “I still got clean underwear here. I think.”

“Ray, do you know what tomorrow is?”

“Yeah. Yeah. The latest batch of mice will be fourteen days old and—”

“Ray.”

“Uh... the date?”

“The date, the day, the month, the year?”

He looks around the lab, vaguely. Notices Carlo's absence.

“Winter break!”

“Very good. You want to narrow it down a little?”

“Oh, my lord. It's not Christmas yet, is it?”

“Tomorrow's Christmas Eve.”

“Oh. So I guess you won't be in?” He sounds a little forlorn.

“No, Ray. And neither will you.”

“Yeah, I will, Fraser, duh.” I am obsessed with him, I admit, but his vocabulary sends me into internal gales of laughter on an hourly basis. “The mice. I mean, I, uh, I know that's just the stuff for the prelims but it should be interesting, from a recombinant protein standpoint, to fire up the electron microscope to see what the, uh, the conformational variations are doing.”

“Other men have obsessions with classic cars or power tools.”

“I'm in it for the toys, Fraser.”

“Yes, I was witness to the haranguing of Molly in S&R over the German glassware.”

“Well, you know, if they're gonna argue about beakers...”

“I suppose even easygoing geniuses have to be temperamental about something.”

He blushes. “Come on, Fraser. Stop.”

“I'll stop if you'll go home.”

“You drive? I'm beat.”

This has become a convenient fiction. His dyslexia, which he is seldom relaxed enough to refer to, even with me and Carlo, is severe enough to make driving with him, in the city, a quasi-religious experience.

“Yes. I’ll pick you up tomorrow too.”

“Early?” He doesn’t sound hopeful.

“How early?”

“F – five?”

“Oh, come on, Ray.”

“Six?”

“We might as well bivouac on the floor here.”

“Cool! A campout! I haven’t been camping since I was a kid.”

“If you want a campout, I’ll arrange one. We are not sleeping on the floor of the lab. Let’s go. Otherwise I’ll end up sleeping on your floor.”

“A sleepover!”

“Ray, you’re getting on my nerves.”

He laughs. Then says, wistfully, “That’d be fun, too. Stay up and talk until you fall asleep, huh?”

Lonely man. Two lonely men. “Yes, it would.”

“Would you?”

Which is how I find myself, against all better judgment, in scrounged blankets and boxers on the floor of his somewhat overheated apartment, staring across the intervening space at him as he talks, about everything, and nothing, and so do I.

We are both dropping off when he says, drowsily, “Stella.”

Adrenaline has a predictable effect on the sleep cycle.

“Stella?”

“They told you about her.” He knows it. He knows, in his world, that he is a celebrity, and much as he hates it, he accepts the fact of its existence.

“Yes.”

He props his chin on his fist, drowsy-eyed no more.

“I loved her.” He says it simply, as a child might. “She... liked me. She talked to me. She argued with me. She was usually wrong –” said matter of factly – “but she wasn’t... she talked to me.”

“There is nothing I can say –”

“No.”

“I’m very sorry.”

“Yeah. Me too.” He reaches suddenly across the space between us and wraps his fingers around mine.

And by the time I have calmed my thunderous heartbeat he’s asleep. I lie awake in silent ecstasy for a long time, until he moves in his sleep and his hand leaves mine.

As we make a last check of the lab the next day, ensuring that everything is turned off, he asks abruptly, “Why didn’t you go home for Christmas?”

Because home is here, now, for me. “Because I’m a workaholic. It must be catching.”

“Your dad, won’t he miss you?”

“My father understands duty.”

His face falls, closes in on itself.

I sigh.

“Which is not to say that I would rather be there than here, Ray. That is simply how I illustrated my point to him. And believe me, Christmas is not an important event on his calendar. Spring breakup is much, much more important.”

“Spring breakup, what’s that?”

I explain the north to him, the rivers that become highways in the winter, the adrenaline rush of creaking, groaning ice, the thunderous crashes that awaken entire towns when breakup is delayed a week or two, as we walk back to my car.

He listens in utter fascination. “I want to – I want to see that. I want to hear that. How could you leave that? Victoria never talks about it like that.”

“It takes a rather... different sort of person to live there.”

“You miss it?”

“At times.”

“I bet.” He studies me as I start the car. “So... what now?”

“A bite to eat. Would you like to go in tomorrow as well?”

“You come with, if I would?”

“If you like.”

“Fraser... let’s do something. Something cold. Something outside.”

“I don’t suppose you know how to skate?”

“Fraser, I grew up in Chicago.”

“Do you have skates?”

“No.”

“Well, let’s rectify that situation before we eat. And then tomorrow we can skate.”

He shakes his head. “Fraser, you are the weirdest guy I know. You never get flapped. Except about, uh, laundry.”

“You’re not exactly flappable yourself.”

“No. No, I guess I’m not.”

My turn. “And what about you? I was under the impression that your family was right here in Chicago.”

“Uh, yeah. Yeah. My... my mom called. But... she knows I won’t... can’t... My dad, he, uh, he doesn’t get it.”

“Doesn’t get what?” I try not to let the irritation show in my voice; irritation directed at his father but all too easily misinterpreted by Ray. I am less than successful. He stumbles more than ever over the words.

“Ah, science. Books. Proteins. Recombinant DNA. He... it’s... they, uh, forget. They forget. I’m still me. I’m just not the me they thought I was. I’m supposed to be a dumb Polack.”

“Yes, you and Marie Curie. It sounds uncomfortable.”

“Yeah. It’s... yeah. It’s easier to, uh, to be busy.”

“I’m sorry.”

“D-don’t be sorry for me. I-I could go home. I just don’t want to. I’m just selfish, okay?”

“Ray.”

“A-and I’m not Marie Curie.”

“Ray.”

“My dad’s got a butcher shop and my brother’s a meat packer.”

“Ray!”

“What?”

“Would you like turkey or pemmican for Christmas dinner?”

He is instantly diverted. “Pemmican? Is that the stuff I see you give Dief sometimes?”

From the back seat Diefenbaker, ever the opportunist, whines.

“Yes. It’s an acquired taste.”

“Hey.” He grins, finally, slightly shy, altogether enchanting. “I’ll try anything.”

We camp out again, on my floor this time. He talks far into the night, disconnected sentences, stringing thoughts together, words often failing, affording me a rare glimpse into how he thinks as well as what he thinks. I love the barriers falling like this; I love the security he must feel in our friendship to talk and to stumble in the talking without apology. And as his talking slows and his voice tires, his hand finds mine again as he drifts into sleep.

The next morning he wanders into my bedroom, half dressed, as I’m putting my boots on. “You got any more flannel shirts I can borrow?” he asks.

“A plethora. In the second drawer from the top. Put an undershirt on too, please. Top drawer.”

“You sound like my mother.”

“You incite maternal instincts.”

“It must be the hair.”

“Undeniably. Who does cut your hair?”

He grins shamefacedly. “Me. It gets in my face, I hack it off. You gonna take me to a barber?”

The word escapes before I can stop it, heartfelt. “No.” I try to recover. “I’m not much on lost causes.”

He snickers. “So you skate good?” He pulls the undershirt on. It’s naturally much too large. It looks delightful. This is a very bad situation. It worsens when he sits next to me on the bed, buttoning the flannel shirt up.

“Fairly well, yes.”

“I thought I heard you tell Rebecca you played on Cornell’s hockey team.”

“Well, yes.”

“Jeez. Be patient with me. I haven’t skated in years.”

“I don’t get as much practice as I used to, don’t worry.”

“Does your dad skate?”

“He does just about everything. He is a legend.”

“Is he still a Mountie?”

“No.”

“He retired already?”

“He’s been retired for some years.”

Ray looks at me sharply. “You don’t sound like it was, uh, by choice?”

“No. He, ah, turned in one of his own. He exposed a corrupt hydroelectric project – and not incidentally saved a village – but the corruption extended into the ranks of the RCMP and he was not really given a choice about retirement.”

“Man. So is he... bitter?”

“No, not that I’m aware. He writes. He hunts, fishes, sticks his nose in all the local business.”

“It had to hurt.” Quiet, factual statement. It’s very difficult to hide anything from Ray when he is concentrating.

“It did.” I swallow hard. “You are right. He is bitter. I was about to enter the Depot – the, ah, RCMP equivalent of the police academy. He said... no.”

“You were gonna be a Mountie? No way.”

“Way. But the Cornell scholarship came through... so I ended up here instead.” Sitting on a bed with a man I worship and can never have. “Life.”

“Wow. I bet you’d have been good at that.”

“Possibly. I doubt it. The shadow of my father would have loomed large.”

“So what scholarship? Don’t tell me. Hockey?”

“No, of course not. Although I did play on their team⁶.”

He falls backwards on the bed with a groan. “I’m dead.”

I will be, figuratively at least, in rather less than three seconds. I hastily get to my feet and rummage for socks for him.

“Rest easy; I wasn’t good enough to make the cut to pro, but as it happened I discovered an affinity for molecular biology and... here I am.”

He tucks his elbows under him, leaning up. “And here you are, riding herd on a whacked out biochemist. Like your whole life led to this point, around that corner, up those stairs, across that rink... oh, yeah, I can see how this would be the be all and end all of your ambition.”

It is fortunate that he is not looking at me because even my not inconsiderable powers of dissimulation and carefully cultivated obliviousness are not strong enough to hide the heart that is in my eyes and the words that actually form on my lips before I swallow them quickly: “You have no idea, Ray.”

“I’m sorry for you but I’m glad for me,” he continues. “If you were a Mountie you’d never have come to Chicago.”

“No, there would seem to be little need for an RCMP presence here. And, trust me, I am not an object for pity.”

“No, that’ll be me, after you get through kicking my –” He stops short, colours, grins.

“Ass?” I suggest.

“On the ice.”

“For someone who is so fond of telling me he grew up in the big mean city your vocabulary –”

⁶ *Ibid.*

“Lava soap, Frase. Jesus. I can still taste it twenty years later.”

I can say it and I do, indulging myself: it is, after all, Christmas. “At any rate, let’s get you and your ass on the ice.”

“Don’t you have to put the turkey on first?”

“It’s not a large turkey, Ray.”

“All right.” He sighs and flops back down on the bed, closing his eyes. Oh, my God. “Gotta gear up for inevitable humiliation.”

Unless I get him off my bed and very soon the humiliation will be entirely one sided. My voice sounds rougher and more impatient than usual. “Come on, Ray.”

“Day’s wastin’, I know.”

We’re resting on a snow bank, Ray sipping coffee from the thermos.

“You play by yourself?”

“Sometimes I run into people here.”

“Different from swimming, huh? I’m pretty sad but I’ll play with you, if you want.”

“With more practice, Ray, I think you’d be good. It seems to be coming back to you with astonishing speed. Yes, I definitely want.”

“It’s too bad you don’t have any other Canadians here. Kinda scarce on the ground in Chicago, huh.”

“I have a friend who’s in town every so often and he usually gives me a game or two. In between his own.”

“Wait, wait, wait. You got a friend who plays hockey? You mean, a pro?”

“Yes. He’s very good. We’ve been friends since we were boys.”

“Wow. That is so cool. I don’t know anyone cool like that. And you stayed friends, huh? You go to his games?”

“Yes. Whenever I can. Would you like to come with me to a game?”

“Oh, yeah. Absolutely. Yeah. Thanks.” He pulls his mittens off, rubs his fingers together, blows on them, and looks back at me. “Oh, man, Fraser. That was so rude, wasn’t it.”

“Not at all, Ray. And I’ve often wanted someone to go with me. Mark can’t exactly sit and critique the game with me, after all. He’ll be in town soon after the New Year for a game. I’ll get tickets.”

“Oh, cool.” He smiles a huge smile at me and drains the thermos. “You should come swim with me some time if I’m going to skate with you.”

I return a noncommittal answer: he’s mentioned that before, but the fact of the matter is that Ray, natural and unselfconscious in a Speedo gifted him by the swim team (they undoubtedly took exception to his grab bag approach to swimsuits), is far too much of a challenge for my self-control and the only indulgence I allow myself is to deliver his coffee on a semi-regular basis after he’s safely wrapped in a towel.

“We’d better go. Get the turkey on, see how many different stations are running *It’s a Wonderful Life*.”

His eyes are a lucent grey against the dazzle of sunlight on snow, an odd spectral experience. “Yeah, okay. Yeah, and call my mom so she, uh, knows I’m still alive.”

"I've got my cell phone. You can call her from the car."

"They, uh, they keep wanting me to get one of those."

"They're an utter nuisance, Ray. You're better off in your Luddite denial."

I busy myself with putting skates and sticks in the trunk as Ray sits sideways in the passenger seat, kicking the snow, the conversation mostly one-sided. I occupy myself with throwing snowballs for Diefenbaker, just out of earshot. At least out of earshot until he begins to get agitated.

"Mom. No. No!"

"No. I didn't. I am. I am!"

"L-look. Look. It's not that. All I wanted – I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

The urge to grab the cell phone and hurl it into a snowbank or, better yet, use it as a puck, is almost overwhelming. My father and I do not have an ideal relationship. He is, as Ray says, rather embittered. But we understand one another on a nonverbal level and we coexist peacefully, few expectations on one side, even fewer on the other. I throw a final snowball and stalk over to the car, catching Ray's eye. He rolls his eyes, attempts to grin, reduced to listening again.

"Yeah. I know. I really... I really – oh, God, no, please, Mom!"

Real panic in his voice, real rage in my heart. I pull the phone from his mittened hands.

"Mrs. Kowalski? Benton Fraser. Ah, yes. Delightful to meet you. Happy Christmas."

"He didn't? Ah, well, I've been hired by the university to facilitate his research. I – yes, of course. At any rate, I'm quite sorry to interrupt but Ray's calling from my cell phone and we might be moving out of range. I simply wanted to warn you."

"Really? Thank you kindly. Would you like to talk to Ray again?"

Ray takes the phone, shaking his head. "Hi. Yeah. Yeah, he's, uh, Canadian. Yeah, he always talks like that. No. No. Yeah. I'll – I'll ask him."

His voice softens. "I know. Yeah. Okay. Love you too."

He hands me back the phone and I hit the end button automatically as I push the antenna down with my chin.

"She wants me – us – to, uh, come over. For dinner. Or tonight. And... thanks."

"What do you want, Ray?"

He sighs. Slumps. Sighs again. "I wanted... I wanted pemmican."

"Then we'll have pemmican and if you feel it incumbent upon you, you can visit them after dinner."

He looks at me curiously. "Is... is everything so straightforward in your world, Fraser? Do you... do you know what, um, guilt trips are?"

"My father disdains them."

That garners a laugh, quickly stifled. "Mine... both my parents are... you know, she doesn't understand. But – it's – we're okay. But my dad, he's, like, I've got two heads or something. He – he really – he doesn't get – get me. I'm not – not what he – and I'm... not..."

“You are utterly incomprehensible, Ray. I can certainly understand their quandary.”

He chokes out another laugh.

“I... I shouldn’t have called.”

“Yes, you should have. But, Ray, your Christmas is equally important. If you want to eat there, please do. But if you don’t – if you don’t – then we will eat dinner together. It’s your decision. No guilt trips, Ray.”

“Turkey and pemmican?”

“Yes. But I doubt I cook as well as your mother.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“You don’t have to decide now. Let’s go back to my place and have some hot cocoa or some coffee.”

“Okay. Okay. I’m freezing. I’m sore. I... I suck.” The last words are whispered but my hearing is acute.

I swallow hard. I steady my voice. “Let’s go.”

He is understandably silent, not to say morose, on the drive back to my apartment. Nor does he bound up the stairs with his usual energy.

“A hot shower might help,” I say, keeping pace with him.

He attempts a grin. “Muscle groups unused to, uh, exertion. Calcium ions, lactate ions.”

“Coffee or cocoa ions? And a hot shower.”

“Cocoa? Um, hot chocolate. Yeah.”

I have it waiting for him, whipped cream on top, when he emerges from the bathroom, rumpled, damp, wearing my robe, scrubbing at his hair, completely awry, with one hand and knocking his glasses cockeyed in the process.

“I’m warm,” he announces. “I could smell the chocolate in there. You don’t use, um, powdered mixes, huh. I’m ready for a nap.” He sets the mug on the table and flops onto the couch, pushing his glasses straight. “I want pemmican, okay?”

“Your decision.”

“You could sound happier.”

“I don’t want to unduly influence you.”

“I, uh, I’m already influenced.”

“In that case, I’m delighted. I’ve put the turkey in.”

“Is the pemmican already done?”

“Yes, months ago.”

“Whipped cream. Wow. Will you come with me, tonight? After dinner?”

“If you wish.”

“It wouldn’t – it won’t –”

“Ray, I would like to go with you.”

“Cool.” He puts his feet up on the coffee table. I don’t protest. Instead I toss him the remote control. He catches it with an easy, one-handed grace that delights me. He channel surfs for a few moments and I watch him as I peel potatoes.

“You were right. It is on. You want to watch it?”

“Not really. It’s not one of my favourite movies. I find it, in fact, quite sad.”

“Really? It’s... the ending is great. Everyone pitches in, everyone loves him, he made a difference.”

“Yes, quite. The underlying message is very uplifting. But the man himself I find tragic. He had dreams. A dream, really. To travel, to see more beyond the small horizons of his town. And he never got to.”

“He didn’t need to; everything he had was there, the whole enchilada.”

“Everything he had, yes. But perhaps not everything he needed. I find him an unhappy figure. I’m sorry. Yes, he’ll die knowing he made a difference and was loved – but he never will see Paris or the... the aurora borealis.” Oddly my voice skips and catches.

He is already looking at me sharply, and at that his eyes narrow.

“Yeah,” he says gently. “I never thought of that. But I think he knows what he got was enough. A compromise.”

“No. Not even a choice.”

“Yeah, a choice. He could have gone.”

“Given the man he was, no, he couldn’t have. And so I find it sad. He did the right thing, each time; and in the end, he was rewarded, but with a different kind of happiness. It may have been better, it may have been worse; but he had no basis for comparison.”

“Well, who does? You never do know. When – when I was a kid, the bank down the street was robbed. It was – I mean, whole nine yards, big guy with a gun. And the funny thing is, I should’ve been there, my dad sent me to get a change order for the shop. But I stopped to help a friend fix his bike tire. So I missed it. What – you know, what if I’d been there? I might’ve become a bank robber. Or a security guard. Or even a cop. And you. If your dad – if you’d gone to Mountie school you’d have been a Mountie. You wouldn’t even know what mitochondria or scanning electron micrographs are. You’d’ve been a cop too, Canadian cop or even maybe Yukon Cornelius. And we’d never have met. And we wouldn’t – if we had met, we wouldn’t have anything in common.”

“I’d have to disagree there, Ray.” I think I have loved you across a thousand lifetimes.

He frowns. “What?”

“Well, ideally you would have refrained from bank robbery as a career choice, but it seems to me that you and I always find something to talk about, whether it’s beta amyloid precursors or, ah, Christmas movies; and I imagine that had we met under different circumstances we would still have been friends.”

He thinks for a moment and then his face lights from within. “Yeah,” he says simply. “Yeah. You’re right. I think.” He sips from his mug, absently not-watching the television screen. I begin quartering the peeled potatoes and dropping the pieces into a pot of cold water.

He rouses himself after a few moments to ask, “You mind if I watch it?”

“Not in the least.”

“You need any help?”

“I’m afraid the dissecting doesn’t come until later.”

He rewards that with a chuckle and turns the volume up slightly. Diefenbaker jumps up beside him on the couch and turns three times before flopping down, his head on Ray’s thigh. Ray drops the remote between Dief and the back of the couch and pushes his now-freed hand into Dief’s fur. He finishes the cocoa and puts the mug on the end table and settles back. I am free to indulge my passion to my heart’s content and I look my fill as I finish cutting up the potatoes and begin, next, on sweet potatoes, my concession to an American Christmas.

It doesn’t take long for the combination of chocolate, couch, and Diefenbaker to accomplish the inevitable. He is chronically sleep deprived anyway – I think he rarely gets more than four or five hours a night – and his unaccustomed exertion today in the fresh air was a different sort of experience than his normal laps in the pool. He sleeps, as I am aware from these recent nights spent in a daze of fierce happiness, with his mouth slightly open, his snoring soft, rhythmic, and altogether perfect. I am well aware that I am only slightly better than a lovestruck teenager, possibly even worse, but my pleasure hurts no one but myself. I have rarely allowed myself such self-indulgence; but I have never felt about anyone the way I feel about this exasperating, innocent, exuberant, enchanting man.

After a few moments of unabashed staring – his lashes, long on his cheeks, refract the same light as his stubble, and his face, relaxed in sleep, is somehow more accessible and yet more remote, a stern set to his mouth that isn’t obvious when he is awake – I realise that his jeans are probably wet and certainly in need of washing. I fetch his clothes from the bathroom, where he folded them, right down to his socks, and put them next to the sink, and put them in the small washer that is in a closet at one end of my kitchen.

I baste the turkey breast again, ready a pot of coffee, pour a glass of wine for each of us, and go into the living room to settle in the overstuffed chair near the couch, carefully putting his wine beyond reach of his feet and moving his glasses from his face to the end table. Needless to say, I do not watch the movie. Dief cocks his head a little on Ray’s leg and watches me watching Ray for a few minutes and then whines at me. I wrinkle my nose at him and pick up a British medical journal⁷. He is not fooled. Neither am I. But I blame my inability to concentrate on the actor’s distinctive voice – the only reason to watch the movie, in my opinion – and not on the real reason, which Diefenbaker was quick to guess and I am reluctant, inside, to deny, to Dief at least.

His clothes are in the dryer and we are well into the next movie on the station, a rather amusing one involving a young boy whose sole Christmas wish is to be the recipient of a beebie gun, when Ray awakens, like a cat, yawn first, then stretch. He reaches instinctively for his glasses, but I am quicker and I hand them to him.

⁷ *Lancet*, not BMJ. Sorry.

“Thanks. Shoot. I missed the end. The turkey smells great. Oh, man, I love this movie. This was, like, my life.” He takes the wine I hand him next and absently sips it.

“I somehow missed this one. It’s fairly amusing and the cultural subtext is quite effective.”

“You’re too much. You reading the one by Cassels?”

“Yes. Somewhat desultorily, I admit.”

“I am so not into conferences but I’ll have to go to that one next summer.”

“Yes, I imagine you will.”

“We will.”

“Quite so. The turkey will be ready in under an hour.”

“I better get dressed.”

“No hurry.” And bite my tongue, the next second, quite sharply, but he only smiles and takes another sip.

We finish our wine – my second glass, his first – in comfortable silence. I break it by murmuring something about potatoes. He murmurs, in turn, something about clothes as we stand.

“I took the liberty of cleaning them for you, Ray, but I believe you have some other clothing here as well.”

“Oh, Jesus, Fraser. I knew – I knew –”

“Raymond Kowalski.”

He stops talking, stares at me a moment, then grins, rather foolishly. “Thanks. What I had today – that’s fine.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Can I – can I still wear that shirt? It’s so warm. I’m – you’re right. I’m never warm enough.”

“Certainly. I told you I’d give you one.” Oddly I feel compelled to fold his clothing before handing it to him. He seems to see nothing odd in the delay. He pulls open the oven door, inhales deeply, pokes at the tray of rolls rising on the back of the stove top.

“You’re not Polish, Fraser, but it smells great.”

“Fortunately Canadian holiday cooking is similar to American.”

“Yeah. I can see where those cultural differences are just... huge.” He takes the pile of clothing and winks at me, so quickly I’m not sure I saw it. Fortunately he is turning to head for the bathroom as I unobtrusively swallow the sudden lump in my throat.

Over dinner he asks, “Where’d you learn to cook? Your dad cook like this?”

“My father has certain inspirations, it’s true. Braised moose hock.”

“Um...”

“It’s not bad. My grandmother, with whom I grew up, thought that all men should be well rounded. She insisted on a thorough grounding not only in fishing, hunting, skinning, and survival skills but in cooking and cleaning as well, not to mention a classical education. I suspect if I had had a sister, however, I would have been remanded to my grandfather’s sole custody most of the time.”

He seizes on the most exotic part of the explanation. "You hunt?"

"I have, yes. It's nothing impressive, Ray. It's a way of life in the Northwest Territories."

"Wow. This is good gravy. I – I'd like to see it. Where you're from. I've – wow. Fraser, I can't remember... I don't think I've ever been on vacation. Except conferences."

"You're welcome to come with me next summer. Unless I go for spring breakup."

"Not in the winter?"

"No, I don't have a sled team any longer. My father and I decided it was impractical. So if I go in the winter I'm dependent on his team or a snowmobile, and he's rather possessive of his team."

"Sled team. Sled dogs? Holy cow, Fraser, I bet that's cool."

Various images flit through my mind of crevasses, tangled frozen lines, equally frozen fingers, and runaway sleds but I only smile. "At times."

"Tell me about it?"

Somewhat reluctantly, beguiled by those eyes, I am drawn in to two or three stories, ending with the one involving my father going after a fish poacher in one of the worst snowstorms of the century and bringing him in. "And he said, 'That's the last time he'll fish over the limit.'"

"He sounds nuts." Ray's still chuckling. "A legend."

"Ah. Yes. Indeed."

"Is he still?"

"Oddly... yes."

"Why oddly? Normal people – people with sense – they know he did what was right, what he had to do."

"Ah, yes, with my father there was never any question of duty."

He's troubled but unaware of the trouble. "At least – at least there was no, uh, guesswork involved."

"Certainly not." I smile at him and he relaxes.

"Hard to grow up with a legend, huh?" he asks quietly.

"Oh, of course. Just as hard as it was for you to become one."

His eyes widen almost in panic. "No, no. No, I'm not. You – you don't think that?"

"No, I'm well aware that you're a crock, Dr. Kowalski. And you're not quite flamboyant enough to feed the legend effectively. You need a few more years of hermitlike solitude in your laboratory, emerging only to bite off the heads of unsuspecting dignitaries – and of course a new wardrobe is essential."

He's laughing uproariously by the time I've finished. "Yeah. Oh, yeah. Maybe I should get, um, some black leather pants and –"

"I understand those are quite uncomfortable. Perhaps a tuxedo?"

"Those are even worse, Fraser. Jesus. I hate ties."

"I am extremely surprised to hear that."

"I do have a suit. I think," he offers.

"Ah. Crumpled in the back of a closet, no doubt."

"Yeah, probably. I haul it out for conferences."

“Ray, does anyone ever know who you are at conferences?”

“Not if I can help it,” he says. “I never, um, speak or give presentations. I mean, I know Volpe⁸, and Cassels, and Hyslop, and LaCroix – we usually, um, get together, sit together, eat together. But, um, they’re – they’re a little stand offish to everyone else and – and I can’t do that so I stick with them and, um, they do it, and no one pays much attention to me after that.”

“You’re a gem, Ray.” I speak without thinking, affectionate amusement apparent. He must be used to that note in my voice by now, because he nods happily.

“Whatever. It’ll – it’ll be fun to go with you. You’ll like, uh, Volpe, I know. He’s – he’s kind of in the same boat as me. You’ll get along with all of them.”

“Once I get over my awe, I’ll become unbearably pretentious and you’ll have to put me out like a cat every night to teach me my place.”

He laughs again. “I’d give something to see you awed. Yeah. Unflappable.”

“You continue to think that, Ray, it’s good for my ego.”

Over coffee, he sobers. He doesn’t want to go. Nor do I: his unease is catching. I get to my feet. “Best to get it over with, Ray.”

“Good attitude, Fraser,” he says, but the smile doesn’t reach his eyes, this time.

“I’m merely voicing yours.”

“I’m not –”

“Bullshit, Ray.”

He grins a real grin then. “Do not swear in front of my mom, Fraser.”

“Eh?”

“Primitive Canadian. She might buy that.”

On the drive there he acquaints me with the familial structure. “My brother – he’s three years older than me. He’s been married... wow. A long time. About sixteen years, I think. They’ve got four kids. He’s a meat packer. His wife, she helps at my dad’s shop. Anyway, they live about four houses down from my parents. My mom watches the kids, mostly the two younger ones; the two older ones are, um, always busy. Teenagers.

“So my dad keeps hoping my brother’ll take over the shop, but Walt doesn’t want to give up the, uh, union benefits and stuff, he’s got a lot of seniority, so he gets laid off but he won’t get cut unless they go completely under. So I don’t think he’ll, um, you know, do the self-employed thing. The shop was my grandpa’s – you know, immigrant dream. They – they, um, got out in 1938, two or three families from the same village... they got lucky, my dad was just a kid, little kid, my mom was born, uh, about five minutes after they got here, is what her mom always said.” He rattles off a string of incomprehensible consonants and grins slightly: a faint, happy memory.

⁸ Rosenberg RN, White CL III, Brown P, Gajdusek C, Volpe J, Posner J, Dyck PJ. Precautions in handling tissues, fluids, and other contaminated materials from patients with documented or suspected Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. *Annals of Neurology* 1986; 19:75-77.

“They came over together then?” I ask softly, trying not to break his concentration.

“Yeah, cousins and nephews and aunts and... my grandma had stories. She was always pretty proud of Mom for waiting to be born, she didn’t want to have her on a boat or in a bomb shelter, not if she couldn’t have her in Wolyn. They had, um, people here, from the same village, or what was, uh, left of it after... I mean, it’s – it’s gone now, they’re all here or, uh, the war... my mom’s dad didn’t make it out, he got taken away, they never knew what happened to him. My dad, his parents both made it but his mom died way before Walt was born, they said she was never, um, quite...” His mouth twists slightly; I’m quite sure he changes what he was about to say, self-conscious now. “She never got over it. My mom wanted to go to Poland, just, you know, to see, but her mom always said no, my dad says no, you know, Americans now.”

“Since the wall came down...”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. I, uh, every time I had a conference in Europe she wanted me to go but that was before. Too much, um, red tape. Maybe now, maybe next time, I don’t know. Anyway, my grandpa died, let’s see, yeah, about twenty years ago, left my dad the shop. And my dad does pretty well. But he’s going to have to take a partner, sell it, I don’t know. Things... things’re not the same as they were then... Chicago’s changing. I’ve... I’ve offered to, uh, be a silent partner – to my mom – but she says no, just... don’t.”

“It sounds as if what he needs is a person, after all.”

“Yeah. And... it’s... not me. But I could help my, uh, brother, I could even buy it. But that’s not... they don’t really know that I have... my mom kind of knows what I do, but I don’t... I, uh, gave money to the schools for scholarships so at least the kids are in decent schools, Saint X for the boys, same as me and Walt, Saint Fortunata for the girls. But...” He shrugs.

“Flaunting?”

“Yeah, probably. Or... or it would make it all okay. And... that’s not... not okay. Not that way. So... you know, just, um, do it.”

“You must talk to your mother frequently.”

“Yeah. Maybe once a week.”

“That’s good, Ray.”

“Well, moms. You know. I’m still, uh, Stanley, her little boy.”

“Stanley. Really. Your name is Stanley Kowalski?”

“My dad had a really big thing for Brando. Just... just, um, the ultimate, you know, American guy kind of thing.”

“Dear God. How did you survive high school?”

“I go by Ray.”

“I should think so.”

“But she calls me Stanley. Just, um, just so you know.”

“And your father?”

His hands curl tightly in on themselves. “F-Fraser–”

“R-Ray.”

He glances sidelong at me, surprised, shocked for a moment, then flashes a smile.

“S-sorry.”

“Not at all. You’ll notice I’m attempting to cultivate the habit.”

“Fraser, I love you.”

It sounds so natural. It is. “And I you, Ray.” A hopeless dream, of course, but it is Christmas, after all.

“I m-mean, s-symbolically s-speaking,” he stutters.

“I know, Ray.”

“He, uh, he t-tries to c-call me R-Raymond. God, F-Fraser, I hate this.”

“But you’re so good at it, Ray.”

His hand shoots out and grabs mine on the gearshift, squeezing hard. I downshift quickly and turn my hand palm up, squeezing back. “You – you’re, um, not s-supposed to, um, make fun – it’s not, uh, politically c-correct.”

“I need remedial diversity training. You’d better tell Dr. Thatcher.”

“She scares the hell out of me, Fraser.” Those words burst out, completely naturally.

“I have a confession to make, Ray. I’m not unflappable. She scares the shit out of me.”

He bursts out laughing after a gasped intake of breath. “You guys, uh, smoke together. Let me try your cigarette again.”

“It’s almost gone. It will taste worse than the last one.”

This time he inhales more smoke, coughs, hands it back, smiling through the haze. I take a couple of quick puffs and put it out in the ashtray.

“You’re right, it was worse than the last one. Yuck.”

“You have a masochistic streak.”

“I’m not the one who takes smoke breaks with the Ice Queen.”

It’s my turn to burst out laughing. He eyes me almost smugly.

“No, not Carlo. Mine. Carlo likes it though.”

“What’s not to like? Excessively apt.”

“Left here. I mean, that way. Okay, now go straight... turn at the tree, the sign, there’s an alley... easier to park there than on the street, but not, uh, not in the driveway. Left, left, uh, that way.”

“If you notice, Ray, I’m beginning to have a conditioned response to your directions. When you say left I put on the right turn signal.”

“Lend you to Neuroscience.”

“Please, God, no. I’ll learn Carlo’s Hail Mary. Anything but that.”

“I can, uh, I can say that.”

“That explains some of your conversations with Carlo. I thought it was earnest conferencing.”

“Wing and a prayer, Fraser. And Latin conjugations when we can’t think of anything else.”

“Well, it appears to be working.”

“There, that’s, uh, Walt’s house. My parents are four more down, the green one on the right. That side.” He points, then takes a quick breath. “Just park, uh, here, on the street.”

“Ray... don’t worry.” I spare only a quick glance for the alley, wider than the actual street, in fact, and lined with tidy fenced yards and small detached

garages; most of my attention is focused on Ray, paler than normal, more restless than normal. "Don't worry."

"I – I – I'm not." But despite his words, he pulls off his glasses, fiddles with them for a second or two, and then shoves them into his shirt pocket.

I dig behind my seat for the bag I deposited there. Ray shakes his head. "Where'd you scare up a present? You didn't –"

"Nonsense." I do not acquaint him with the fact that I have begun buying Polish rye vodka and had an unopened bottle. "Come on."

Before we can get to the door, it's opened by a woman who can only be Ray's mother, beaming.

"Stanley! *Brzydalu!*"

"Yeah, hi, Mom." He hugs her hard and she rocks him for a few seconds. "Mom, this is Benton Fraser, my, uh, friend. Fraser, my mom, Barbara Kowalski."

"It's very nice to meet you, Mrs. Kowalski, in person. I believe we've already spoken on the phone." I hold out the bag.

"Oh, well, thank you, Mr. Fraser, you certainly didn't have to –"

"Please call me Benton. Everyone does."

"Barbara, don't leave them standing on the doorstep."

An older man, hair oddly similar to Ray's, stands watching in the shadows of the hallway.

"Of course not," Mrs. Kowalski says, ushering us in.

The television is on, loudly, and somewhere in the house there are children talking, squabbling. I step forward quickly, holding out my hand. "Mr. Kowalski? I'm Benton Fraser, Ray's grant writer." He looks at my hand as if I'm speaking a foreign language. Perhaps I am.

"Friend," Ray says quickly, too loudly. His father looks at him and back at me, my hand still outstretched.

Reluctantly, or so it seems to me, he takes it, shakes it briefly, and says, again to Ray's mother, "Get them some coffee."

"I was planning to, Damian."

Ray, fallen silent, follows her through an arched doorway into the dining room. Mr. Kowalski hesitates and then falls into step behind me.

Mrs. Kowalski settles us at the table, passing sugar and cream. It takes a conscious effort not to mix Ray's and pass it on to him, as I've become accustomed to doing.

"It seems our timing was excellent," I say to break the silence. "This is very good coffee."

Mrs. Kowalski seizes upon the topic gratefully and we manage two or three actual sentences on the superiority of French presses versus the efficiency of drip coffee makers. Ray expresses, briefly, a preference for the French press; Mr. Kowalski, a preference for the old fashioned percolator.

Ray's mother and I have begun discussing whole bean coffee when two children explode through the door, a large, brightly coloured box with various models depicted thereon held jointly, followed by a man who bears a distinct

resemblance to Ray although he's broader and slightly taller. Behind him is his wife, a short, round faced woman.

"Grandma, we can open this, can't we?" the young girl asks. Her brother, blond, earnest eyed, chimes in, "Please?"

"It's got about ten thousand pieces and they're going to get lost," Ray's brother says. "Useless toy. Pieces all over the place."

"We'll leave it here, Grandma won't mind."

"I really don't mind, Walter."

"All right, all right."

I'd gotten to my feet with the advent of another woman in the room. "You must be Ray's brother," I say, smiling, holding out my hand. "Walt? I'm Ray's friend, Benton Fraser. It's very nice to meet you."

His eyes widen; the entire family seems to have difficulty with the concept of my existence and I'm not sure if it's because I'm Ray's friend or if it's because I'm Ray's friend and I admit the fact. And I push that unworthy thought into the back of my head firmly.

"Yeah. I'm Walt. This is my wife, Patty. Nice to meet you too."

With Patty I am on much firmer ground, as I am, generally speaking, with women. She holds my hand rather longer than she should and she doesn't hear her mother-in-law ask, patiently, if she would like more coffee even when the question is repeated; and she is quick to sit in the chair next to mine.

The drawbacks of this placement are apparent when she opens her mouth; my hearing is quite good and yet she appears to think that I, as well as the rest of the family, am afflicted with near-deafness as she introduces the children to me: Ellen and Matt.

"Matthew," the young boy says, firmly, echoed less than a second later by, astonishingly, Ray.

Patty rolls her eyes at me and says, with ridicule and long suffering equally apparent in her voice, "Matthew."

In the course of the introductions Walt, Ellen, and Matthew have begun opening the box at Ray's end of the table and looking at the pieces contained therein. Ray watches in intent silence. A teenager with a headset on wanders through the room, kisses her grandmother, ignores the rest of us, and disappears into the kitchen.

"Benton's from Canada," Ray's mother says, brightly, attempting to introduce a general topic of conversation.

I see Ray's eyes flicker as he hides a smile. He has been the recipient more than once of my diatribes against American insularity.

"Oh, so you're Canadian?" Patty asks.

"Yes, but I hide it well," I say, equally brightly.

"You do," she agrees. Ray pulls his coffee cup towards his mouth, hiding behind it. "But I suppose it's not hard for Canadians to get into America."

"Generally speaking, no, as long as the dog sleds are running. However, I actually went to university in America on a scholarship."

“Hockey,” Ray interjects. Evidently one-word sentences are an effective recourse against his stammer. I look at him in surprise as Walt and his father both look at me in surprise.

“What team?” Walt asks before I can protest.

Ray’s gaze remains implacable and I give in with a small frown. “Cornell, I’m afraid. Fortunately I had the sense to attend my classes as well as hockey practice since I wasn’t quite good enough to make the cut to pro, although a friend of mine who did holds that I succumbed to the lure of the electron microscope and didn’t give hockey a fighting chance.”

Walt abandons the box, the children, and the instructions, of which he claimed a few minutes previously he could make no sense, to pull a chair around to the other side of his wife. Mr. Kowalski takes, finally, a seat beside his wife, close enough to hear the conversation, which rapidly turns into fulsome compliments on Canadian hockey players in general and a fairly sensible comparison of the Hawks and the Maple Leafs.

Mrs. Kowalski goes to fetch more coffee and in the lull that follows, Walt catches his wife’s eye and rolls his own eyes at the tableau at the far end of the table. Ellen is on Ray’s lap, sorting pieces into various piles and Matthew and Ray are talking intently and in low voices as construction commences, and I note that Ray’s glasses are back where they belong. Mr. Kowalski follows his older son’s gaze and his mouth tightens. And my hearing is acute enough to hear the muttered, “Kids’ toys,” from him to his son.

Mrs. Kowalski returns with a fresh pot of coffee and a tray of cookies. The process of refilling coffee cups and passing cookies gives me time to rein in both my temper and my rage so that I am able to respond with the appearance of complaisance when Walt asks me if I play hockey in Chicago.

“I’ve been fortunate enough to convince Ray to give me some practice time,” I say, easily, rejoicing inwardly at their looks of shock. Ray, concentrating hard, doesn’t even hear me but his father’s look of disbelief, echoed on his brother’s face, is almost comical. “He’s very agile. I’m looking forward to introducing him to my friend when he’s in Chicago again.”

While the two male Kowalskis at my end of the table digest that heretical pronouncement, Patty opens her rather large mouth again. “What is it you do, Mr. Fraser?”

“Please call me Benton. I’m a sort of... liaison. I facilitate Ray’s research, anything from writing grant proposals to cleaning mouse cages and keeping the FDA out of his hair, in the hopes that when he wins the Nobel I’ll get a footnote.”

Ray hears that, glances up quickly, almost imploring, his face suddenly bright red. I stare at him, implacably, in return. Sauce for the goose...

“The Nobel? Prize?” Patty asks. “For what?” She sounds honestly amazed; I’m taken aback.

“For putting together Legos,” his father mutters, sotto voce again but not sotto enough for me to miss.

“Mouse farming,” Walt concurs, not quite as discreetly, with a nudge to his father’s ribcage; his father rewards that bon mot with a shrug and a roll of his eyes.

“Legos are in fact a very apt simile,” I say as pleasantly as I can. “Except that in Alzheimer’s research the blocks are impossible to see without special equipment, their ‘structure’ or shape is predicated on biochemical changes on a subcellular level of which we have very little knowledge and which can, moreover, change depending on which blocks are adjacent to them, and we have no instructions. It’s rather like putting that – “ I nod at the end of the table – “together in a completely dark room lighted very occasionally and unpredictably by a strobe light.” And into the utter silence that follows, I turn to Patty and smile. Normally, of course, I’d never mention the Nobel, let alone imply that Ray’s a candidate to win it; but these aren’t colleagues... and their ignorance angers me and makes me want to break through, get some acknowledgment that they can see past their prejudices to the Ray I see, the Ray I know.

She sits, as they all do, in a rather stunned silence for a long moment. Her next question, while it takes me by surprise, does not surprise me in the least. “The Nobel? Isn’t that a cash prize?”

“Generally the money is secondary to the, ah, honour, but I believe there is a financial reward.”

“For Alzheimer’s?” She enunciates the thought that crossed all their minds; again, she sounds genuinely shocked.

“People get old. They forget things,” her father-in-law asserts, somewhat aggressively, and Walt and Patty nod, almost eagerly, in unison. “That’s all there is to it. That’s how it’s always been. How it always will be.”

My anger increases tenfold: have they no idea, no comprehension of anything outside their little world of home, shop, neighbours, television? I wonder for a moment if they believe men actually landed on the moon. Perhaps if Ray were a physician in an emergency room... and involuntarily I smile at that concept: Ray eagerly and closely examining a near fatal wound to the exclusion of all else while the nurses and orderlies look on in near-panic, frantic and exasperated.

Out of the corner of my eye I see Ellen twist up to look at Ray and ask, quietly, “Can you really put together Legos in a dark room?”

He shakes his head, grinning; only I see the strain in his eyes. “No. I’m not sure I can, uh, put these together in broad daylight. It’s a good thing we have Matthew.”

I gather my wits; certainly it would be impolitic as well as impolite to come to blows with Ray’s progenitor under his own roof. “The, ah, prize money. Yes, there is a cash award, although undoubtedly the university will claim the lion’s share. Perhaps not, as much of the research is privately funded at present. Too much.” I glance at Ray as I say this; he rolls his eyes. He finds my recent interest in locating other sources of funding, public and private, to be puzzling at best and annoying at worst. That part of my job is, after all, is more or less a sinecure: I fill out the papers, they’re rubber stamped by both Willsie and the university, and copies get put in files until the next round, no fuss, no bother. “But that’s some time in the future, of course, probably after Ray discovers how to cure Alzheimer’s.”

Mr. Kowalski gets abruptly to his feet, looking from me to Ray to Patty to Walt. The expression on his face when looking at Ray is, I imagine, akin to the one on Hercules' when he encountered the Hydra. Ray, becoming aware of the scrutiny, looks up, blushes, pulls his hand back and knocks two of Ellen's carefully sorted piles onto the floor.

Patty snickers. Mr. Kowalski turns and stalks from the room. Mrs. Kowalski makes a small sound in her throat, soft, almost mournful. And Walt says, jovially, "You had me going there for a minute. But this is my brother, you know, Ben? I was there when he failed reading, and spelling –"

"And when he got a scholarship to Northwestern at the age of fifteen," Mrs. Kowalski says quietly. "Patty, would you help me in the kitchen, please?" Her tone admits of no argument and Patty snaps her mouth shut and follows her mother-in-law almost meekly.

"Cause he sucked up to the nuns," Walt says under his breath at his mother's retreating back. Ray glances up at him and then away too quickly, his expression so completely neutral that I ache for him; and I slide down to the floor next to him, helping Ellen to pick up scattered pieces, difficult to see on the worn, patterned rug. Matthew, who seems more like Ray with each passing minute, continues to snap pieces together, oblivious to us all.

"You got undergraduate scholarships to both Northwestern and Stanford?" I ask quietly, casting about for a reassuring subject.

Ray shrugs, and then his shoulders relax, slightly, as he moves his long fingers unerringly over the carpet.

"Yeah. But my mom's always been impressed by the whole – the Stanford, uh, aura..."

"I'm fairly surprised you didn't go to there to begin with."

"I didn't know – didn't think that research was going to be my thing. Med school. And Chicago was – and the nuns and my mom thought – and then I got into Northwestern's ISP program, and that was... that was an eye opener, we were doing grad-level research there. So I decided to go to Stanford for my doctorate, they had the dual program in case I still wanted to do, um, med school."

Ellen, sorting pieces again, says curiously, "You're really a doctor? Grandpa said–"

"Yeah, I am, I mean, but not the kind who looks down your throat when you're sick."

"A pediatrician," she says knowingly.

"Exactly."

"But Grandma says–"

"I'm not a practising kind of doctor, not the medical kind. I mean, I am, I did, but I'm – I do, um, I do research. Medical research. Kind of."

"Neat." She looks at me. "Are you a doctor?"

"No, I'm afraid not. Just a master's."

"Two masters', one from Columbia," Ray says with a snort. "Biochemistry and molecular biophysics?"

"Oh, so you did bother to read my c.v."

“I was bored one night.”

“So I see.”

“You gonna get your Ph.D. now?”

“You have enough for both of us, Ray.”

“Uncle Ray,” Matthew says unexpectedly, “this diagram is stupid.”

“Hang on a sec, or show it to Fraser,” Ray says.

I study it for a moment, then get up to look at Matthew’s progress, and shake my head.

“Need a flowchart?”

“I really can’t make sense of these—”

“Oh, come on, Fraser.” He takes it from my hand and leans up on the chair, looking from the diagram to the partially assembled toy. “It’s – they’re great drawings. Matthew, look, see, the problem is that you’re forgetting it’s all, um, binary, or do I mean reciprocal? That you have to do the same thing on both sides even though they just show one side in the drawing.”

My heart swells in delight at his homonyms. “Reciprocal is undeniably correct.”

Ellen, looking over our shoulders, says, “And you used a piece that was too long here.” She hands her brother the correct piece.

“Always wise to have a troubleshooter on the team,” I say. “Sorry, Matthew, I’m much better at hockey than at Legos. I didn’t have those when I was growing up.”

Clearly Canada has fallen greatly in Matthew’s estimation. This is, however, Walt’s cue to step in, and he does, as I expected he would. He’s been hovering almost nervously, ignored deliberately by me, forgotten apparently by Ray, who jumps a little at the sound of his voice, scattering a few more pieces.

“So who does your friend play for?” he asks.

“Uncle Ray, you’re worse than Matthew,” Ellen says in a voice of fond exasperation as she kneels again. Matthew sits down on the carpet next to them and I hand them the box with most of the pieces as Walt sits down in a chair nearer to us. Ellen begins sorting again, patiently allowing Ray and Matthew to paw through her piles from time to time.

The other daughter, still not introduced, still moving her head in time with unheard music, wanders back through the dining room to the living room. Mrs. Kowalski, coming back in with more cookies, looks distressed. “Oh, Benton, not on the floor, please.”

“I think it’s been determined that the floor works much better, Mrs. Kowalski. As long as we have cookies we’ll be fine.” I turn slightly and hold the tray up to Walt, who waves it away. “He’s just signed another contract with Winnipeg⁹. His name’s Mark Smithbauer.” I don’t generally name drop but tonight it’s in a good cause.

⁹ Yes, Rowan. I know Winnipeg doesn’t have a team any more. I like Winnipeg. So the Jets are back. Such are the joys of alternate universes, not to mention fictional ones.

Walt's jaw drops. Literally. It's a fairly unattractive sight. "Would you hand me my coffee, please? Ray, would you like more coffee?"

Ray's mother doesn't wait for his response; she freshens up both coffees and hands them down to me, resting one hand on my shoulder, a brief squeeze perhaps my imagination, perhaps not.

"Mark Smithbauer? You play hockey with—"

"Ah, yes. I have for years. We used to play on the pond behind his barn. He wouldn't let me go home until my grandmother came looking for me. It paid off. He's quite good."

"Yeah. Wow. Just think if you had his rookie cards."

"I do. I bought them as they came out. He also gave me a set a few years ago in return for a favour I did him."

Ray glances at me sideways, frowning slightly. I know he'll want to hear that story later; and I look forward to the completion of the Lego monstrosity so that we can leave and talk again, just us; and I know he won't leave until it's finished. Walt appears to be struck speechless once more, so I begin helping Ellen sort pieces, and together she and I figure out how to attach small round magnets to black plastic holders.

Patty comes in, her demeanour somewhat chastened, carrying a small round silver tray filled with small, iced glasses. Mrs. Kowalski thanks her and sends her to fetch her father-in-law and holds the tray out to me.

I take one; Ray does as well.

"Polish, uh, families, Fraser. Caffeine, alcohol, sugar, caffeine, alcohol, sugar."

"That may explain your metabolism."

"Ha. Yeah." Almost under his breath, too low for anyone but Ellen or Matthew to hear, he adds, "You gotta drink at least three, Frase."

Walt also mutters something under his breath, meant to be heard; but I make no attempt to listen this time. And I don't have to, since his sentiment is voiced, unsurprisingly and rudely, by Ray's father upon his advent, who says, "Maybe you'd better give that to Matt, Raymond."

"Matthew," Matthew says, in a long-suffering voice.

Ray neither flushes nor stammers as he gets to his feet, to my surprise; and after a few seconds of realising exactly what his lack of response implies, my anger returns in a full and heated flush.

Patty and Mrs. Kowalski take, finally, the last two glasses and Mr. Kowalski raises his and begins speaking in Polish. It doesn't sound exactly like a prayer; at the end, the intent is clear, even if the words are unfamiliar, and we knock back our respective glasses more or less simultaneously, the fire in my throat fuelling my rage.

Walt reaches for the bottle and refills my glass without asking, his father's without asking – and tilts the bottle over Ray's glass almost insolently. Ray nods, solemnly, and Mrs. Kowalski and Patty disappear into the kitchen again. A small, quick squabble breaks out at our feet between Ellen and Matthew.

"The magnets do go there, Fraser said so!"

“They’re backwards.”

“They can only go one way, moron. You’ve got the picture backwards.”

“I do not.”

Ray kneels quickly, pulling the instructions around, Matthew’s blond head and Ellen’s brown head crowding together to look with him.

“*Na zdrowie*,”¹⁰ Mr. Kowalski says again, and we drink, again, followed, tardily, by Ray, who solved the magnet problem with one finger stabbed at the diagram and a ruffle of Matthew’s hair. I’m not surprised when the glasses are refilled nor am I surprised when Walt repeats his byplay with Ray’s glass; I am, however, angered further by the complicit, smug glances exchanged by father and elder son.

“*Na zdrowie*,” Ray says, unexpectedly, and tosses his third off and places the glass on the table before sitting down again. I drank with him; it takes Walt and Mr. Kowalski a few seconds to respond and then they too drink.

“No more, Stan?” Walt asks in a very friendly voice. Ray doesn’t look up.

“No, thanks. Th-this, uh, is hard enough as – as it is.”

Walt’s words aren’t clear but certainly ‘Nobel’ figured amongst them. The tone is, however, only too clear.

“You’d think he could change a car battery, wouldn’t you?”¹¹ Mr. Kowalski says in response, in a voice meant to be overheard, to Walt, who laughs derisively and responds, “Nah, that’d be useful.”

I open my mouth to ask why on earth they think that Ray, who adjusted a spectrometer at the lab in such a fashion that he could probably patent the result (and, indeed, published not one but three groundbreaking papers on image analysis in human amyloid plaque formation¹²), not to mention what Carlo told me he did to one of the centrifuges, pointing to faint splatters on the ceiling with a grin and a shrug, can’t change a simple car battery – and, incidentally, how Alzheimer’s research can be construed as anything other than useful – when I catch Ray’s quick glance up at me from under his lashes. I close my mouth with a snap and retreat in some confusion. A very dark horse, Ray Kowalski.

While I’m distracted, Walt refills mine without asking, again, and I set it, still full, on the table, with an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry, I’m driving, Walt.”

They all look at me, startled, and I’m not quite sure why. Evidently I have committed a class one Polish-American faux pas. I’m devastated.

“Go to waste, Ben,” Walt says.

¹⁰ Surfgirl. Response to email message (panicked), ca. 12/25/99

¹¹ Bone. Email message ca. Feb 2000

¹²Kowalski SR, Tamaoka A, Ozawa K, Ikeda M, Saunders AM, Komatsuzaki Y, Savard M, Levesque G, Yashin A, Zhamnova A, Naslund M, Pollen DA, Hendriks L, Martin JJ, Zeffirelli C, VandenBussche C, Fata R, Mori H. Amyloid-beta-protein isoforms in brain of subjects with PD1-linked, beta APP-linked and sporadic Alzheimer disease. *Brain Res Mol Brain Res.* 1995 May;56(1-2):178-85.

Kowalski SR, Hagen M, Zeffirelli C. Automatic image analysis of beta amyloid plaque formation in early-onset Alzheimer's disease. *Neuropathology and Applied Neurobiology* 1994; 20: 518.

Kowalski SR. Novel application of image analysis to the detection of spongiform change. *Analytical and Quantitative Cytology and Histology* 1994; 16(6): 430-434.

“Canadians can’t keep up with Americans,” Mr. Kowalski says, almost good-naturedly.

I was, of course, raised in an extremely hard-drinking environment and there is nothing that a Polish-American can show the son of a Scots-Canadian Mountie from the Northwest Territories about drinking; but I allow none of this to show in my face. Various responses flit through my head but I can’t lose sight of the larger picture, nor can I allow Canada to be impugned. Quicker than thought, however, Ray reaches up one long arm, snags my glass, downs it, and smacks it back down on the table. “Fraser’s driving.” He turns back to Matthew without missing a beat, holding two pieces out. I am more than astonished.

Mrs. Kowalski hands me a fresh cup of coffee as Mr. Kowalski and Walt sit down at the table, the bottle between them, another muttered aside, another muffled laugh.

“Hit me again,” Ray says, and again there is an unusual firmness in his voice. His brother grins; his father rolls his eyes but reaches over and refills the glass, slopping a little on the table. Mrs. Kowalski, watching it, sees me watching her, and looks down quickly, as do I. I turn my attention to the construction, which is proceeding apace, helped along, I gather, by some innovations peculiar to Ray’s brain and not to be found in the diagrams at all; and answer further enquiries about Mark, hockey, and Canada politely and without elucidation.

Enquiries about my family and my love life, respectively, from Mrs. Kowalski, require a bit more information. My father, yes, still lives in Canada, in a cabin, in a – my mother? She died when I was quite young. Yes, it was a tragedy, requiring my father’s parents – slightly too old for the task, yes, I agree – to raise me. No, my father never remarried. I? No, I’ve never married either. Yes, I’m currently in a long distance sort of relationship; sadly, no, the distance is having its inevitable effect. Yes, it’s a shame. Yes, there are quite a few nice women in Chicago. I’m adjured by Walt, in a hearty manner that sets more than my teeth on edge, not to let the grass grow under my feet “like Stan.” This affords him great amusement; his father, however, is tight-lipped, not to say grim about the subject, with a barely concealed dismissal that almost incites me to violence: “No money, no house, no real job – no woman with any sense would settle for a *gapa*, who does he think he’s kidding?” and I think, more fondly than is my wont, on my own father’s policy of indifference.

In the time it takes to finish the main spaceship, Ray has, astonishingly matter-of-factly, downed five more shots, matching his brother and father drink for drink, and has managed to finish a cup of coffee as well; his father and brother are lapsing into longer and longer silences, certainly a welcome circumstance, soon broken only by the toast and the advent of yet another bottle of vodka.

Ray is paler than usual as he gets to his feet. He hugs Matthew and Ellen, who are also showing signs of wear, and then his mother. “Sorry I gotta split early,” he says to her, his voice barely slurred. “Fraser and I are planning to run Westerns tomorrow and we need to set up the gels.”

His brother and father get to their feet; his brother slaps him roughly on the shoulder and says, "Good to see you. Make a man outta you yet, Stanley."

His father says nothing at all; his feelings on the subject are perfectly clear from his expression.

"It was very nice to meet you," I tell Mrs. Kowalski. She grips my hand very tightly for a brief second and her eyes are imploring. "Thank you for allowing me to join your family celebration," I continue, shaking hands with Mr. Kowalski.

"It was our pleasure," he says. "Some night when you're not driving we'll see what Canada's made of."

"I look forward to it, sir," I say, carefully, politely.

Ellen has been speaking to Ray in a low voice; he shrugs and then shakes his head. She looks entirely disappointed; he looks around, confused, at his father, and then at me, and then at his mother. It's not difficult to guess the course of the conversation, and I lean over and say in a low voice to both Ellen and Matthew that they really ought to visit the lab one day. Ellen brightens immediately; Matthew grins, slightly shy; and Ray's mother nods briskly and suggests lunch in order to "make a day of it."

Mr. Kowalski catches the tail end of the conversation, enough to infer its content, and shakes his head. "Don't start with that nonsense," he says to his wife, in a whisper he evidently considers to be discreet. "Isn't one enough?"

Mrs. Kowalski doesn't respond at all. Instead she turns to Ray and tells him she'll call him to firm things up; and I wonder for a moment if she heard her husband. She must have; I expect him to repeat himself to make his point, since clearly his manners have deteriorated as his intake of alcohol has increased; but oddly he says nothing further, simply looks at her, and then Ray, from under his bushy eyebrows.

"If you ever get extra tickets from Mark, toss 'em my way," says Walt, happily oblivious.

"I certainly will." I add, very cordially, "*Quand l'enfer gèle.*"

Only his mother follows us to the door, and she hugs Ray fiercely. His eyes are heavy lidded and he's swaying a little now, but he hugs her back, also fiercely. She says something softly, in Polish, and he answers, also softly, also in Polish.

I start to the car, belatedly aware that I am being more than rude.

She calls after me, "See that he gets home."

I turn and smile. "Of course."

"Thank you."

"Fine, Mom, I'm fine," Ray says.

"Come on, Ray, before I start you on a coffee IV."

"Oh, God, Fraser, no needles."

In the car, he leans back and sighs.

"Early?" I say. "It's almost midnight. Diefenbaker is going to be utterly furious."

“Early... uh, early. Yeah. They’ll kill another bottle, um, before they’re finished. They’re... it’s, uh, tradition.” He yawns suddenly, and blinks, as if it took him by surprise.

“So you drink once a year?”

“Does it show? I’m not – it’s not enough... for... for them. I – yeah. I don’t... I don’t get out much.”

“Really?”

He laughs, as I intended. And, shockingly, leans over and rests his head on my shoulder.

“God, Fraser. I’m... beyond buzzed. I hope... hope I don’t blow chunks in your... in your car.”

“Not half as much as I do, Ray.”

He chuckles again, then shivers, pushing further against me. “I’m... f-freezing.”

“The heat’s on.”

“What... what was up... uh, tonight?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You know. With... uh, with my... oh, hell, Fraser... doin’ your Sancho Panzer thing.”

“Very apt.”

“Hell. The other one.”

“No, I think you had it right the first time.”

“You... you... unflapped... they were, uh, pretty laid back tonight. Thanks.”

Sheer rage overwhelms me for a brief second, and I wonder how on earth he’s managed all these years. “You didn’t need to drink them under the table, Ray.”

“Better’n you. I’m... used to it. Them.” His voice slurs more. “You... they liked you. You... like me. I... like... you.”

It is a moment before I regain command of my voice. “I like you as well.”

“Oh... yeah. Me... me ‘n my Legos. Kids’ toys.”

I love you and your Legos, Ray. “Matthew appreciated the help.”

Another chuckle. “He’s... he’s... they’re both pretty... fun. Kids. Wonder what it’s like to... to have ‘em. Ellen wants to, uh, she wants to see the lab. I think... I think, um, Matthew does too. I... they’re pretty... fun. You ever want kids?”

“Not in the lump, no.”

“Your, uh, girlfriend want kids?”

I have to think a moment. My laugh is not entirely forced. “No. No, that’s not an issue.”

He sighs. “I didn’t know... y-you don’t talk about her. No... no photos.”

“It’s more or less over, Ray.”

“Oh. Wow. Sorry.”

“It’s quite all right. It wasn’t a tremendous love story, Ray. I’m not heartbroken.”

“Okay.” He sighs again and tips his head back, between my shoulder and the seat back. Within moments he’s asleep.

He’s virtually impossible to awaken. I abandon all attempts, finally, since he shows every sign of becoming cuddly and I cannot bring myself to douse him with snow. I’m thankful that I have only two flights of stairs to navigate. I sling him up in a fireman’s carry, devoutly hoping that he does not ‘blow chunks’ on the stairs or my coat.

As I divest him of his coat, a tricky business since he’s leaning on me with virtually all his weight, his smell, the feel of his body against mine exquisite torture – and I wonder briefly if insanity as well as masochism runs in my family – he sighs into my neck and says, “Thanks.”

As I remove his boots I tick him off, rather firmly. “A future Nobel winner – which you are, Raymond Kowalski, whether you believe it or not – does not attempt to drink his hardened alcoholic family under the table to protect a Canuck who has thicker skin than a certain wolf we both know. And who, moreover, could drink your entire family under the table with room to spare for a Mountie or two. The Canuck, not the wolf. Although I wouldn’t put it past Diefenbaker.”

He grumbles and turns over.

“Nor does he pass out and force his friend to carry him up two flights of stairs. Nor does he vomit on said friend’s couch. Understood?”

“Unnnnnnnner...”

“Good. I’m glad we have that cleared up. And there will be absolutely no electrophoresis tomorrow.” I cover him with my Hudson’s Bay blanket. “I’m going to walk Diefenbaker. Don’t even think of going anywhere.”

He starts to chuckle and it turns into a snore instead.

Diefenbaker, somewhat disgruntled, whines at the couch upon our return: he tends to fall asleep there and then usually at some point during the night moves to my bedroom, by the door or, less frequently, under the bed altogether.

I look from Ray to Diefenbaker and back again. Ray’s sleeping deeply, too deeply even to snore. “It’s a lost cause,” I say quietly. “You’d better resign yourself to the floor tonight.”

He whines again and stalks ostentatiously to the window, then flops down under it, his sigh conveying the full extent of his feelings quite effectively.

“Suit yourself,” I tell him as I turn out the lights. I can’t resist rearranging the blanket covering Ray. Upon reflection, I realise I should have taken him into the guest bedroom but it’s too late now, there’s no point in disturbing him. Next time I’ll think of it. And then I hope that the next time will occur another year from now, because I’m quite sure that, for my part, Walter and Damian Kowalski are only tolerable in minute doses.

I stare at him for a few moments longer, drinking my fill. Diefenbaker cocks a knowing, not to say cynical, eye at me, and we sigh at almost the same time before I turn and make my solitary way to my room where, I trust, the small amount of vodka I consumed will contribute to a peaceful and dreamless sleep.

In the middle of the night I hear him stumble, probably over the coffee table or Diefenbaker, on his way to the bathroom. Familiar noises, water running, and suddenly he's standing in my bedroom doorway, dirty gold halo backlit by the bathroom light.

"Fraser?"

"Yes, Ray?"

"Aspirin?"

"Left hand drawer in the bathroom."

"Did I wake you?"

"Of course."

He laughs and a moment later I hear him rattling around in the drawer in the bathroom. He leans in the door again. "Thanks."

"Will you go back to bed? People are trying to sleep."

He chuckles again. "G'night."

"Night."

He's sleeping deeply, completely, one hand trailing on the floor, the blanket twisted untidily around his midsection, when Diefenbaker wakes me for running, later than usual. His hair is starkly contrasted against the black leather of the couch, his stubble catching the unruly light from the windows. Impossible, irresistible man. Dief whines at me, recalling me to myself. I've never thought of myself as shallow; in my own defence, I do seem to be one of the few people who finds him physically as well as mentally attractive. Well... no one ever went broke overestimating the intelligence of the American public, or words to that effect, coined expressly, in my opinion, for the bulk of Ray's sympathetic and loving family.

I shake myself and follow Diefenbaker down the stairs.

We run a few errands whilst out – I live close enough to Lincoln Square to be reasonable – and it is after ten before we get back. Ray's still sleeping, but less soundly. I brought coffee, of course, as well as a German sort of breakfast, hard rolls and cheese and a kind of smoked raw bacon, very thinly sliced, that has become an addiction of mine.

"Coffee?" he says muzzily, one eye still closed.

"And breakfast, should you be able to contemplate it without misgivings."

He grunts and rolls off the couch, landing on his hands and knees. "I love how you talk. They all talk that way in Canada?"

"No."

He ambles to the table, the Hudson blanket still tangled around him, over one arm. "Oh, cool. You were Polish in a former life?"

"No. I just like this."

He says something unpronounceable, pointing to the bacon.

"They call it 'Speck,'" I say.

He snorts. "Well, they're German," he says.

"Amazing what Polish vodka will do for one's sense of ethnic solidarity."

He grins then. "No hangover, though. Gotta be Polish vodka, y'know?"

"Or aspirin at three a.m."

“Really?”

“You don’t remember?”

“Nope.” He swings a chair around, sliding a leg over it to sit gracefully as he does so, resting one forearm along the back as he reaches for his coffee with his other hand.

“Normal people actually sit in chairs –”

“I love yankin’ your chain.”

“Ah.”

“You afraid of me?”

“Terrified. I believe I’ve mentioned that.”

He reaches for a roll, ignoring the knife, splitting it neatly with his hands. “Yeah.”

We eat in silence, his appetite belying the amount of alcohol he ingested last night.

“I wish I had the Polish stomach,” I say, finally.

“Cast iron.”

“Considering your normal diet, that’s probably a good thing.”

“Oh, yeah.” He sighs, switches the chair around in a complex manoeuvre that leaves him somehow still caught up in the blanket and leans back, propping one leg up on the chair opposite him. “That was great. When can we go in?”

“To the lab?”

“Yeah, to the lab. I haven’t gotten anything done in days.”

“Does the term ‘workaholic’ mean anything to you?”

“Should it?”

“You’re impossible. There isn’t much we can do without Carlo and Rebecca; and the hospital is on a skeleton staff as well. In addition, today is technically a holiday. In Canada.”

“Oh. Yeah.” He laughs a little. “Boxing Day, right? Yeah. You’re right. I’ve... I just... just haven’t spent so much time away from it in... in years. Well. Ever.” He grins shamefacedly.

“We’ll head over after showers then.”

“No. No, that’s okay. Let’s... let’s skate again.”

I stare at him, at a loss for more than a few seconds, before recovering myself. “All right.”

“If you... if you want. I mean... I’m... if you want to be alone and stuff... just take me to the lab?”

“Ray, good God. What on earth are you talking about?”

“I’m... uh, I’m... you’re... something’s wrong.”

“You’re very astute. I have a confession to make, Ray. I bought you a present. And I’m not quite sure if I should have or if you will, ah, take it in the spirit it’s intended.”

He sits up. “A present? For me? I didn’t – I didn’t get you anything...”

“That’s not quite the point of present giving, Ray.”

“Okay. Okay.” His eyes are glowing. “Cool. I mean, unless it’s a tie.”

I get up and pull a large box out of a bag by the door. He looks very puzzled for a moment. "A whole suit?"

"A really large tie."

"It rattles."

"A noisy tie. Do you perhaps need help with the unwrapping?"

"Delayed gratification, Fraser."

He sees, or senses, my nervousness, and relents, rips. And sits, in more than stunned silence.

"Legos, Fraser?"

"I'm—"

"Oh, wow."

"Is that a good wow or—"

"That's, uh, a great wow. I always... I always think kids today, uh, have way cooler toys than we did." Unselfconsciously he leans over and hugs me hard. "Wow."

"With the proviso that I do not have to help you put it together."

"Uh, yeah. Sure." His mind's already working, his fingers already busy at the sides of the box.

"I won't see you for the rest of the day. Would you like some vodka?"

He snorts. "Easier without. I – wow, Fraser. I – it's – I can see this. I get this."

"I know."

He looks at me then, straight in the eye. "Yeah. You do." And hugs me again. The man is probably touch-starved; I, on the other hand, am starved only for his touch. But this is innocent and enjoying it causes me only bare twinges of guilt.

"God. Wow." He releases me and sits, again, staring almost hungrily.

I clear the table quickly, before he begins sweeping things out of the way. And find music to put on – Bach, of course – and do the dishes. After that, respecting his self absorption, I settle into the couch with the British medical journal again, and, after that, my laptop.

A few hours later he's demonstrated, once again, the complete and utter oddity of his brain. He built the first one by the book, with the instructions. He then branched out and began building some of the other pictured variations, although they came with no further explanation than the finished pictures. He barely finishes one before it's dismantled and the next one is begun.

"Fraser!" He sits bolt upright, pieces scattered around him. "I need my laptop. What is this music? It's all patterns. All of it's patterns. I can tell what the next one will be...it's progressions. I need my laptop. Why the hell did I leave it at work?"

"It's Bach, and you're welcome to use mine."

"No, no, you don't have the, uh, the models. The right program."

"I'll take you to get it."

"No, no, I'll go, I'll walk, I need to walk. Dief, wanna come?" His eyes are bright, almost feverish. "Can I – will he go?"

"Probably."

“Oh, cool, okay. You’re the greatest. See you.”

About ninety seconds later, he sticks his head back in the door. “I forgot my coat. Do you want to come? I’m sorry. I’m – I’m not used –”

“If you don’t mind my company, I’d be glad of a walk. If I’ll distract you, then I’ll stay here. It’s quite all right, Ray.”

“Uh, not company, I’m – I’m not, uh, coherent, but you, uh, you never distract me. Unless I want you to.”

“You’re never coherent.”

He sighs in relief. “Okay, good. Come on.”

“Coat, Ray.”

“Oh, yeah.”

I quickly pour a thermos of coffee as he shrugs into his coat.

His silence is intense and shrouds him in an untouchable fog. At the lab he paces impatiently while waiting for the laptop to boot up.

“Dinner?”

“Sure. Yeah. Okay.”

“I’ll be back in a few hours.”

“Yeah. Sure. Okay.”

“Coffee’s on your desk.”

“Okay. Yeah. Sure.”

I’m very tempted, for a moment, to say, “I love you,” simply to see the response, which I’m fairly sure will be a variation of “Sure, yeah, okay.” I repress. I’m becoming entirely too good at that. The alternative – life without Ray – is, however, unthinkable. “Dief. Dief. Dief. Dief!”

He follows me with a flounce and a grumble. He’s becoming, in turn, entirely too wayward.

Dief and I spend an hour at the pond, me skating, him burrowing in snowdrifts. Arduous physical exercise always has been the accepted method of sublimating baser urges, and I am enthusiastically sublimating today.

I decide on leftovers for dinner; easy to transport, turkey sandwiches are always better cold, and Ray would probably be unable to say, later, whether he’s eaten joint compound or pastrami anyway.

He’s hunched in his familiar pose over the laptop, music pounding, tapping, moving, reaching over from time to time to scribble or draw on the pad on his drafting table. But he seems happy to see me.

“Fraser! It’s the glycines!”

“Really?”

He laughs. “Really.”

“Not the prolines?”

“Look, the protein markers are, um, essential. We need assays, the whole enchilada. Where the hell are Carlo and Rebecca? Can you do assays?”

“Of course.”

“Come on.”

“Eat first, please.”

“Fraser, it’s going to take hours–”

“Possibly even days–”

“Oh, right. Not!”

“I’ll start culturing as soon as we eat.”

“I need – I need, um, the software, the models, they’re okay, but if it’s the glycines – can you culture those, um, those brain cells?”

I sigh. “Columbia.”

“I knew you were a name dropper.”

“Entirely. Eat, Ray. I brought more coffee. Just as well, as it happens.”

After a few hours of lab rat work he consents, finally, to rest, on the cot, but I had despaired of even that so I’m not displeased. He is however forced to admit that not even Raymond Kowalski can affect the rate of cell division in any measurable fashion, and I promise to return as early as possible to help him in the next steps – “With coffee!”

“Of course. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“G’night.” He heads into the bathroom to brush his teeth and I let myself out, closing the door firmly and carefully behind me.

The next few days are spent in a blur of Ray frenzy, joint compound and pastrami sandwiches becoming only too common; I bow to the inevitable and camp out, Mountie style, on a bedroll on the floor for two nights; Diefenbaker, of course, insists on taking up most of it. Rebecca and Carlo are sorely missed and a stray janitor with his omnipresent broom is pressed into service from time to time to ‘do dishes,’ Carlo’s phrase.

It isn’t until we order pizza, with the subsequent appearance of Sandor, that Ray begins to try to surface. He and Sandor engage immediately in a discussion about Morrison Hotel¹³, to which I listen with less than half an ear, cogitating myself on the direction in which Ray’s ideas have taken us and how to integrate this with what he’s already done, and, anticipating, resignedly, Dr. Thatcher’s probable reaction to this tangent, which I fear will be less than ecstatic: more delays to strain the relationship with Dr. Metcalf and Willsie, already, I’ve gathered, a trifle fraught.

I’m interrupted by my cell phone. I haven’t checked my voice mail in days; I’m not altogether surprised, therefore, to hear Mark’s voice when I answer.

“Where the hell have you been, Fraser?”

“Why the hell are you calling long distance on my cell phone, Smithbauer?”

“Because you’re never fucking home any more? Where are you now?”

I laugh. “At work.”

“Exactly. Workaholic.”

“Co-dependent would probably be a more accurate appraisal.”

“I’ve got a game this week.”

“I know. Are you coming in for the New Year?”

“No, I’m stuck in Winnipeg, I won’t be in until the day of the game. I’ll leave you tickets, okay?”

“No, Mark–”

¹³ Um . . . the Doors? Jim Morrison? Why are you here? Go read.

“Jesus, Ben, every damn time. Give it a rest.”

“I really—”

“Shut up, Ben.”

“You’re not the boss of me.”

“Say that to my face, Fraser.”

“I will, Smithbauer.”

“See you after the game, right?”

I hesitate, too long. “Certainly.”

“You okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“You sure?”

“Of course.”

“Go home, Ben, you know it’s almost eleven your time?”

“We’re finishing up.”

“All right. See you. Sharpen your skates.”

“They’re sharper than yours.”

“You wish.” And he breaks the connection. Ray looks over curiously.

“Mark?”

“Yes.”

“Cool.”

“I’ve gotten tickets, and protein markers or no protein markers, you are coming with me.”

He grins. “Yeah, I know. Good seats?”

“Relatively. Can I give you a lift home?”

“Nah, Sandor’s going to take me. Thanks anyhow.”

“All right, then. Don’t stay up all night talking about Jim Morrison, for heaven’s sake.”

Sandor, who’s always been rather silent around me, snorts, surprising me. “Sometimes I wonder about his head,” he says to us both.

“We all do that,” I say. “Come along, Diefenbaker.”

oOo

Due to one reason and another we are barely in our seats for the face-off. I point Mark out to Ray, noticing as I do so that Mark is looking at the empty seats where he, no doubt, expected me to be. Not for the first time do I wish I had clothing on the order of my father’s red serge dress uniform, which has the dubious benefit of standing out in a crowd. The first period is almost over before he finally makes a slow, sweeping search of the stands on his insolent way to sit out a penalty (as usual, he’s leading the league in penalties again this year: his nickname, the Avenger, is well-earned and opponents have found to their cost that they risk his wrath when they go after his teammates) and I catch his eye. He shakes his head at me and skates off to the penalty box.

Ray has been mostly silent, and, I fear, bored, but every time I glance at him, his eyes huge, he seems to be almost holding his breath. I wonder how

many events such as this he's been to and conclude that the answer is, most likely, few to none.

After the game, Mark skates over, signs a few autographs, tosses a puck to a breathless child and yells to me. We make our way down to the edge.

"Jesus, Ben, what the fuck was wrong with my tickets?"

"Excellent first impression, Mr. Smithbauer. Ray Kowalski, Mark Smithbauer of Foulmouth, Canada."

"Yours is no better, Fraser."

"True, but I make an effort in front of strangers, Smithbauer."

Ray, evidently not trusting himself to speak, nods and holds out a hand. Mark pulls off his glove and shakes, looking at me somewhat quizzically.

"Ray's the researcher I'm working with at the university," I explain. "He's been kind enough indulge my passion for skating at times."

"You skate? Awesome. Hey, Ben, come around. You too, Ray. I'll hit a quick shower. I'll tell Bruno to let you in."

"Bruno? Not really."

"Nah, but he looks like one, so, you know?"

Without waiting for a response, he tears off across the ice, evidently determined to shower before we make our way around. He usually succeeds.

This time is no exception. He's mostly dressed and only slightly damp when we're finally admitted by the Brunoesque door guard. Only a few of Mark's teammates are still around but we're met with friendly greetings. Most of them know me, at least by sight.

"Hey, Ben, come in and catch me up while I get my boots on," Mark says. "If Ray doesn't mind?"

I square my shoulders as Ray shakes his head and backs up against the outer passageway, taking everything in. This has to be done but I'm not looking forward to it. Still, I've never shirked my duty.

Mark senses something's wrong: I believe he was aware of a difference the last time we spoke on the phone. As usual, he doesn't mince words.

"So... you got something to tell me."

"I'm afraid so." It is hard to meet his eyes but I force myself. They're rueful and understanding. My heart twists a little and I feel heat behind my eyelids: he has always made everything easy for me, even this, even now.

"I knew something was different. The last couple of times we talked. Your emails. You were a little preoccupied." He jerks his head at the door. "Is that—"

"Yes. You always could read me."

"Like a book, Ben."

"I'm... I'm so sorry, Mark—"

"Hey. Cut that crap. We've been friends since we were twelve. We've been lovers – if you can call it that – for a couple of years. We'll be friends forever."

"I don't like hurting people, Mark. I don't like hurting you."

"You think I don't know that? Look, Ben. I loved what we had. And I love you like a brother. You kept me on the straight and narrow more than once. This isn't going to change anything. You'll still get front row tickets."

“You don’t know how much that relieves my mind.”

“Yeah, I knew you were in it for the perks.”

“The perks were considerable,” I say, soberly. “Thank you.”

“You got that twisted around as usual, but you’re welcome. Of course, you could have waited to tell me until after tonight...” He grins, suggestively, engaging as ever.

I smile back, a real smile, relieved and slightly sad. “In some ways, I wish I could have.”

“Oh. That serious, huh?”

“No, not at all. It’s just me.”

“Yeah, it is you. So how long you two been...”

“We’re not...” I imitate his leer as best I can.

“Oh, Ben, you know? You are priceless.” He throws his head back and laughs. “Had to break up with the fuckbuddy first?”

“In part, yes. And please don’t say—”

He sobers, looks at me hard, and then hits the door in two strides, locks it, and turns back to me. I don’t protest the hug. I need some contact. I am not an island.

“Jesus, do *not* tell me he doesn’t know.”

“No.”

“Ben, you are so fucked.”

“Yes, so you’ve often remarked.”

“Different context, and it’s not exactly nice to bring that up when you’re breaking things off. He straight?”

“God only knows, Mark. I think so. But all I know is how I feel. And so I can’t...”

“No. No, I know. I know you.” He buries his face in the side of my neck and breathes in. “I am going to miss you. Miss you in my bed, I mean. Are we still on for a game tomorrow?”

“Please.”

“Hey. Bring him, okay?”

“Mark—”

“I want to get to know him, Ben. Bring him.”

“He’ll be far too intimidated to either talk or skate, Mark.”

“I can be pretty gregarious when I put my mind to it, Ben.”

“Egregious is the word that springs to mind. I’ll ask him.”

“He’ll come.”

“He didn’t even know who you were, Mr. Hockey Ego.”

He grins. “He’ll come.” Then, arms still around me, he puts his head on one side and looks at my mouth. “One more kiss, Ben? You have no idea how much Mr. Testosterone Hockey Ego likes your mouth.”

“I think you’ve mentioned it, actually, once or twice.” I lean forward on the laugh that follows. He makes it good: partly to change my mind, partly to give me a memory. Nor do I hold back: he deserves more than I was able to give him, and I can at least give him this, the knowledge that he was, is, wanted, was, is, valued, as a friend.

And so we are both breathing rather quickly when we finally, reluctantly, part. “This sucks, Ben.”

“I am sorry,” I repeat inadequately, feeling more of a heel than ever.

“Helluva goodbye, huh? Just one more night?”

“Mark...” I sigh, torn, still wondering crossly what on earth I think I’m doing, whether I truly do have a hole in my bag of marbles. I look up and he looks back at me steadily. “You are the only person to whom I would ever even consider saying yes to that question.” I can almost hear my father: “Indecision is unfair to everyone, Benton.”

“Is that a yes or a no?” Mark doesn’t move, but suddenly he seems larger.

“Christ, Mark, you don’t play fair...”

“Only in hockey. Anything else is open season.” He holds me by both shoulders. “I’m sorry, Ben. Didn’t mean to hassle you. This is what I get for encouraging you to pull yourself up by your bootstraps and start over, huh?”

“Mark—”

“How about dinner. Alone. Just us?”

“Yes.”

“Thanks.” He squeezes my shoulder, unlocks the door, lets me go through first. Ray is still standing in the doorway of the passage leading to the rink, watching the Zamboni move across the ice. I should have known.

“Will he talk to me this time? What do you want to bet?” Mark whispers as we walk.

“I never wager.”

“You never wager money. How about your a—”

“Mark!”

Ray turns at the sound of our footsteps. “It’s hard to believe the atoms are still moving. In the ice, I mean.”

“Well, for that matter they’re still moving in steel or hard plastic,” I say.

“I guess there’s a good reason I didn’t go into physics,” Ray says. He holds out his hand. “Great game.”

Mark hides his surprise well as he shakes the proffered hand. My pride is less well hidden, I’m sure, at least from Mark. “Not bad. Thanks. Ben and I are planning to hit a few pucks tomorrow. If you feel like it, you can join us.”

“Uh... yeah. Cool. He did tell you I can hardly skate, didn’t he?”

“Well, no surprise there. You are an American.”

Ray actually laughs. Yes, Mark can be quite... gregarious, and Ray enjoys being teased.

“We’ll meet here tomorrow then,” Mark says. “Ben, where are we eating?”

He’s doing that on purpose; the rudeness is entirely unnecessary and he knows I will call him on it. I always do.

“You drop me at the lab on your way, Frase?” Ray asks, taking it all in stride, as if he knew in advance: coals of fire.

“Of course.” I add, with a pointed look at Mark, “It’s the least I can do.”

“Can I keep Dief?”

I stare at him for a second, then recover. “Well, it’s entirely up to Diefenbaker. It’s quite all right with me.”

“Does he still talk to that wolf?” Mark asks Ray.

Ray nods seriously. “All the time.” Ray talks to ‘that wolf’ as well, so he finds nothing strange in my behaviour.

“All right, Ben, where are we eating? I’ll meet you there – or I could just take you to the lab, Ray, and we could pick up your car later, Ben.”

I know what he’s doing but Ray is already nodding. I glare at Mark, who pretends not to notice.

After dropping Diefenbaker and Ray off, Mark says, “Go ahead. Yell at me. Get it out of your system. I know I behaved – oh, let’s see how many of your words I can come up with. Abominably. Execrably.”

“I find those apt. There is no competition, Mark.”

“Maybe that’s why I’m being so abominable, Ben.”

“Execrable as well.”

“You in the mood for Chinese? Steak? How about ribs?”

“I am in the mood to give you a tongue lashing you won’t soon forget.”

“No, Ben, once per friendship per lifetime. You already used that up.” His hand finds mine in the darkness of the car and squeezes, hard. “That’s why you can get away with just about anything with me. And you know it. Let’s have ribs.”

“Fine.”

“Oh, God, Ben, don’t sulk.”

“I’m not sulking. I don’t sulk.”

“I’m sorry. I told you. When it comes down to it, I’m not ready for it to be over. And he doesn’t seem to be your type.”

“What is my type?”

“Oh, fishing, Ben? Me. Of course. Plus there’s the whole straight factor. He likes you. But I can’t tell if it’s a good buddies thing or not, and if I can’t tell, you can’t tell.”

“You’re right about that.” I am surprised by a sigh, from my toes.

“You want to get those ribs to go? Take them to your place? Go to my hotel and order room service?”

“Mark, do you want to spend one last night together knowing you are only an outlet for unrealised lust?”

His hand squeezes mine so hard that it hurts. After a long moment, he says, “Yes. And damn it all to hell, you are your father’s brutally honest son.”

“Well, I don’t. How the hell do you think I could live with myself in the morning? It’s a cliché, Mark, a damnable cliché, but if I lose your friendship – over sex – I will have lost much more than a friend. I will have lost an integral part of me.”

“So I’m guessing the hotel would be a better choice tonight.”

“Mark.”

“Ben. It’s always been friendship for us. The sex was a nice – hell, a great – sideline. No expectations, no commitments, just knowing you were there. That’s the part that I’m fighting.”

"I felt committed. And I definitely had expectations."

"I know that," he says in exasperation. "So did I. I just meant not in a white picket fence sense."

"Oh, of course. Neither did I."

He looks at me sideways, an eyebrow lifted, but says nothing.

We drive in silence, broken finally by a final attempt at clarity on my part.

"Mark, I... I think I love him."

"I got that part, Ben. But you still want me."

"Of course. And that's partly a function of our familiarity as well as a function of biological drives—"

"Turn it off, Ben. I'm not in the mood tonight."

"Ah."

"I hate when you do that."

"I know."

Further silence.

"You even sulk sexy."

"You are completely reprehensible."

"We'll get room service. At least we can talk there without worrying about people overhearing us. You can be brutally frank some more. I can deny reality some more."

"Mark, are you in love with me?"

"Jesus, Ben, don't you think I'd've told you that by now?"

"Yes. No."

"I already told you. Love you like a brother. I just don't like change. And this was a little unexpected. I wish we'd had more time, that's all."

"You're pretty good at that."

"Hey, I learned from a master."

He always picks the best exit lines. We're pulling up in front of his hotel with a flourish. He tosses the keys to the valet as we pass him in the entryway. It's odd to be here with him. In the past we have generally gone to my various apartments, for many reasons; but what I am contemplating would not even be a possibility at my apartment, not now, not after seeing Ray on my bed; and somehow Mark knows this.

He continues the conversation in the elevator. "I'd've fucked you senseless in the off season last year, for one thing."

"You nearly did."

"Yeah, but then I let you go to Canada to hike, for God's sake."

"You could have come with me."

"That's what I'm saying. Stupid mistakes, Ben. What was the point of wasting that week? You'd think I could have done the math."

He gets, with that, a smile out of me, and he smiles back.

It's usually a suite, for Mark, although I rarely see them. He's not the most highly paid hockey star in Canada but he commands respect for his take no prisoners honesty on and off the ice, which translates to a very respectable paycheck; so he never hesitates to upgrade his hotel accommodations. As soon

as the door closes he's on the phone. "Two full slabs. Yeah. Everything. Potatoes, salad – whatever you do. Bottle of wine. I don't care. Yeah. No, not that. French. Côtes du Rhone. Yeah, that sounds fine."

"Canadian," I murmur.

"In your dreams," he says, covering the mouthpiece. "Yeah. I'm here. Okay. 1013. Thanks. And the faster you get it up here, the bigger the tip. I'm starving."

"You're not going to get me drunk and take advantage of me," I say, hanging up my jacket.

"Nah, been there, done that. It was fun, though, wasn't it?"

"Mmm. Yes." Best not to wander down those paths. Mark was – is, I suppose, should be the preferred tense – an inventive and enthusiastic lover. And it did, in fact, take a night of rather unrestrained drinking to trigger an admission of attraction and subsequent action upon said admission.

He goes to the small bar and mixes himself a whiskey and soda. He offers me the glass as we sit down on the couch; the casual assumption, the reminder of intimacy, clouds my head for a moment and he is quick to take advantage as he pulls me next to him, arm solid around me, whiskey tang burning my mouth.

"Mark."

"Ben," he says, mimicking me, squeezing my shoulders.

"Mr. Hockey Ego needs a hug?"

"Yeah. Let him down easy. He's being deserted for a shy, skinny, straight scientist."

"Nice alliteration."

"Appreciative audience."

He holds the glass to my lips again for a brief sip. I don't much care for whiskey, but I associate it with Mark and affection. He pulls me down in a familiar position, my head resting on his thigh, one of his hands on my face, the other still holding the glass. We look at each other for a long moment.

"Shit, Ben."

"I'll miss this too, Mark."

"Yeah." He runs his index finger across my lips and I smile under it. "I hope for your sake that Bill Nye isn't as clueless as he comes across."

"No, you don't. You hope he is and I get over him and come running back to you."

"Well, yeah, that scenario has its appeal." He laughs and moves the hand from my mouth down to rest at the base of my throat. We stay like that a while, silent, contemplative. I wonder if he is thinking about might-have-beens; I am resolutely trying not to do so. He finishes his drink and sets it down on the table and puts his head back on the couch, closing his eyes. One deep breath, followed by another, and then he breaks the silence.

"So what are you going to do, Ben?"

"Love him." The answer is immediate and requires no thought.

He shakes his head, eyes still closed. "You're something out of a Coleridge poem."

"I think you mean Keats."

"I think I mean Yeats. Whatever. You're going to end up with a broken heart."

"Most likely."

"You're going to love him for twenty years and be a Watson to his Crick and he's going to find some eager young grad student who hangs on his every word and make a bunch of not so brilliant babies with her."

"Well, he hasn't so far," I point out mildly. "And Watson was every bit as involved as Crick—"

"Watson had his doctorate."

"One can't have everything."

"One—" he mimics me almost perfectly, "can get pretty damn close."

"And this is."

"Incurable optimist."

"Probably."

"Definitely."

"The fact that we have been what we have been and had what we have had has only reinforced that tendency in me," I say gravely. He opens his eyes and looks down at me.

"Thanks," he says, finally. "Jesus, Ben. You really do want to stay friends."

"Of course." I know I sound surprised. I am.

The smell of food precedes the knock on the door but we are both startled when the door opens hard upon the knock. There is no reason to blush as I sit up but of course I do. Mark says something in a low, almost menacing voice to the waiter as he signs the tab and then stares at him as he backs out of the room.

"Paid off by a journalist, probably," Mark says, closing the door hard. "Sorry, Ben."

"At least we were dressed."

"Damn it," Mark says, grinning, eyebrows raised suggestively. He sobers almost immediately. "I am sorry."

"You have more to lose than I do, Mark. It's not the same sort of issue in academic circles."

"Anyone makes it an issue in hockey circles they'll be eating pucks for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Sit, eat."

He picks the phone up again and as I pour the wine and arrange the food he manages, in a few short sentences, to be connected to the general manager. In a few more, he makes it quite clear that the hotel will not be hosting him or his teammates in future and moreover that he would be surprised if the hotel does not receive a letter from his lawyer. The conversation is ended with a bracing admonition to pay his people decently. Despite the problem, I'm laughing by the time he's finished.

"Mr. Testosterone indeed," I say, handing him his glass. "You just got that waiter fired."

"Yeah, probably. I'm real broken up about it."

"Mr. Intolerant Hockey Ego."

“Hey, I realise not everyone has a wannabe Mountie to keep him honest, but there are certain basic standards of human behaviour.”

“Where have I heard that before?”

He grins and pushes at my shoulder. “So I, ah, took it a little to heart.”

It doesn’t take either of us long to finish dinner. We were both starving. Nor does it take us long to make substantive inroads on the bottle of wine. The conversation, revolving around slightly scandalous stories about journalists and, of course, hockey players, that never made it into even the Canadian edition of Sports Illustrated, keeps me laughing.

It takes me by surprise, therefore, when he leans forward suddenly and licks the corner of my mouth. “Barbecue sauce,” he says by way of explanation, unrepentant.

“Nonsense.”

“Yup.”

“I’d better call a taxi.”

“No. Don’t go yet.”

“Mark.”

“I love how you say that. Just one syllable, so many ways to say it. Your scientist doesn’t know what he’s missing. Come here.” He pulls us down together on the couch, back to front, his breath tickling the hair on the back of my neck. And he sighs.

We rest together for a while – we used to watch TV like this – and I am actually to the point of drifting off when I realise that I am being rather more than foolish, and Ray has Diefenbaker.

He feels me tense, and his arms tighten as he says, also drowsy, “I’m not gonna like this, am I?”

“I do need to go.”

“Fuck.”

“No, thanks.”

“You are sooooo funny, Benton Fraser.” But he lets go of me, finally, and gets to his feet with me. He remains silent as I call the front desk and ascertain that there are, in fact, a couple of taxis waiting.

“Tomorrow, okay?” he asks.

“Of course,” I say, pulling on my jacket.

As we reach the door, he suddenly pushes me around, against the door, and kisses me, hard. My response is almost instantaneous: he is safe, familiar, desired, and still dear. It’s with extreme reluctance that I finally push him away.

He frowns, angry and unhappy; my heart twists despite my resolve. “God, Ben. It’s not like you’re fucking. You’re not even involved with him. All I want–”

“I can’t give you that. I’m sorry, Mark.”

“You’re not cheating on him, there’s nothing there, damn it.”

“There is something there,” I say as steadily as I can. “I’m sorry. When I close my eyes... I see him.”

“I can live with that.”

“Mark. Neither of us deserves that.”

“Oh, come on. When you get home you’re just going to jerk off. What’s the difference?”

“Well, perhaps it’s not quite as discrete a line as our previous attempts at moral conditioning, but it’s a line for me nonetheless.”

“You know, I don’t know if I like you better sexy or snarky.”

“For the sake of our friendship, I hope it’s the latter.”

“Jesus. Does he know how lucky he is?”

“He... he does like me, Mark.”

“He’s damned lucky, Ben.”

“It’s kind in you to say so.”

“I mean it. And you – you talk to me, okay? I can be a shoulder. I’ll see you tomorrow. What time? Nine okay? “

“After ten would probably be better. I’ll call you in the morning.”

“All right. Jesus. Goodbye.”

One last, lingering kiss, full of sadness and tenderness. He pushes me almost roughly out the door. “Go on. I gotta go jerk off.”

“You are disgusting,” I say, grinning, my usual acerbity restored, as he intended.

“You know it.”

Although it’s quite late, Ray is still up. Diefenbaker is lying beneath Ray’s drafting table. Ray is staring at the screensaver on his laptop, long fingers tapping in time to the music, which is soft and plaintive tonight, rather a departure for him.

“Hi, Ray,” I say quietly.

He turns, surprised but not startled. “Hi. I... I gave Dief p-pizza. For dinner. Sorry.”

“Thank you for thinking of him. A slice—” Ray grins, and shakes his head, “—or two of pizza isn’t the end of the world.”

“D-did you and Mark have a nice time?”

“Yes, very, thanks for asking. We had some things to catch up on that would have bored you, I’m afraid.”

“No, it’s okay, I know. We’re-we’re not joined at the hip, Frase.”

I’ve had far too much to drink to be able to listen to innocent entendres with equilibrium, even if they are delivered somewhat wistfully. I am therefore somewhat brusque. “Get some sleep tonight, Ray. Mark wanted to meet at eleven but I told him after lunch would probably be better.”

“F-Fraser, I don’t think—”

“Oh, please, don’t back out, Ray.”

“Since I met you I spend way too much time p-playing, Fraser.”

“That’s a good thing, Ray.”

“I’m not getting my work done.”

“Are we on a timetable? Other than the extrinsic processes, which are all make work anyway?”

He stares at me in surprise. “Have you – have you been drinking?”

“More than a bit, yes. Why?”

“You, uh, you sound...”

“Snarky?”

“Yeah.” He grins. “That’s a good word.”

“Mark accused me of the same thing. Why are you stammering at me, Ray?”

He draws in a quick breath, very startled. “I – I – I don’t know.”

“Are you nervous? Angry?”

“N – no. I don’t know. I m-missed you. I – I guess. And – and it’s, um, stupid. Because you – you have a social life. F – friends.”

“Compared to you, Ray, Nanook of the North has an active social life.”

He grins back, relaxing. “True. All those dogs.”

Diefenbaker raises his head and then gets slowly to his feet.

“That’s my cue. I’ve had rather too much wine, so we have to walk, Diefenbaker. Don’t complain. I’ve left my car at the rink.”

“G’night,” Ray says, a trifle wistfully. He begins to turn back to his computer, and hesitates, looking at me sideways.

I sigh inwardly. I am nothing more than a glutton for punishment and I’m fairly sure I’ve redefined purgatory in a way that would be of considerable interest to the Pope. “I can’t offer you a ride home but you’re welcome to spend the night again, Ray, if you want to walk fifteen blocks. Since you are still planning to come tomorrow.”

He slides off his stool quickly. “Oh. Yeah. I am tired. Are you sure?”

Yes, Ray, not only do I have a death wish, I have a martyr complex as well. “Haven’t we been through this?”

He frowns a little, and then laughs. “I’ve never seen you... so snarky. Exasperated. Human.”

“I am all too human, Ray.” He has begun his usual process of securing his computer. I watch him and observe idly, “You know, obsessive-compulsive disorders are often a function of brain–”

“Save it, Fraser. You got a major pot kettle issue there.”

“Ah. You have a point,” I say, raising my voice slightly so that it follows him into his closet.

He comes back out, closing the door and setting the alarm. “Okay.”

“Should we call NORSTAT and ask them to keep an eye on the lab?”

He frowns a little harder this time. “You think they would?”

“Undoubtedly.”

“What’s with you tonight? Did you and Mark have a fight?”

“No, of course not. I’m sorry, Ray. I’m on edge. I’m taking it out on you. But you know, you need key cards and access passes and all sorts of things even to get on this floor. I’m waiting for them to start frisking Diefenbaker. Which he would not tolerate, by the way.”

“Yeah. I know. I just... it’s probably... it probably is obsessive-compulsive. Brain malfunctions.”

“Your brain functions admirably, Ray,” I say, gently. “The next time I can’t keep a civil tongue in my head you’d better sock me.”

“I doubt I could get a fist in edgewise.”

“Oh, you could. If I deserved it, I’d let you.”

“You probably would. Come on, let’s go. Long cold walk.”

Tonight I am certainly not in the mood to camp on the floor, mere inches from him, so I make up the bed in the second bedroom.

“Why’d you get such a big place?” he asks, pulling a pillowcase on the pillow.

“Because I’m not a Chinese graduate student?”

He laughs out loud. “And I am?”

“It would be difficult to discern the difference simply from your choice of abode. Which reminds me, you carry a much higher balance in your checking account than you should and you have far too much money tied up in low-yield short term CDs. Do you have a financial advisor?”

“They send someone – a CPA or something – in to talk to me every once in a while. I don’t know what... so I just nod and say, yeah, okay.”

I close my eyes briefly, simultaneously more exasperated and enchanted than ever.

“I’m too tired tonight to go into it, Ray, but I’ll find someone for you to talk to about it, all right?”

“Okay. Can’t you – can’t you explain it?”

“I’m touched by your faith in my abilities but I don’t pretend to understand the complexities of the stock market beyond the buy low sell high platitude and the useful application of dollar cost averaging.”

He stares at me for another long moment. “Okay.”

“I won’t abandon you, Ray. I’ll stay and translate.”

Finally a smile. “Okay. Good. So why did you get such a big place?”

“Ostentation.”

“Uh huh.”

“Dr. Thatcher had arranged it, in all honesty; it was very thoughtful of her. And I’m enjoying the space. You should have seen my apartment in Toronto. It was compared, on more than one occasion, and quite unfavourably, to a refrigerator carton.” He snickers at that and shoves the pillow further into the case. “And, as you can see, I have almost as many books as you do.” He cocks an eyebrow and then grins. I grin too and then shrug. “I’ve finally paid off the last of my student loans. I suppose I ought to think about a new car as well.”

“Okay. Someone said... I wondered. ” He shrugs back, a quick imitation, and then grins, shyly, and tosses the pillow at the head of the bed. “G’night. Sleep well. Thanks... thanks for letting me stay again.”

“My pleasure, Ray.” And pain, but that goes without saying. Fortunately I am tired enough and depressed enough to fall asleep more quickly than I thought I would.

Unfortunately I don’t sleep as well as I’d hoped. I wake even before Diefenbaker and spend a few minutes staring at the ceiling, slowly greying with the dawn, while my mind chases its tail in endless circles. Finally Diefenbaker stretches and moans: he’s never been one to indulge my tendency towards introspection and I’m well aware I’m a sad trial to him in that respect.

“Shhh,” I whisper crossly, and roll out of bed to hastily don my sweatpants and then shirt. “No need to wake our guest.”

He sits up and lets his tongue loll out of his mouth, as insolent a manner as he can affect, and indeed it’s quite effective.

“You may indeed wish Mark could take you running but beggars can’t be choosers,” I tell him as I finish tying my shoes.

His rejoinder is incisive, not to say cutting, and I fume silently until we are well out of earshot of the house. He tries to ignore me; I end up talking to his back, a useless endeavour, I know, but it’s a habit I haven’t made much effort to break and he can communicate quite well with his shoulders and his tail when he so chooses.

“The situation is entirely different. I am not a beggar and I am not in any sense choosing Ray as much as I am choosing not to...”

“No, I’m well aware compromises have to be made. That’s not really the point in this case. The point is...”

“It may indeed make no sense from a lupine point of view, but if those are your criteria, then none of my personal relationships makes sense since the production of offspring is not...”

“Ah. Well, thank you for that concession. Certainly pleasure is an important component of physical relationships for many species, including my own, and I’m glad to find you so reasonable about it.”

We slow to a jog, as is our wont, when we come to the pond, and he finally deigns to look at me.

“Of course Mark’s a friend. A very good friend. No. Clearly I don’t think so. No, I don’t think he thought so either. Don’t be ridiculous.”

His silence is eloquent; we sit on a bench for a while. Into the silence, more to myself than to him, I say quietly, “I don’t know, Dief. It’s not logical. He should have been... And yet...”

Diefenbaker whines, and then barks, eliciting a sleepy, startled quack from the nearby cattails.

“That’s true,” I agree, far too soberly. “More than I may deserve, certainly. I do realise that. And I appreciate your attention to the matter, although I feel it incumbent upon me to point out that I am not, as it happens, doomed to spend my life alone. After all, I have you, don’t I?”

His groan is half-mocking, half-sympathetic, and altogether infuriating.

“No worries, Dief, although I must admit I certainly never thought of you in that manner either. Furthermore, if I may make an observation, you seem inordinately fond of Ray.”

“Perhaps you’re right, I ought to have consulted you. But, despite your rather vulpine – yes, I said ‘vulpine’ – logic that a hockey player in the hand is worth two in the bush, it simply wasn’t enough for me. So I am afraid that the outcome would have been the same, whether or not I had sought your opinion.”

He snorts impatiently.

“Perhaps it has escaped your attention but if scientific research had an NHL, Ray would have been drafted when he was eighteen and he is certainly Hart Trophy material. Admit it, Diefenbaker: you’re simply a hockey groupie.”

He doesn't dignify that with a response and instead feints at two pigeons, causing them to take flight, then looks smugly over his shoulder: wolves enjoy obvious metaphors, as I've learned to my cost.

"No, perhaps not, but my heart is involved." That silences him: like most wolves, Diefenbaker has a deeply buried but wildly romantic streak; and he does have an overweening affinity for Ray, much as he claims to be impervious to further human entanglements.

We finish the remainder of our run in silence, Diefenbaker sneaking glances at me from time to time shaded with exasperation, melancholy, and, oddly, a touch of admiration; but then, his favourite film is *Dr. Zhivago*, loath as he is to admit it, so he's clearly not the impartial observer of human relationships he likes to pretend he is.¹⁴

Mark's already at the rink by the time we get there but he's probably been there all morning. Hockey players have a tendency to live on skates. Ray watches in undisguised fascination while Mark drops a line of pucks and then without missing a beat – although missing the net rather more often than he should – skates backwards, smashing each one towards the goal.

Ray sighs. "I'll never get the hang of that."

"Yes, you will." I raise my voice. "Very sloppy, Smithbauer. What is the NHL coming to? I've seen you shoot better on a pond behind a barn."

"Get down here on the ice and say that, Fraser."

He skates over to the wall and leans on it as we lace up. "Hey, Ray. You got a hangover, Ben?"

"No, the Côtés du Rhone was an apt choice. You?"

"Hell, no. I was up at seven, firing waiters left and right."

"We all need hobbies."

"Yeah, and I need to find a new one."

I open the gate rather more sharply than I should, catching him off guard and in the gut. "It sounds as if you've got one."

He gives me a shove as I start off and I shove him back when he comes up behind me. "But pulling your tail is so fun, Ben," he whispers.

"I hope you find eating hockey pucks fun." He's skating backwards in front of me now.

"Ooh, big words."

"Judging by your earlier display, it won't be difficult."

"Ow."

"Well, this can be fun, which I was hoping; or it can be difficult, which seems to be your latest hobby."

"There's more of that brutal honesty, Ben. Did I say I liked that? Because if I did I was lying. Do your warm up laps. I'll shut up."

True to his word, he does, skating backwards again in front of Ray and me as we skate a few laps. Ray is watching Mark's feet with undisguised intensity.

"Could you turn?" he asks abruptly. "Turn and skate forward and then turn and skate backwards again?"

¹⁴ The inestimable and incredible Otsoko Guretxea.

Mark raises an eyebrow at me but complies with a good-natured shrug. "It's easier to learn by doing than by watching," he says after a few minutes.

Ray nods. "I have to, uh, see stuff, though. Then it's easier to do."

Mark emits a short half laugh and demonstrates again, more slowly. I skate off to find a stick and practice my own netting. When I look around at them again, Ray is behind Mark, holding onto his waist, as Mark swivels, skates backwards, swivels, skates forward. They do it a few more times, and then Ray releases Mark to try it on his own. Mark skates over near me to watch.

"He's pretty dogged," he says, grudging admiration. "Quick. Agile."

"Not such a geek?"

"Oh, yeah. But I like geeks, Ben. You're a little geeky, you know. It's just your incredible good looks that fool people."

"I got it, Fraser," Ray calls. "It's a push from the side. It's not actually skating backwards, it's sideways in a backwards motion."

"He catches on quick. He reminds me of a guy I knew in Red Deer, blew out his knees in his second year. He was good, he was Gretzky class. He coaches youth hockey now. Looks a lot like your Ray. All elbows and knees but fast as hell. You catch on quick," Mark calls.

"Yeah." Ray joins us, flushed, happy. "Yeah. Thanks. That was a good idea, feeling you skate, feeling you move. Yeah. Wow."

"I'm surprised Ben didn't think of that," Mark says, entirely too innocently, refusing to catch my eye. I can match him.

"So am I. I'm afraid I'm not very kinesthetic."

Mark shoves me again. "What the hell does that mean?" To Ray: "He does that to put me in my place."

"It generally works."

Ray just grins and pushes off backwards again. He falls a few times as he works on the transition from forward to backward motion but he's getting smoother. Mark and I begin to desultorily smack a puck back and forth, but most of Mark's attention is on Ray.

"He kind of grows on you, doesn't he?"

"And how exactly am I supposed to answer that, Mark?"

"You're not." He whacks the puck at me and shoves his stick at me a brief second later. "Wait a minute, Ray," he calls. "You're putting too much stress on that ankle. You've got to let the skate blade do the work." To me: "Americans, eh? If they're going to teach their kids to skate..."

I shake my head – the quickest way to Mark's heart is on skates – and practice my netting some more, accompanied by the occasional laugh and even more occasional thud from the other end of the rink.

"Heads up!" Mark calls and he's skating fast, hard, Ray hanging on for dear life behind him, a huge grin on his face. Mark manages an almost graceful stop near me. "Your scientist is a speed demon, Ben. Remedial tutoring. I think we're ready for a game. You take me and Ray."

"That's hardly fair. The pro should take both amateurs and give us two goals besides."

“Nope. I’ll give you one goal but I need to help Ray with his stick work and I can’t do that if he’s on your team.”

“You will give me no goals,” I say, heading for the face off.

“Make you eat those words, Fraser.”

“You try, Smithbauer.”

Ray is watching us, slightly puzzled, entirely happy.

“Kowalski! Pay attention. Ben is sneaky. Don’t give him any quarter.”

“Yes, sir!”

“There we go. That’s the kind of respect I deserve, Ben.”

“No comment.”

The game is fast and furious. Mark and I tend to be somewhat competitive on the ice although my only edge is that I am faster. I’m down three to two when Ray, who’s not exactly slow either, hooks a pass and makes a long shot. I skid into the net on my stomach about three seconds too late, all the breath knocked out of me.

“Way to make him fade, Kowalski!” Mark shouts.

“Good aim,” I say, getting to my feet. “Pure dumb luck.”

“He’s a sore loser, Ray,” Mark says. “Luck’s a good thing to have, on ice or off.” He looks at me as he says that, making sure I get it, and smiles wryly. “And you got the luck. Let’s hit the showers. I need serious beer. You should’ve taken the goals, Fraser.”

“In your dreams, Smithbauer.”

After pizza and after we have made inroads in a third pitcher of beer, Ray becomes rather silent, but it’s not the silence of shyness. It’s the silence of wheels turning in his brain. Mark jerks his head at Ray. “Is he in there?”

“He’s probably had a molecular epiphany.”

Ray comes back to us. “Nah. I was trying to remember what I know about the physics of motion. Is... when those figure skaters jump, on the ice, is it the same as ballet dancers?”

To my surprise Mark doesn’t launch into his manifesto on how hockey skaters are the real skaters, with hilarious and muttered specific asides. “I’m sure some of it is.”

“Can you do that?”

“Is everyone he meets an experiment?” Mark asks me.

“Pretty much,” I say.

“Look, hockey skaters don’t jump. And if we do, we don’t tell anyone and we don’t do it in front of anyone.”

“Oh.”

“Jesus, Ben.” Mark looks at me quizzically. “Look, Ray, if you were a physicist I’d help you out here. But – “

“If I were a physicist I would already know the answer,” Ray says simply.

“Ray, have another beer and stop worrying about it. Next time we hit the ice, I’ll see what I can do, okay?”

“Really?”

“Jesus. Yeah.”

“Cool. Thanks. Be right back.” He gets up and makes his not entirely steady way to the back of the bar.

Mark laughs. “Toasted scientist. Let’s do shots. Let’s get him really drunk.”

“You are reprehensible.”

“Hey, it worked for us.”

“Mark...”

“I’m just saying. God, Ben, I want to hate him and I can’t. He’s a little freaky but he’s... endearing.”

“Very much so.”

“Of course, I think you are too.”

“Nonsense. And you’re just impressed because he’s an American who can skate.”

“Yeah, those are so rare in my line of work. I expect nothing less from you. I’d have to disown you otherwise.”

“The prospect is terrifying.”

“I can see you shaking.”

He looks at me. I look steadily back.

“Yeah. It’s cool, Ben. Okay?”

“Good.”

“If you ever get him in bed, you tell him how lucky he is.”

“If I want to sound completely egocentric I certainly will.”

“Give him my number. Tell him you come with references. Maybe...maybe he’s...” He holds my eyes now and despite the heat rising in my cheeks I can’t look away. “Maybe he’s what you... need.” His smile twists; the implication is clear. I feel a lump in my throat: what I have never does seem to be enough.

“Or maybe I’m fucked up, Mark, as you said.”

“Letting me down easy, Ben? That’s not very...honest of you.”

“Mark, when you told me that you would never lie to me again I believed you.” I drop my voice, of course, for discretion’s sake; but this is the crux of the matter, after all, and only Mark would bring it up, now, in a crowded, smoky, noisy bar where privacy is all but impossible and Ray will return at any moment. “I expect the same consideration from you.”

“Yeah.” Finally he looks away but he looks back at me almost immediately. “Yeah. You made sure not to ask the hard questions after that, didn’t you, so I wouldn’t have to.”

“This has and had nothing to do with that, Mark.”

“Yeah, you don’t hold grudges. Tell me another one.”

“When warranted, I do,” I say steadily. “In this case, I did not.”

He stares at me for a long moment, silent. I realise with a shock that he does not trust his voice and my world turns upside down again. I hear myself stumbling over words that sound pathetic and even insulting in their pity: “Mark... should we... go somewhere and talk?”

“Fuck, no,” he says gruffly. “I just... fuck, Ben, it’s how I am.”

“I know,” I say steadily, and it’s the truth: I have very little left in the way of illusions now. “But please believe that our extremely satisfying *modus vivendi* had nothing to do with my current – or perhaps you would say chronic – fucked-up state of mind.”

He picks up his glass and swirls the beer in it absently. In a faraway sort of voice, staring at the glass and not me, he says, “You shake me up, Ben.” He puts the bottle down and leans forward to look me in the eye, almost aggressively. “You make me wonder shit like if I wasn’t me, who the hell would I be?”

And would even that have been enough? I wonder silently, but manage not to say that aloud despite my alcohol- and emotion-induced haze. I note Ray’s reappearance, and jerk my head in his direction. He does appear to be, if not three sheets to the wind, at least more than one.

Mark raises an eyebrow but continues, in a louder voice, “You never wonder shit like that, do you, Ben. Like who you’d be if you weren’t who you are?”

“I wonder,” Ray says unexpectedly, taking his seat with a thud. “I wonder who I’d be if I were someone else. And who I’d be with other people. If I would be me, the same me, if... if people... other people... weren’t who they are.”

I am unable to muster any sort of response; and Mark and Ray are staring at each other as if they are indeed the strangers they are talking about, and have suddenly found themselves sitting at a table with other strangers, having philosophical discussions about existence and self.

Ray shakes his head and grins, slightly self-conscious now. “Too much beer. Do you remember how many brain cells an ounce of alcohol destroys?”

“Was it on the wall in the can?” Mark says. I kick him under the table.

“No, I can’t remember offhand, Ray. But you have plenty to spare.”

“Yeah, but what if they’re important ones?”

“The odds are good that your neural network has a great deal of redundancy.”

“Well, the brain has the most redundancy of any organic system...”

“You guys can talk like this after three pitchers of beer? I bet you’re a real barrel of laughs sober.”

“Gluta-glutathione transferase,”¹⁵ Ray manages with a grin.

“I think you’d better take him home.”

“It’s not even dark yet,” Ray says. “Take me to the lab.”

“I am not letting you near electrophoresis gels tonight, Ray.”

Mark stands abruptly. “I’d better get back to the hotel, head to the airport. I’ll call you, Ben. I’ll fly back in for a long weekend. See what the schedule looks like.”

“Hey, thanks,” Ray says, rising too, shy again, extending his hand. “Thanks for your patience.”

“You’re a natural, Ray. Make you an honorary Canadian. Keep practising.”

¹⁵ Sevenall, email message 7-13-01.

“Yeah. Okay.”

Mark grabs me roughly in a bear hug, squeezing all the breath out of me, and then picks up his bag and, nodding to both of us, leaves.

“You notice he left us with the tab,” I say, voice strained. Ray seems to notice nothing. He just grins.

“Old friends.”

“Yes, they do take advantage.”

“Fraser, I am really buzzed. I like him. Must be nice to have a best friend.”

“He is a good friend, yes. My oldest friend.”

“Best friend,” Ray says insistently.

I allow my eyes to meet his, very briefly. “No.”

“No?” His voice softens, wondering.

“No. Come on.”

“You have better friends than Mark?”

“Yes. Come on. Dief’s going to be angry enough as it is.”

“Who?”

“Stubborn drunk, Dr. Kowalski.”

He actually giggles. “I’m stubborn all the time. You – you’re my best friend, Fraser.”

“I – what?”

“I said–”

“I heard you. Thank you. You – you’re mine, as well.”

“No!” He sounds genuinely disbelieving. “I can’t skate. I can’t even joke with you the way Mark does.”

“Oddly my notion of friendship is predicated neither on skating performance nor on smart-ass ability.”

“Oh, cool. Just... goddamn... cool.” His face has lighted up and he is beautiful.

“Dr. Kowalski, I am shocked. Your language is going to get us thrown out of here.”

“Lava soap, Fraser.” He gurgles with laughter. There’s no other word for it. Mark was correct: tipsy Ray is more than slightly endearing, as I have already learnt. “When are you going to get your Ph.D.? I wanna be able to call you Dr. Fraser in that superior tone of voice.”

I toss two twenties on the table and resignedly pull him to his feet. “I’ve... never been able to think of a thesis.”

“I got lots of ideas.”

“You took twin degrees from Stanford so I’m hardly surprised to hear that.”

“Where are we going?”

“My place, I suppose. Since my best friend exists in the twentieth century with every microscope known to man but he’s never heard of cable television.”

“We going to watch more hockey?”

“If you like.”

“Okay, Frase.”

*Switch off the mind and let the heart decide
who you were meant to be
“Windpower,” Thomas Dolby*

The return of classes and students brings the return, expected and awaited, of Carlo and Rebecca. Also expected: Victoria. My jealousy is expected, as well, and is unworthy and I suppress it as well as I am able because he seems pleased to see her. We are used to her visits, of course; generally she teases Carlo, ignores Rebecca, and coaxes Ray into surrendering precious data through pretended deafness and constant reiteration. It's a dance that I gather is mutually agreeable and they execute the steps, back and forth, with familiarity born of long practice; and she seems to enjoy the byplay, as does Ray, although she never seems to be completely satisfied.

Ray does, I admit, resemble a mollusk in that regard, a comparison she is fond of drawing frequently, in, of course, a light-hearted fashion. She treats Ray rather as one might treat a petted younger brother and I am therefore surprised, one day, when her glance at Ray's desk is followed by an incredulous laugh which is very spontaneous and less than tactful.

“Are you entertaining children now?” she asks Carlo, nodding at the Lego construction on Ray's desk. He frowns in puzzlement, following her gaze. Ray brought a baggie of Legos in to work with him following our intensive session after Christmas and within a week of his return Carlo and, I suspect, Sandor began to add to his collection. It has become commonplace since for Ray to fidget with them and to build weirdly intricate structures at night. One morning we were greeted with a fairly respectable double helix.

“They're Dr. K's,” Carlo says, still frowning.

Ray looks up from across the room, quickly. She notes his attention and moves swiftly to join him, saying something in a low, teasing tone. He flushes and ducks his head, grinning, and Carlo looks at me, still bemused. I shrug and turn back to my laptop, making a conscious effort not to eavesdrop.

I begin to feel the edges of my temper fray with Victoria within the next week or so. I tell myself it is because of the odd times she chooses to appear. I have finally managed to find a person to explain the intricacies of finance to Ray. His name is Patrick, and he is an MBA student whom I met in line at the bookstore, an excellent place, I've found, to track down people of particular skills. It took a few weeks, in fact, to find someone as dedicated to the field of finance as Ray is to his own; one way past Ray's shyness is to match his shyness and/or dedication in some wise. And she has already forced us to reschedule Ray's appointment with Patrick once.

Uncannily she shows up fifteen minutes before the rescheduled meeting is to occur. I feel a growing sense of exasperation at the sound of her voice; out of the corner of my eye, I catch Ray opening his top drawer and sweeping his Legos into it, quickly, unobtrusively, and only devoted eyes would note the hectic flush that rises in his cheeks and then fades just as quickly. Suddenly I feel not just exasperation but a barely contained impulse to separate one of her arms from its socket, or, better yet, her tongue from its root.

She catches me looking at her and gives me a quizzical, almost challenging look. She's attempted to flirt with me in the past but neither her heart nor mine was in the game – I sensed, for her, that it was more automatic than not, almost from the start – and the last time she tried, Ray, surprisingly, asked me if I had heard from my girlfriend lately. For that as well as more immediate reasons, I am taken aback when she moves closer to my desk: we had a somewhat awkward encounter in the parking lot recently in which she expressed faux dismay at what she surmised was my inadequate standard of living by saying, in a manner I think she meant to be teasing, that she had a friend who collected vintage automobiles. She then went on to ask, somewhat impertinently, if I didn't find Ravenswood a rather inconvenient and somewhat expensive place to live.

And – because it was none of her business, because she sets my teeth on edge, because she laughed at Ray's Legos – I depressed her pretensions firmly, even sharply, without elaborating, by saying that I found both my car and my apartment more than adequate for my needs. Her lips compressed into a thin line for an odd and unsettling instant, destroying all her pretensions to beauty, and she quickly changed the subject. I chuckled inwardly, though I kept my face neutral: I lived on shoestrings, and worse, for so many years, and in New York City, to boot, that my current salary and abode are frankly luxurious, and I have an inexplicable fondness for my admittedly aged Volvo. The conversation ended very shortly after that and she has ignored me completely since then.

"Dr. Thatcher tells me she'd like you to meet with our clinical team next week," she says. Jerking her head in Ray's direction, she adds, "He's never gone, of course."

"Of course," I echo. "He really doesn't need to be bothered with the mundanity." I almost say 'inanity' but realise that would be more than rude.

"As long as you think you can answer their questions," she says, still smiling pleasantly, and it takes me a moment to process the words that belie her tone of voice.

I quell the resentment: she is trying to goad me. Clearly she, too, holds grudges: one small thing we have in common; and I was, after all, rude, and deserve a measure of rudeness in return. "I'll certainly do my best."

"I'm sure your best is more than good enough," she says smoothly, and lets her eyes wander in an almost insolent fashion over my body.

"So I'm told," I say, attempting to match her tone, with some success, and I have the pleasure of seeing a small frown flick across her face.

“Fraser, where are we meeting this – this, uh, Patrick guy?” Ray calls across the room.

Victoria turns swiftly. “Ray, I was hoping to go over some questions our staff has for you–”

“Sorry.” He doesn’t quite meet her eyes and I’m more confused than ever, although inordinately surprised and pleased that he remembered the appointment. “I’m sorry. I promised.”

Her hands, clasped behind her back, tighten but her voice remains pleasant and teasing. “I’ll have to extract a similar promise from you then. Tomorrow at ten, will that be all right?”

“Yeah. Um, wait, no. We – we’ll be in the lab all morning. After lunch, how’s that, is that okay?”

“No, I’m sorry, I’ve got an appointment in Oak Park,” she says, and she sounds less pleasant.

Ray shrugs, clearly losing interest rapidly: if it doesn’t involve the lab or, more recently, skating, his attention span is more limited than ever. “Okay, m – maybe we should set up an appointment? Okay?”

Now I’m more than gratified, I’m stunned. Ray has never set limits for anyone; and Victoria is the last person I would have expected him to begin with.

“Okay, Frase?” Ray repeats, a little impatiently, turning to shut off his laptop.

I clear my throat. “Certainly. I’ve got Dr. Kowalski’s schedule roughed out here, Dr. Metcalf. What about Monday?”

“I’ll call you,” Victoria says, turning back to me, her face and expression neutral. “I left my Dayrunner in the car. I’ll let you know the details about the other meeting at the same time.”

She doesn’t wait for an answer and her heel clicks sound unnaturally loud in the dead silence as she leaves.

I look at Carlo; he looks at me. We both look at Ray, who says, a trifle more irritably than is his wont, “What? I promised.” He doesn’t wait for an answer either; he takes his laptop into his room to lock it up.

“Dr K, I think you pissed her off,” Carlo says, uncharacteristically blunt, when Ray emerges. “Remember the nice lady with the research money?”

Ray shakes his head. “Stuff we’re doing now, Carlo, you know we’re putting in some pretty intense lab work. She can – she can make an appointment. That’s what Fraser does with the – with Thatcher.”

“If you–” Carlo begins, then stops abruptly. I can fill in the rest of his thought but as always resent even implied criticism of Ray.

“Ray’s correct,” I say mildly. “If we knew when she was coming perhaps we could have the data organised in a more coherent fashion and she wouldn’t get quite so frustrated.”

Carlo and Ray both blink at me, but at the moment I’m more concerned about Carlo’s reaction and I hold his eyes with my own.

“It’s more efficient,” I say gently.

“Yeah.” He doesn’t sound convinced. “She used to – with Marta – she’s just – she’s got a temper, Ben, you’ve–”

“Yeah,” Ray says unexpectedly. “She – yeah, she does. But she’ll take it out on Fraser, Carlo, don’t worry. He can handle it. Unflappable.” He grins again, inviting response, and Carlo grins back, somewhat reluctantly.

“The sacrificial lamb,” I say resignedly.

“Wolf in sheep’s clothing,” Ray says, and then laughs.

Carlo looks startled for a brief second and then joins in.

We meet Patrick at a quiet coffee shop off Lincoln Square. Patrick is already there, at a table in the rear, laptop on. Ray’s eyes brighten at the sight of the laptop: a small familiarity in this financial singularity.

Patrick notes his interest immediately and before the conversation gets technical I make quick introductions and excuse myself to order coffee. Upon my return, I hand the coffee round and Ray busies himself with sugar and cream. Patrick takes his black, as do I: we’ve had coffee together a few times on campus.

There’s an awkward silence for a few moments; Patrick breaks it by asking Ray a fairly innocuous question about his work. He listens thoughtfully as Ray tells him, stumbling now and then as he remembers that Patrick doesn’t know either biology or its terminology.

“It’s all right,” Patrick says, seeing his frustration. “I get it, I get the basics. That’s all that matters. Your eyes will glaze over if you get me started on loaded funds, NAVs, and the NASDAQ.”

“Yeah,” Ray says. “What do you do?”

“I’m a licensed stockbroker and my wife got a pretty good promotion a couple of years ago so we took out some student loans and decided that I should get my MBA while the getting was good. I finish this year; it’s been a lot of fun. So what do you want to know? Where do we start? I’ve got a program on here that can take us through some of the basic questions.”

Within a very few minutes Patrick has drawn Ray into an animated conversation about the Darwinian nature of the stock market, natural selection, and the long term effects of inflation, Ray contributing cogent if obscure comparisons to nucleic acid chains and DNA reproduction, although I feel it incumbent on me to step in when he begins to talk about self-assembly of viral complexes.

“I don’t think I can get that analogy, but does the rest make sense?” Patrick says. “Because if you look at inflation and at where you want to be in – how old are you?”

“Thirty-three.”

“Okay, where you want to be in thirty years, you lose money if it just sits in the bank because the inflation rate is higher than the interest rate you’re earning.”

“You lose money if the stock market crashes,” Ray says, a little more definitely, leaning forward. “I mean–”

“Well, that’s why you diversify,” Patrick says. “You put some money in the bank, some in bonds, some in mutual funds, maybe some in stocks, and that diversity protects you.”

“Like the RNA in a virus mutates to mimic the host DNA,” Ray says animatedly. Patrick looks at me, startled and amused.

“Okay. So what happens when the virus finds a host?”

“It reproduces and multiplies.”

“Compound interest and reinvested dividends.”

“Stock market viruses?” Ray says, and this time he laughs.

“Good virus,” Patrick says. “Can there be?”

“Yeah. Wow. Yeah. Especially because they can cross physical and chemical barriers – it’s – it could be a whole new field for gene therapy and–”

Patrick grins. “Okay, yeah. Good virus, that’s the main thing.”

“Except you can’t turn them off,” Ray says slowly. “Except by killing them.”

“You can turn the stock market off by taking your money out of it,” I say. “Don’t carry the analogy too far, Ray. You’re extrapolating from dissimilar premises.”

Ray laughs. “I don’t think you can turn the stock market off.”

“Ah, so it’s the virus.”

“It’s more of a symbiosis,” Patrick says, somewhat to my surprise. Ray looks surprised as well, and then definitely happier, leaning in to listen as Patrick begins to explain how mutual funds work and the difference between stocks and bonds, and although I am unable to see the laptop screen from my vantage point, I can tell that Patrick is using graphs and graphics because Ray is paying close attention. I take the opportunity to replenish our coffee; as I do so, I catch a glimpse of a dark haired woman on the sidewalk outside; but Dr. Metcalf had a red coat this morning and this woman’s coat is black; and there is no logical reason for her to be here. This is where obsessions with biochemical geniuses, not to mention runaway tendencies towards protectiveness, get you, I think to myself, and take the coffee back to our table.

“So where is your money?” Patrick is asking. “Do you have an IRA? You probably have a hefty 401(k). 403 (b), same difference.”¹⁶

“Mostly in checking, some CDs and savings,” I say when Ray looks at me expectantly. “I’ve got your statements in my briefcase, Ray, if you need them.”

“He says I have too much in checking,” Ray says, shrugging. “Every once in a while I just take some and put it into a CD. I’ve got some kind of thing with the university. A tax sheltered annuity?” He says these words almost proudly, and I smile at him.

“That would indeed be your 403(b).”

“You need to see a financial planner, Ray,” Patrick says firmly.

Ray, in the act of stirring the sugar into his second cup, shakes his head. “I – no, I mean, what if he tells me this stock and that – um, that bond? And what you said about loaded mutual funds, class A and class B and front end loads, I get the difference but what if he doesn’t?”

Patrick shoots me a wry glance. I shrug. I did warn him.

¹⁶ A 403(b) is a 401(k) for non profit organisations.

“I can help you get started,” he says slowly. “We can draw up a basic portfolio – you can run it by your accountant, your lawyer – whoever you trust.”

“Okay, we can do that,” Ray says. “I’ve got a guy who does my taxes, has for years. He does Dr. Thatcher’s. “

“Okay,” Patrick says, still looking a little stunned. “I – I don’t have an office any more but we could meet–”

“You said you had my statements with you,” Ray interrupts. “Would that help to get started with?”

“Well... yeah...”

Ray has a tendency, I’ve noted, to jump in with both feet, although it takes him much longer to make the decision than it takes most people. I open my briefcase and hand him the file folder. He opens it, looks at the top statement, shakes his head, and hands it to Patrick, pulling out the next one to look at himself.

There’s an intense silence for a few minutes, both men frowning over their respective papers; and then Patrick begins to enter some information into his laptop. Ray looks over his shoulder, frowning harder, and then back at the statement in his hand. Patrick says something innocuous and Ray nods abstractedly. I’m used to that expression on his face; it means he’s wrestling with a problem; and, sure enough, he reaches behind his ear for a pencil, but it’s not there.

I pull one out of my briefcase and hand it to him; he takes it automatically and flips the statement over, pulling the next one out and frowning at it, marking two or three transactions on it.

“Ben was right,” Patrick says. “Even if we put you in a conservative portfolio you’ll earn a hell of a lot better return than a three percent CD.”

“Okay,” Ray says, not listening, and Patrick shakes his head.

“Ray, you can’t do that, you have to listen.”

“Yeah, okay,” Ray says again. Patrick looks at me; I shake my head. He grins and goes back to his laptop.

“Fraser, do you have the rest of my statements?” Ray asks.

“No, just the three that you had in your desk at the lab.”

“Then the rest are at my apartment. We need to get them.”

“Is there a problem?”

Ray looks at me, full in the eye, hesitates, and then says, “No, I just – I haven’t looked at the balance in a while and – it’s just more than I thought it would be. It’s nothing.”

Patrick says suddenly, “Eaton Vance. You give up a little of the total return, but the NAVs are solid, just solid, and it’s worth – “ He stops suddenly and grins at both of us. “Sorry.”

“Okay,” Ray says simply.

“Who are we to argue with NAVs?” I say, and Patrick shakes his head.

“Scientists. Look, Ray, let me have just this one and if you could dig up your 403(b) information for me–”

“No, I need that, I need that statement,” Ray says. “I’ll go – I’ll pull it all together and you can come by the lab tomorrow or something to get it, is that okay?”

“Yeah. Okay, that’s fine – I’ve got something to go on with here, anyway.”

I give Patrick directions to the building in which our lab is housed, finishing with, “Just have the security desk call me; I’ll come down and get you. We’ll be there all day tomorrow.”

“I’ll stop by around lunch, then,” Patrick says. “Wow. This has been great, Ray. Ben was right – you are a lot of fun.”

“You’re a lot more fun than I thought you would be,” Ray says, and then flushes, but Patrick laughs.

“Scary Wall Street financial monster.”

“Virus,” Ray says with a cheeky grin, composure restored. “Okay, see you tomorrow then? I’ll go get the stuff from my apartment right now.”

We say our goodbyes and I pick up a biscotti for Diefenbaker on our way out in recompense for having had to wait outside. He swallows it in two gulps: apology accepted.

I’ve been to Ray’s apartment more than once, of course; sometimes Diefenbaker and I stop to feed the turtle (despite Ray’s insistence that wolves and turtles are natural enemies), when Ray’s in saturation mode at the lab. For some reason his apartment feels emptier than ever and I half-expect to see an inch-thick layer of dust on everything and cobwebs galore but it’s only my imagination, overactive today: first seeing Dr Metcalf on every corner, then feeling something’s off about Ray’s apartment.

Ray goes to a shabby roll top desk in one corner of his living room and begins rummaging. I glance at the turtle and then go into the kitchen to give Diefenbaker a drink of water. In opening the cabinets to find an appropriate bowl, I am both amused and somewhat saddened to see the contents: two china plates spattered in a Holstein-like pattern (and I immediately conjure up a vision of Sandor bringing Ray yet another ‘grab bag’), a small plastic bowl, and four mugs, three with pharmaceutical company logos on them. The food in the cupboard consists of a can of baked beans, a half full jar of Nescafe, and, oddly, a bag of black-eyed peas.¹⁷ It’s only slightly better stocked than the sole cupboard in my first apartment, a tiny studio in New York City; but that was eleven years ago for me, well past; and this is Ray’s present.

Ray comes into the kitchen and I hold up the bag, raising one eyebrow. He grins. “I don’t know. They looked, um, interesting. I was thinking of Mendel, I guess, but...”

“Is it all right if I give Diefenbaker a drink in this dish?” I ask. “Why the hell don’t you have any dishes? Do you even have pots and pans?”

“Yeah, I have two.” He points to the oven. “Give Dief a drink in one of those, Fraser, that bowl’s too small for him.”

¹⁷ Michael Stipe, et al. The sidewinder sleeps tonite. Automatic for the people: 1991; 3.

A trifle confused, I open the oven and see, indeed, two saucepans and – something that finally makes sense – a pizza pan.

“You know, I can see where you prefer the lab,” I say as I fill one of the pans. “You’ve got a lot more luxuries. An entire cot, for one thing; and a lab full of clean glassware.”

“And snack machines down the hall.” Ray leans against the counter next to me as we watch Diefenbaker drink. “I’ve got a bed here, Fraser. I just hate wasting the time coming home and going in the next, uh, day, you know?”

“Your approach does indicate a certain conservation of energy, that’s true.”

“See? I’m wasted in biology, Frase. Should’ve been physics.”

“You can get your next Ph.D. in thermodynamics then. Obviously it’s a career path you regret not taking.”

Ray laughs. “Mark. I didn’t mean to, um, upset him.”

“Oh, I know for a fact that they really do jump, Ray. It just doesn’t fit in with his Mr. Hockey persona to admit it.”

We watch Diefenbaker then, in a comfortable silence.

“Is there something wrong with your bank account?” I ask finally.

Ray glances at me, startled. Perhaps he thought I believed him; perhaps he simply forgot that I can at times employ the direct approach.

“No. No, I just – I should learn to do it myself.”

“Ah.”

Now he looks more worried than ever. “It’s not – it’s not that, Fraser–”

“It’s quite all right, Ray.”

“No. No, you don’t understand. I can’t balance a checkbook. I – even when the account’s brand new I never can find it all. But I know how much I make and how much I spend–”

“Virtually nothing. Oh, I forgot, you did splurge on an entire bag of dried peas.”

“ – and I just – it’s – I’m glad you’re doing it, Fraser, so’s Rebecca, but there’s – I didn’t think there should be – “ Frustrated, he looks up at the ceiling and then at the window, and then shakes his head. “I’m probably – I just lost track. I probably just missed a whole month.”

“I find that highly unlikely. You’re not–”

“I probably just lost track,” he repeats, louder this time, exasperation more than plain. “I’ll wait in the car. Don’t forget to lock the door.”

Well. “I’ll be sure to put the wolf out as well,” I say to his retreating back. He stops dead and looks over his shoulder at me, and my breath catches in my throat at the misery in his eyes. He opens his mouth, hesitates, shrugs, and, picking up the file folder he left on the counter, leaves.

Diefenbaker looks from the door to me and back again.

“Oh, please,” I say scornfully as I pick up the pot and wash it quickly, my mind racing as I try to set my ego aside for a moment. Uncharacteristic behaviour, to be sure. He’s never afraid to argue with me and he has never pulled rank or simply ended an argument for no apparent reason; and the

expression on his face completely belied his words and short circuited my anger as well as twisted my heart.

I scold myself for lapsing into sentimentality – how I feel about him has no bearing on the problem at hand – and I set my feelings in the corner with my ego for the moment as I try to make sense of his actions.

Diefenbaker whines as I lock the door; he, being a mere wolf, is of course incapable of separating either his ego or his feelings from his good sense. Thus it is that he runs to Ray, who was leaning against the car awaiting us, and jumps at him, licking his hands, when we regain the parking lot.

“Hey, stop,” Ray says, but he’s laughing and he makes a paddling motion in the air in front of Dief, a gesture I’ve seen him make before, and one that reduces Dief to a quivering ball of mush on the inside, much as he pretends to be the big bad denizen of fairy tales on the outside.

“Enough, Dief,” I say, to no avail, of course. “Are you ready, Ray?”

“Yeah.” He hesitates again, emotions warring on his expressive face. “Can we – can we take a quick walk?”

“It’s rather late. Is there anything you needed to talk to Carlo about before tomorrow?”

“Yeah, but – just – I think Dief needs a walk.”

Diefenbaker, the traitor, barks encouragingly.

“Very well, then.”

We’re halfway down the block before Ray breaks the silence. “Fraser, I was – please don’t stop balancing my checkbook. I – I was – I really think I lost a month in there somewhere, okay? Maybe at Christmas.”

“Ray, you’re not a very good liar.”

He stops us both, one hand on my arm, and looks me in the eye, a stubborn set to his jaw. “You’re not a very good sport, Fraser. I said I was sorry.”

“Ray, if I overstepped the line, I would prefer hearing that in plain terms.”

“Overstepped the line? God, Fraser, no. No. No. If it wasn’t for you – Jesus, Fraser, I’m sorry. I – it’s really really not that. I – maybe it’s that I feel dumb. I can’t even understand the stock market.”

“Patrick can’t understand synergistic interactions in enzymatic active sites.”

“Lots of people can’t understand that. Lots of people can balance their checkbooks and invest money,” he says matter-of-factly.

“Well, Ray, all I have to say is that if I believed in a god, I would thank him – or her – every day that you are not ‘lots of people,’” I say. He holds my eyes for a moment, frowning; I stare back, serious and unsmiling, because I meant every heartfelt word.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. Wow. I – I – me too. It’s not your fault, that’s all – it’s not your fault I don’t get it.”

“I didn’t think it was,” I say mildly, casting about for a way to reassure him, and falling back, as always, on science. “I had thought of trying to do a

graphic representation of capitalism on a flow chart but it was beyond my abilities and no doubt you would have commandeered the structure for its molecular possibilities.”

He smiles, finally, and says, simply, “Yeah. And – I liked Patrick, thanks – he really wasn’t hard to talk to.”

We finish the walk in a companionable silence, broken only by the occasional observation, our sense of ease restored; and it is not until much later, after I’ve left Ray at the lab and when I am in my car with Diefenbaker and heading home for the evening, that I realise Ray never did answer me. I review the conversations: his method of sidetracking me was so subtly done perhaps he didn’t even know he was doing it.

I turn the car around. Diefenbaker raises his head and looks at me; I ignore him. He can have pizza; Ray had called Sandor as we were leaving. If Ray doesn’t want to tell me what’s going on, I naturally have to respect that; but there’s no reason I can’t go over his statements myself and see if I can piece together what’s puzzling him.

“No, there’s no reason for me to get a cot,” I say as we walk to the building. I see Sandor’s car, parked, as always, in the never-used handicapped space. “We’ll run an extra loop tomorrow and you can keep your sarcasm to yourself for the rest of the evening. I only started talking to you out of pity, you know, and I can stop any time.”

As we enter the lobby, I see Sandor coming out of the elevator, and I’m somewhat surprised; he usually spends an hour or two with Ray. I look a question at him as I approach him.

“He’s in a mood tonight,” Sandor says with a head shake. “Pizza wasn’t right and he’s got papers all over the table. So I just left some CDs. Sometimes he has to wallow.”

“Does he?”

“Yeah. Not as much as he – when he – after–” he stumbles over the words, looks at me apologetically, then continues, “–not as much as he used to. Is everything okay? You guys aren’t getting any funding pulled and stuff, are you?”

He sounds genuinely concerned; I reassure him instinctively, incidentally delighted at his firm grasp of the financial underpinnings of modern scientific research: I’ve always thought him to be a very sensible man and that question confirms me further in my opinion. “No, I don’t think it’s that. I don’t really know what it is, Sandor, but he is, as you say, in a mood. He has been all day, starting with Dr. Metcalf this morning.”

He grimaces; it’s another characteristic we share, that irrational dislike for a certain pleasant, attractive, professional woman. “Is that why you came back?”

“No, I’m afraid not. I left some papers here I needed to go over. Come back up with me; perhaps we can coax him out of his mood.”

“No. No, I got things to do. I’ll see him tomorrow; it’s Friday.”

“Ah. Very true. Drive carefully; it’s supposed to snow again.”

He snorts and grins. “Been delivering pizza in Chicago for years, Mr. Fraser.”

“Call me Ben.”

“Okay, Ben. Ain’t no weather I can’t drive in.”

“Pride goeth...”

“Ah,” he says, scoffing. “See you tomorrow.”

“All right.”

The music is pounding; I can feel the bass vibrations in the floor when I step off the elevator. Perhaps that’s another reason he prefers the lab: no other tenants to complain about his musical habits.

He’s not, for once, hunched on his stool. He’s sitting on the floor near his desk, tailor fashion, back to the wall, his head buried in his hands, his body absolutely still; and the song he’s listening to is, from what I can make out, not only heavy metal but very grim to boot.

“Nirvana?” I ask, loud enough to be heard over the music, noting the untouched pizza on the table near him.

He starts slightly at the sound of my voice but he doesn’t raise his head or turn immediately and his response is too muffled to make out. Diefenbaker, surprisingly, bypasses the pizza to go and lick Ray’s ear, which brings Ray up out of his position with unsurprising speed. “No, Dief, get off me!”

Diefenbaker moves in front of Ray and sits, ostentatious and insolent, with his back to Ray.

“It tickled,” Ray says to his back.

“He’s deaf,” I say.

Ray pokes Diefenbaker in the back and leans around him. “It tickled!” he enunciates. “Go have some pizza.”

Dief rewards the apology with a swipe of his tongue and a cheerful disregard for Ray’s ensuing and expected outburst and trots over to the table, where he gets up on one of the chairs.

Ray twists around to look at me. “Hey,” he says. “Not Nirvana. BÖC.”

“Ah. Are you all right?”

Ray stretches, cracks his neck, inducing me to crack my own in a sympathetic reaction, and reaches up to the desk to turn the volume on his laptop down. “I-I’m fine. I’m stuck, just – that’s all. What – what are you doing back? Have some pizza? Tony left the p-pineapple off.”

“Idiot,” I say. “Diefenbaker doesn’t mind, but then he’s rather indiscriminate about pizza.” Diefenbaker, from under the table, where he’s polishing off his second slice, lifts his head and whines. I roll my eyes at him and look back at Ray. “What are you stuck with, Ray? Can I help? Or perhaps you ought simply to go to bed.”

“No, it’s – it’s nothing. “ To my surprise, he looks a trifle embarrassed. “What are you doing here?” he repeats. “You didn’t come all the way back to – to mess with those, uh, gra-gratuitous grant proposals some more, did you?”

“I’ve told you before, Ray, that it’s not wise to have all your funding dollars in one basket, to coin a phrase.”

“It’s a lot of work, Fraser, that’s all. Willsie’s not going anywhere.”

"I don't mind, Ray."

"Nah. You never do. So what are you doing back?"

Tenacious. No sense in pussyfooting around. "I thought I would take another look at your bank statements."

He stares at me for a long, long moment; his glasses are on the desk and his eyes are rather bloodshot. He blinks two or three times before he says, slowly, "C-Can't you just leave it, Fraser? Why c-can't you let it g-go?"

"It's not in my nature," I say steadily.

"No." He thinks about that for a moment, and then says, with more assurance, "No. But there are some things you c-can't – that I have to – it's not enzymes, F-Fraser. It's not even laundry. Leave it."

I step closer to him and crouch down in front of him and look him in the eye. "Are you in trouble, Ray? I can help."

He makes the tiniest movement toward me and then checks himself and looks away, down at the floor again. "No. What – what trouble could I be in, Fraser? I – I never leave the lab."

"That's not an answer, Ray."

"Fraser, I – I don't want to – to tell you it's not your business..."

"You're perfectly welcome to tell me that; sadly it will have little or no effect. My father would be happy to commiserate with you on that significant character flaw of mine."

He looks back at me finally and there's a spark of anger in his eyes. "I think m-maybe I would too. I'm – I'm going to go to bed. Lock up when you leave."

"Snubbed twice in one day," I say, swivelling on my heel and moving to sit next to him against the wall. "Luckily we Canucks have thick hides."

"Thick heads," Ray says, with a sidelong glance at me.

"No argument from this corner," I say, and tip my head back against the wall, thinking it lightly once for emphasis.

He doesn't get up and go into the bathroom; instead he moves backwards too and leans against the wall.

We sit in silence for a time; Diefenbaker, apparently adjudging correctly that to ask for a third slice would be pushing his luck, circles three times beneath the table and curls up with a thud and a loud exhalation.

"I think you're tired," I say without looking at him, after a long five or six minutes.

He makes a sound of assent in his throat.

"Tired," he says in a faraway voice. "I'm – yeah. I've been t-tired for a long time."

"You've been doing all of it for a long time, Ray. Alone."

"Yeah. Alone. I – I don't mind alone, Fraser."

"No. It's a good thing, Ray. It takes a strong mind and person to enjoy being alone."

"You – really? You think?"

"I know, Ray. Where I'm from, alone is the rule rather than the exception. There are few planes; fewer roads; very few people. And then there

are nights that last twenty three hours and days that seem to go on forever, one very like the next.”

“Ice and snow,” Ray says quietly.

“Mountains too.”

“Caribou.”

“They’re not good conversationalists.”

“Moose?”

“As annoying as they can be, in my experience wolves are probably the best option if one absolutely has to have speech. Unfortunately one then opens oneself to over-familiarity and criticism.” I raise my voice slightly; Diefenbaker opens one eye, grunts, and closes it again.

Ray’s laugh is a little muffled, as if he’s too weary to bring even a chuckle to fruition tonight.

“I – I don’t mind wolves either.”

“Nor do I, on the whole, but don’t tell him. His opinion of himself is already ridiculously high.”

That garners a real laugh. “I wish – wish he could look at the damned proteasomes with us.”

“Damned recalcitrant proteasomes,” I say. “He wouldn’t tolerate them at all, nor would his language be appropriate for any company, civilised or un.”

“Wolves like to be alone.”

“Yes. Sometimes. Some wolves are born that way. I think Dief was, actually.”

“And he stopped wanting to be... I mean, he wanted to be... not-alone when... when he met you?”

“Yes. Apparently. He’s never been altogether clear about his motivations. I suspect the prospect of future pizza may have influenced his decision.”

“What about you? Have you ever wanted to be alone and... and not-alone?”

The question is sufficiently unexpected that I glance at him once before looking away. “Of course. Don’t we all? Haven’t you?”

“No,” he says, very softly. “No.”

“Not even with...” I don’t want to say her name, and I don’t need to.

“I – yeah – or I – I thought I did. But now... now I think maybe it was an inner ear imbalance.”

He says this so solemnly that I’m hard-pressed not to laugh; but then I see a tell-tale quiver at the corner of his mouth, and I turn my head to look at him, to smile, to let him see my joy in him, open for once, hiding nothing.

He smiles back, and this time the smile reaches all the way into his eyes where it shivers into a million iridescent sparks.

“What about you? What about your... girlfriend?” he asks, still looking at me, into me.

Now, at the point, I cannot lie to him. I could prevaricate; deflect; mislead. Instead I open my mouth and hear myself say plainly, “There was never a... girlfriend, Ray. And, no: mine wasn’t an inner ear imbalance. It was more along the lines of a ringing in the ears.”

“Oh,” is all he says. The smile fades from his face but the light is still in his eyes; and after a few more moments he adds, “He seemed like a really nice guy.”

I swallow hard, attempt a smile, manage a nod. “He is. We’re... we’re friends,” I say, almost inaudibly.

He nods once, as if in some inner confirmation, and then says firmly, “Thank you. Thanks for telling me.”

“You’re welcome,” I say, proud that my voice is steady, simultaneously exhilarated and frightened to death; but his reaction is, upon reflection, what I have come to expect from him.

“Thank you,” he says again. Abruptly he gets to his feet and stretches, and then reaches a hand down to help me to mine; his hand is strong and warm, and his long fingers are gentle against my skin and I bite the inside of my lower lip hard: my emotions are all too close to the surface at this moment, not just feelings for Ray but feelings about Ray, about me, about Mark, about Stella, about the past and things that can’t and shouldn’t be changed; and, because the past is already gone, the future is set in inevitable patterns. Ruts, Mark would say; he always said that; and supported wholeheartedly the exchange of a rut in Cleveland with a rut in Chicago, hoping it would be a shallower one. And I wonder if he would have urged me to it if he had foreseen the outcome; and then think he might have done, after all, because he was, and is, a friend, first.

“Hey, Frase. Fra-ser. You there?” Ray waves a hand before my eyes. “I’m not the only one who’s tired.” He looks down at my hands, which are still clasped around his. “Wake up.” But he’s smiling, and continues to do so despite my flush of embarrassment, especially deep in the wake of my disclosure. I see no discomfort in his face or his bearing; instead he reaches out with his now-freed hand and squeezes my shoulder. “You’re tired too.”

“You have a tendency to exhaust those in your vicinity,” I say, trying to regain my composure. “Go to bed. Would you like a ride home?”

“No.” He shakes his head, reaching for his glasses and hooking the earpieces back over his ears with an ease born of long practice. “Here I got pizza without pineapple. There I got black-eyed peas. You haven’t eaten. Eat with me. You want a soda?”

“Yes; I’ll fetch some.”

“No, Sandor brought me a six-pack. I stuck them in the utility fridge.”

“You’d better not let—”

“Carlo’ll be too busy tomorrow to worry about it.”

Over cold soda and lukewarm pizza, we talk shop: a recent article rejecting the role of PrP in Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease¹⁸ and its implications for our own research and directions in our related field, and the conclusions it draws, with which we, unsurprisingly, disagree.

¹⁸ Manuelidis L, Sklaviadis T, Manuelidis EE. Evidence suggesting that PrP is not the infectious agent in Creutzfeldt-jakob disease. EMBO 1 1995; 6

“Sloppy work,” Ray says around a mouthful of pizza. “I’d never have passed it for publication. The premise was faulty.”

“Faulty or not, it raised some interesting questions.”

“Yeah, but there’s no point in answering those questions if they’re based on a faulty—”

“Certainly there is, if the points would otherwise never have been addressed.”

“They’re not – they’re not valid questions, Fraser,” he says earnestly.

“Simply because the premise is faulty doesn’t mean those questions are invalid.”

“See, that’s your problem, Fraser, you’re going to go on their ground and try to argue with them and win and you never will because they’re arguing from a faulty premise. You have to choose your battles, Fraser, and if you get sidetracked into an argument where they’ve re-redefined the – the terms, you’ll never get anywhere.”

While I try to formulate a response to that astonishingly simple view of the world, he adds, “And there were at least three major errors in the formulae. If I’d reviewed it I’d never have recommended it for publication.”

Having prepared some of his scathing and always-pithy review summaries for professional journals – the complete opposite of his comments on the student papers turned in for the honours special topics course he teaches, irregularly and intermittently, and in which no student has ever received a mark lower than an “A,” because, I suspect, computing grades simply doesn’t register on Ray’s radar¹⁹ – I can readily believe that, and I say so, and the conversation turns, quite naturally, to our own publications: an article we finished last week, now ready to be sent to a neurological journal, on the intracerebral distribution of amyloid protein²⁰; and then the article we’re preparing for publication on protein immunohistochemical staining²¹. I remark idly on the possible allelic variations in the prion protein genotype in Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease²² that I think the authors of the recent article ought to be taking into account, and Ray looks at me sharply.

“You think that could be related to plaque formation and age of onset in Alzheimer’s?” he asks.

I know a rhetorical question when I hear one: I can already see the wheels turning. “Sporadic, of course,” I say helpfully, and duck as he throws a crumpled napkin at me.

“You did immunocytochemical studies at Columbia and Sackler, didn’t you?” he asks. “Didn’t you—”

¹⁹ Otsoko Guretxea. Email, 3/10/2001.

²⁰ Kowalski SR, Fraser B, Zeffirelli C. Intracerebral distribution of amyloid protein in early-onset Alzheimer's patients. *Ann Neurol* 1996; 38: 245-253

²¹ Kowalski SR, Fraser B, Zeffirelli C. A quantitative and qualitative analysis of beta-amyloid protein immunohistochemical staining in Alzheimer's disease. *Neurodegeneration* 1996; 5: 87-94.

²² Fraser B, Kowalski SR. Allelic variations in apolipoprotein E related to plaque formation and age of onset in Alzheimer's disease. *Neuroscience Letters* 1997; 187: 127-129.

“Yes; I was interested in crystal structures of protein-proteinase inhibitor complexes, among other things.”²³

“Not so far off from Alzheimer’s, after all,” Ray says.

“Well, not now, not since you turned your attention to it,” I say with a grin, gathering up the empty box and tucking the used napkins and empty soda cans inside it and then closing it. “You are planning to get some sleep tonight and not stay up worrying about allelic variations, right?”

15) The way they are looking at cures now is vaccination (antibodies has been shown to clear plaques and improve memory) and altering of the protease activities (ie, enhancing the non-amyloidogenic pathway at cost of the amyloidogenic). I know it's difficult to write this, and you don't have to do all or any of the changes I propose, but I thought you might want to know about them.

“You believe whatever makes you happy,” Ray says, and from the light dancing in his eyes I can tell that the ‘mood’ is completely gone. He goes to wash his hands and I follow him after setting the pizza box outside the door; by the time I come back from the bathroom, he’s already seated in front of the laptop, a molecular model displayed in brilliant colour. Passing behind him, I note it; and then do a double take worthy of any silent film star.

“Ray, that’s not one of the precursor models. That – that looks like some kind of retrovirus–”

He whips around and to my surprise he looks not only amazed but guilty. “No. No, um... no... It’s – it’s insane, I know, I thought maybe a virus to deliver it–”

“Ray, you... you *are* a damned... genius,” I breathe, pulling a chair over. I should have known: Ray would have to work on the whole cure, the whole enchilada indeed; and that term takes on new meaning for me, often as I’ve heard him use it. The whole enchilada, cure and delivery of said cure, wrapped up in one incredibly neat package. He stares hard at me, puzzled, and then he smiles, but I’m too distracted to do more than smile back, briefly, my attention fixed on the screen, my hand reaching for the mouse. “Artificial or natural? I’ve heard it postulated, isn’t there a scientist in Germany²⁴ who’s working on artificial virus particles but he’s still in a largely theoretical stage – and look what you’ve done, just in models. Artificial, right? How are you going to deliver it, no, that’s a stupid question, you’re going to do protein attachment rather than direct membrane fusion, given the nature of the enzyme, or, no – well, yes; that would target it more accurately–”

²³ Cahill A, Roberts G and Fraser B. (1990) The 2.0 Å crystal structure of bovine interferon-: Assessment of the structural differences between species. *Acta Crystallographica Section D* 56:14-24;

Cahill A, Linden T, Roberts G, Fraser B & Korolev I. (1989) Probing intermolecular backbone H-bonding in serine proteinase-protein inhibitor complexes. *Chemistry & Biology* 6:419-427.

²⁴ Gerald Böhm.

He holds up a hand, and he's laughing, so hard that I wonder for a fleeting moment if he's playing a joke. "Whoa, Fraser. Um, wow. I haven't – well, I've considered that, it'll have to be some kind of protein attachment so the affected amyloids are targeted, but I'm still working with the basic problems, like lysis and self limitation – I – " He pauses and looks at me, hard, and then he frowns again. "You – you get this? It's – it's okay?"

"What's not to get?" I ask, a trifle impatiently, pulling the laptop closer to me so I can reach the keyboard. "There are inherent difficulties in any delivery method; this one simply has the internal sort, cell-based biological limitations, rather than the external sort. The replication is a big problem, I see that; lysis, less so, given the fact that we're working with a very specific–"

"And when we're done with that we can work on faster-than-light travel."

"You know, Ray," I say, without really listening, "in prokaryotes, there is an exception that the ends of some mRNAs can form stem-loop conformation to stop protein synthesis. No, now I know we're not talking about bacteria here but–"

"Well, no, we're not. The self replication, repeating chains, we only know how to turn those off chemically and when and how to do that, without affecting the cure–"

"The chains are repeating, true – the viruses are repeating – but you've got a logic flaw. Mathematically it's a good theorem, but just because a set, just because the virus can, in itself, consist of recursively occurring elements doesn't mean that the set as a set is recursive–"

"Recursive sets? Who the hell talks like that, what the hell do you mean? A virus has to replicate, it has to be repeating, it can't be repeating and non-repeating, if it's got repeating elements, how do you stop them from repeating the whole thing over and over? Molecular selection drives cellular evolution."

"Barbara McClintock aside, Ray, of course it's possible to have sets that consist of recursive elements without the sets, in themselves, being recursive. Look." I shove my stool over to his drafting table and illustrate a basic logic problem in pictures. He follows intently, frowning, leaning over me. He grabs a marker, rips off the sheet of paper I was working on and draws a flow chart with two concurrent chains. He stares at it for a long, long time, doodling a viral chain on the bottom of the sheet, absently. I occupy myself by sketching a molecule and then a nucleotide chain, pondering on the process of atom to molecule to chain, and the related process of how replication works on an atomic level and how to switch it off and then, and only then, does Ray's comment about faster than light travel sink in.

I turn to look at him, to laugh, and he's got his head in his hands, his thumb and forefinger squeezed together on the bridge of his nose, glasses pushed up against his forehead. Without thinking, I put a hand on his shoulder and then move it up to squeeze, gently, the back of his neck, tense under my fingers. I only realise what I've done when he tenses further; I begin to pull my hand away when I feel him relax under my touch. He raises his head, pushing back into my hand.

“Mmm,” he mutters. “I’m – this, I’m getting this – this idea. It’s – what is that, isn’t that Gödel’s theorem? Everything I say is a lie and the truth at the same time? I don’t – I mean, I see how it works, on paper. How it works in my head–”

“Strange loops indeed.”

He snickers, rolls his neck and cracks it, and I feel the vibration move through my fingers, still in place on either side of his cervical vertebrae. “Fraser. God. My loops hurt.”

I squeeze his neck again and push my fingers down into the taut muscles.

“You’re a freak,” he says with evident affection.

“So you’ve said.” Finally, reluctantly, I move away, the residual warmth of his skin lingering for more than a few heartbeats on my fingertips. He turns back to his laptop then, frowning at the screensaver.

“Ray, is staring at a computer screen going to help? How about a walk?”

He cracks his neck again, looks at me curiously. “It’s getting late. I could use some coffee.”

“I’ll walk with you to the coffee shop if you like.”

“Um... yeah. Okay. Okay. I thought you’d tell me it was too late for coffee.”

“I’m well aware I was being baited, Ray.”

“You take all the fun out of it, Frase.” He shuts down his laptop; as usual, even on the spur of the moment, late at night, a deserted building, he takes the time to remove the hard drive, shoving it into his inner jacket pocket.

We walk to the coffee shop, Diefenbaker enthusiastically bounding ahead and then back to us repeatedly. Once there, I decide to sit and have a cup with Ray, who was rather silent on the walk and is more silent now. I respect the silence even as I try to discern its cause. It seems different from his usual absorption in matters biological; this one seems more personal, somehow, almost wistful, and I don’t know why. Certainly he has more than enough to absorb his mind, professionally speaking, at the moment.

I glance up, out the window. We are the only two in the coffee bar, although it’s more than an hour to closing. It has started to snow again, the big thick soft flakes that herald school closings and make one grateful that one is within reasonable walking distance of work simply so one needn’t deal with frustrated and frustrating drivers; and again I think I catch a glimpse of a dark haired woman in a dark coat at the edge of my peripheral vision. When I turn my head, sharply, there’s nothing there, of course.

Hallucinations, indeed; but I feel sufficiently uneasy to see Ray safely inside, back at the lab, extracting a promise from him to attempt sleep tonight, before Diefenbaker and I retrieve the car and make our way home; and I suspect that Diefenbaker, too, is watching the shadows for ghosts tonight.

Once home, I call Mark. There’s no answer; I didn’t think there would be. I haven’t looked at his schedule lately but he’s probably playing an away game; and this isn’t something I can put into email. I simply need to hear a sane, human, voice, divorced from my current reality and my mono-existence. After

a few moments' thought, I call my father. Human, certainly; sane, less so; divorced from my current reality, yes. Completely.

Third ring and I resign myself to voice mail; he has a habit of forgetting to charge his cell phone and he usually answers on the first ring otherwise because he has no time to waste on preliminaries or, often, courtesies, and hasn't, not since the flooding of a valley was narrowly averted, long ago.

"Benton? Good God."

Of course, the third option – it is late, even though he's two hours behind: he was asleep and sounds worried, for him: altogether impatient, in other words.

"Hello, Dad. How are you?"

"Asleep, Benton."

"Console yourself with the thought then that this is merely an unpleasant dream."

"If I could, son, I would."

"Great-Uncle Tiberius always said—"

"Son, if you're calling to bring up skeletons wrapped in cabbage leaves, I can think of better ways for you to spend your money."

"Well, if I really wanted to waste my money I could get you started on Great-Uncle Cornelius."

He snorts. "Treaties, indeed." Somewhat to my surprise, however, he doesn't take the bait. "How's the job, Benton?"

"Absorbing. All encompassing. How are the dogs? How much snow do you have?"

"The dogs are fine; I've got two puppies to trade for a male puppy from Ellen's lead dog. We've got the usual amount of snow for this time of year: the world hasn't stopped rotating, last time I looked, son. Endless stretches of concrete wearing you down? I ran into Quinn the other day. Gave me a nice caribou. Asked about you."

"I'll be up for spring break up."

"We ought to think about getting you another team."

"Possibly. I've grown soft."

"You're a Fraser."

"Tell me about the time you watched the cabin for eleven days, Dad, even though you knew no one was there after nine."

"Sometimes what we think we want to see, son, isn't what we want to see."

"Dad?"

"Benton?"

"Were you always this irritating or does it simply take maturity in order to appreciate you?"

"The latter, son, the latter. Built an office on the side of the cabin."

"What the hell do you need with an office, Dad?"

"Writing my memoirs."

"Oh, that ought to go over big."

"Oh, I hope so, son. I hope so. Go to bed."

“You too. Memoirs. My God.”

“Good night, Benton.”

“Good night, Dad.”

“Benton.”

“Yes?”

“I’ll look at that litter for a dog for you too.”

“If you like. Good night.”

“Good night and good riddance, Benton.”

We hang up simultaneously; I glance at Diefenbaker, who’s pointedly ignored the entire conversation. He likes pizza, of course, and he’s assured me more than once that he wanted to come here; but he hates being reminded of winter in, around, or near Inuvik. He’ll undoubtedly sulk for a day or two unless we get enough snow tonight to take his mind off things.

Ray’s not at his best the next day; it’s a good thing there’s a great deal of rather technical and mostly straightforward lab work to accomplish. He’s still in that odd, almost pensive mood, although it seems, as it did last night, to be more personal than professional. I arrived early and he asked me not to mention the virus idea to anyone else. As if he needed to do so: I reassure him and hand over his coffee. Carlo’s late, looking harassed and in need of coffee: fortunately I thought to bring enough for everyone.

Ray calls an early day, as he often does on Fridays now; Sandor generally shows up, unasked now, each Friday complete with pizzas and even Rebecca has relaxed enough now to have a piece or two from time to time before her boyfriend, earnest and lanky, arrives to take her home. Dr. Zhamnova and her people generally appear in conjunction with Carlo now and even Dr. Thatcher has been known to stop in from time to time.

Sandor and Ray get involved in their inevitable musical conversation after Dr. Zhamnova and Dr. Thatcher leave and, somewhat to my surprise, Carlo engages me in a generic conversation that encompasses first the paper that we’re working on and then, oddly, moves to hockey, touching briefly on Mark, whom I gather Ray has mentioned in passing, before returning to immunofluorescent assays. It’s later than I intended to stay when I finally realise the time that has passed and we both stand almost simultaneously, making motions of imminent departure.

Sandor grins at me as Carlo and Ray have a brief conversation, and says, in a low voice, “Out of that mood.”

“So he is. Will you see he gets home? The roads are bad.”

“Yeah.” He looks affronted until I smile; and then he relaxes. “Always do. If he’ll go.”

“All right. Dief!”

“Fraser?” Ray looks up from his conversation with Carlo. He sounds startled. “You leaving already?”

“Yes, sorry, Ray, I’ve got a couple of errands to run. Give me a call – if I’m at loose ends tomorrow I’ll come in if you want me to.”

“Oh.” He sounds taken aback; again, I’m finding it quite hard to read his mood today. “Um, okay. See you later.”

Carlo and I walk to the parking lot together; it's snowing quite hard now and I offer Carlo a ride home. He looks at the road, shakes his head, and says, "Be better off on foot. I'm not too far. Thanks anyway."

"I'm inclined to think you're right. Enjoy your weekend."

"You too." He lifts an arm in a goodbye but for some reason he stands, watching, as Diefenbaker and I pull out into the street. I see in the rearview mirror that he stands there a few more moments, watching us, before turning and trudging away.

The errands take up the better part of two hours, and the roads have worsened considerably by the time we make our way back to my apartment, complete with the necessities to ride out a storm: milk, bread, eggs, coffee, toilet paper, and dog food. I let Dief gambol in the snowdrifts behind the building as I unload the car and then put the groceries away. When I go back downstairs to fetch him he's already burrowed into a snowdrift and shows no inclination to emerge.

Threatening to leave him to freeze, is of course, nonsensical, and how he keeps a straight face I will never know. I am forced, finally, to resort to a (muttered) bribe, incomprehensible to any but a deaf, recalcitrant wolf, of a half a doughnut. He holds out for three quarters of one and, bargain struck, consents at last to come inside after extracting an additional promise to go skating in the morning. I shake my head and murmur at his back as he ascends the stairs: "You pay and you pay and you pay..."

He sniffs at our door longer than is his wont; I begin to ask him if something's wrong when my phone rings. To my surprise, it's Sandor, letting me know that Ray is staying at the lab and that he, Sandor, is going emphatically home and will not be delivering pizza on the morrow for God or even for Ray. I thank him and hang up, unaccountably relieved. True, snack machines aren't much better than Nescafé and a can of beans, but Ray can always scrounge instant soup and hot coffee at the lab, at least, and while the cot is less than comfortable to someone like me, at least Ray is around people.

I shake myself: I always had a vivid imagination and my grandmother shook her head over it more than once, as I often thought my way into nightmares; and this sense of odd foreboding is my mind up to its childish tricks again, after all these years. "It must stop, Benton," I say out loud, crossing to the kitchen to pour myself a glass of wine and to get my shameless wolf his doughnut: three quarters is ridiculous, after all, so I hand him a whole one with a mournful shake of my head, which he, rightly so, utterly disregards: I am, after all, the one who resorted to bribery in the first place.

I've changed out of my suit and settled on the couch with Diefenbaker and a few journals when there's an ominous hum and the lights go out. Diefenbaker grunts. I wait a few moments, letting my eyes adjust and hoping, of course, that the lights will come back on before sighing heavily and making my way to the kitchen.

The previous occupant left a good two dozen utility candles in a cupboard above the refrigerator. I pull down a handful and hear a couple roll off the counter into the sink as I fumble for matches. I light the ubiquitous kerosene

lantern on the pass-through first, casting a glow into the living room and the kitchen simultaneously: I have always been convinced, not quite rationally, that if I didn't have one on the premises there would be a knock at the door and the ghost of Great-Uncle Tiberius would be there with an armful of them, scolding me for forsaking my Northwest Territorial heritage. As well he should: after the almost complete darkness the lantern seems companionably and more than adequately bright.

From the couch Diefenbaker whines in approbation, and then barks softly, more than a hint to light a fire tonight.

"Two minds with but a single thought," I say to him, good-humoured again: it's no mystery that man fears darkness, and it's rather trite of Diefenbaker to draw analogies to the vast unknown and the circle of the familiar.

I think a moment and light the two candles on the dining room table, and then carry as many candles as I can into the living room, to the large window that's framed by the built in bookshelves. It's a low window, large, with a wide sill, and I fill it with as many candles as I can carry, going back for a second load, stacking some on books to stagger their heights.

Diefenbaker whines as I light them, each successive candle adding to the glow, inside and out. "No, we may not need a fire after all," I say, standing back to admire the picture. I return the matches to the counter and begin to cross to the couch when the reflection of the candles in the window with the snow swirling outside draws me closer, makes me catch my breath. I go over to the window, pushing up my shirtsleeves, and lean to look out at the falling snow, the window an odd flickering reflection in the darkness, other windows in the area lit too with the soft glow of candle and fire light instead of harsh electricity.

I wonder about Ray: he may not even be aware it's snowing and the university has back-up generators. He's probably still hunched over his laptop, puzzling away the mysteries of replication and RNA in viruses, listening to the Go-Go's. Or, no, this week it was Jethro Tull, I believe. An involuntary smile curves my mouth, as it often does at the thought of him, and I catch sight of myself in the window, framed by the warm glow of candles and yet standing outside, in the snow, looking in, as if I am someone else and not me at all, and I feel an ineffable sadness. I close my eyes and think, again, of Ray, instead of the stranger in the window who is me and not-me.

I open my eyes again after a moment. Diefenbaker is staring at me in the window, and the man there is looking at him just as I am looking at the man's wolf, all I can really see of him glowing eyes framed by black rings and the peaks of his ears, spectral snow falling through him.

Diefenbaker whines, unblinking, staring at not-me, forcing me to look back at us just as not-me looks at me. I raise a hand and wonder if I try to touch him if I will feel cold glass, warm flesh, or ghostly chill. He stares at me, hand also upraised, eyes knowing and watchful, as if he too sees more than himself from his window. His wolf stares at us both, and then I see the hackles begin to rise on his wolf's neck. My own neck prickles in involuntary response as I look

down at Diefenbaker; his too are raised. I look back at myself and his mouth is open, as if in warning, and then, abruptly, startling us all, both our wolves bark sharply. I shake myself: thinking into nightmares again, and I push the sudden and unwelcome thought of Victoria firmly out of my head along with the brief frightening flash of blood stark red on white snow, banishing imaginary demons.

“Absolutely ridiculous,” I mutter. “Shall I tell Uncle Tiberius’ ghost cat story to top things off, Diefenbaker? Or is this enough adolescent nonsense for one evening?”

Diefenbaker, as is his wont, begins to sulk instantly at the mere mention of a cat, and moves his head ostentatiously to his leg, nose pointing to the floor, ignoring me and my reflection, and his, as we both should have done from the start. I move to reclaim my seat on the couch when there’s a thud in the hall and an almost simultaneous thump on the door.

“Mrs. Gillespie needs to borrow matches or candles,” I say to Diefenbaker and make my way around the back of the couch and across the room. I hadn’t thought to put a candle in the stairwell, and I open the door with an apology on my lips that dies as soon as I make sense of the snow covered figure before me.

“Hey,” he says, half-shy. “I was two-thirds here and the lights went out. It was pretty weird. Lots of snow. I thought maybe you and Dief would be out in it.”

“I – ah – no. He – Good God, Ray, are you insane?”

He stomps his foot on the rug outside the door, shaking loose more snow. “I – yeah. I mean – I couldn’t – think – and you left. And Sandor left. And, um, black eyed peas didn’t sound f-fun. And – and, um, you said–”

“I meant that, you idiot.” I pull him roughly inside, masking my feelings with brusqueness. “I’m extremely pleased to see you. I would have been better pleased had I seen you an hour or two ago, before the blizzard kicked up and the power went out.”

“Yeah, that was stupid,” he says happily, relaxed again, stripping off his mittens and blowing on his hands: the only grown man I know outside the Northwest Territories who wears mittens and I wonder briefly where on earth he gets them before the obvious answer occurs to me. “It wasn’t snowing that hard when I left, though. This is great, Fraser. Those candles are, uh, wow. I saw them from the street. Like a lighthouse. Saw you too, I thought, looking out.”

“Looking in,” I murmur absently, unwinding his muffler, shaking the snow onto the floor and brushing more off his coat. “You have three feet of snow on your hat. I should be glad you wore a hat.”

“Yeah,” he says simply. “Think the power’ll be out long?”

“I hope not. You need some coffee.”

“Just make instant with hot water.” At my horrified look he grins and shakes his head. “Live a little, Fraser.”

“That would be you, I think, Ray. I prefer to live a lot. It’s a gas stove. Get the rest of your things off; I’ll put the kettle on.”

It's the work of seconds to put a kettle on, and when I come back out he's unbundled, his outer garments in a pile by the door. His pants are soaked well past the knee. I shake my head at his apologetic grin and, picking up a candlestick from the table and shielding the flame with my hand, say over my shoulder, "Come on."

"You got an extra pair of those red things you wear to bed?" he says hopefully, following me. "They as warm as they look?"

"Yes and yes. You are staying the night, I infer."

"Ha. Yeah. If—"

"No ifs, ands, or buts, Ray." I set the candlestick down on the dresser and pull open a drawer, fumbling in the darkness, finding my way by feel rather than sight: it's disconcerting to realise how much one relies on what one sees. Or thinks one sees, as my father said; and then I wonder what I thought I wanted to see in the window and what my father would make of that, when, of course, he finished laughing. "Here we are." I found them by feel after all, shoved to one side in the drawer, not in their usual place, or perhaps I'm disoriented by the darkness.

He's sitting on the end of the bed, pulling his socks off, still looking apologetic, the planes of his face absolutely breathtaking in the flicker of candlelight, his eyes mirroring a tiny dancing flame.

Dear God, Benton, get a grip.

"You okay?" he says, standing again, his hands moving to his pants, somewhat to my surprise: I had thought that in this, at least, there might be some slight awkwardness in the post-revelation phase, as it were.

"Yes; I'm overly fanciful tonight, and Diefenbaker's not being his usual pragmatic self either. I'll go check the kettle. My robe's in the bathroom, you may want it as well. If the power doesn't come back on soon it will get chilly. I'll light a fire."

"As long as you think I can be trusted alone with a candle," he says with a grin, followed by the sound of his zipper. I slide my unruly tongue back into my mouth and bite the end of it, hard, as I cross swiftly to the door. It's absolutely ridiculous to leap to conclusions, unforgivable in the scientific mind, and completely unacceptable to speculate on such things: perhaps I am unhinged. Tonight, in fact, I can easily believe that of myself.

"Just leave the candle there then," I say without turning; even my self control would be sorely tried at the sight of him in nothing but candlelight. "There's enough light in the hallway as it stands. Don't forget the robe."

"O-ok-kay," he says softly, and he sounds, perplexingly, apologetic again; and then I hear his teeth chatter.

I turn, swiftly; he's pulling off his T-shirt, his skin appearing warm and tawny in the candlelight, belying the actual air temperature. I avert my eyes, moving back to my dresser. "You need a clean T-shirt too. Layers. All I have are boxers..."

"S-starched?" he says, a tiny laugh stuttering out along with the word.

I grin at him. "I'd think it would be uncomfortable. Do I seem the type?" I turn back to the drawer, rummaging.

“C-could be,” he says. “Lot I d-don’t know about C-Canadians. I d-don’t know how I g-got so d-darned wet.”

“Possibly the rate of snowfall and the wind speed combined with the distance travelled may have had...” I turn, holding out the socks and shirt and boxers, and the words die on my lips: he’s standing, naked and shivering, waiting, one hand outstretched for the clothes I’m holding and he is everything I could have imagined, and more, in candlelight, and a warm heady flush overtakes me and slows my brain to a crawl.

And then I understand: he’s trying to prove something to me, trying to show me nothing has changed between us; and sanity returns, its cold grip shocking but welcome; and I brace myself, swallow once, and smile at him, my eyes never leaving his face. “Here you are. The sooner you get dressed the better. I’ll make some chicken soup instead of coffee, if you don’t mind instant soup, and we’ll light a fire.”

He frowns, apparently confused, but he takes the clothes from me. Our hands touch as he does so and I shiver, involuntarily, no doubt a sympathetic reaction: the urge to enfold him in my arms and warm him is almost overwhelming. He stares at me a moment longer and then smiles again, simple, relaxed. “That sounds great. Thanks, Frase. For – for everything.”

“Nonsense, Ray. Get dressed. You’re losing body heat by the second; it’s probably less than sixty-five in here at the moment.” I turn my back on him again as I speak, covering the distance to the door in less than two strides.

He emerges as I begin to work with the fireplace, the soup, mugged and hearthed, sending curling tendrils of steam and scent into the cool air. He perches on the edge of the coffee table and reaches for the mug closest to him, his red-clad arm inches from my face.

“You forgot the robe,” I say, striking a match and setting it to the tinder at the base of my log pyramid.

“Cool fire,” he says, ignoring me. “Is that a Canadian fire?”

“Scout fire. Don’t tell me you weren’t in Scouts.”

He shrugs and grins at me as I look over my shoulder at him, and then takes a sip of his soup. “I think I’ve, uh, successfully repressed most – well, okay, all – of the memories.” He takes another sip and exhales sharply.

“Scalding your tongue isn’t going to warm your innards faster,” I say acidly and hear an echo – too many echoes tonight – of my grandmother.

“Fire’ll help,” he says, moving a little closer, stretching his bare feet towards the flame.

“Didn’t I give you socks?” I rock back on my heels, preparing to stand.

He puts a hand on my shoulder and squeezes gently. “Fraser. I grew up here. Had cold feet before, okay? They warm up faster this way, nothing between them.”

“Nonsense. With no covering to trap the warmed air—”

“I like the feel of the fire on my skin,” he says simply. “I love fires. I ought to get a place with a fireplace.”

Silenced, I sit back.

“Maybe they’d put one in the lab for me,” he adds, and grins, mischievous and boyish, over the rim of his mug when I raise an eyebrow at him.

“It might be worth it, just to see Dr. Thatcher’s face.”

“Yeah. Oh God yeah. I remember when we were setting up the NSOM²⁵. It was top of the line; we were in the old building then, shabby stuff, not even – not half the space we have now – and she wanted to say something and couldn’t. I still remember her face. I didn’t do it on purpose – I mean, we had to have it and the specs were – but – yeah.”

“Toys,” I say resignedly. He winks at me. I shake my head and poke gently at the fire; on the couch, from his customary spot, Diefenbaker makes an appreciative sound. Ray looks over his shoulder and grins at him.

“I really did think he’d be out in it,” he says, jerking his head in Diefenbaker’s direction.

I settle back against the coffee table. “He tried. He was, in fact, rather rude about his Arctic heritage when I proposed to leave him to freeze to death. Not to mention the fact that he very snidely questioned how on earth I thought he could be sorry if he was frozen solid. Before he was able to lead me too far down the path of the vexing philosophical subject of animals and the great hereafter—” at that Diefenbaker moans, almost contemptuously, and Ray,

²⁵ Excerpt from NSF Abstract 913855: Equipment will be purchased to develop a dedicated near-field scanning optical microscope (NSOM) for the study of semiconductor and biological systems with the assistance of the Academic Research Infrastructure Program. The major components are NSOM control electronics and software, a spectrometer, DC and high frequency probes, semiconductor parameter analyzer, long wavelength detectors, a charge-coupled-device (CCD) detector, an inverted microscope foundation and optics, and a thermoelectric mount and controller. The NSOM laboratory will be used to study: 1) sub-nano/picometer wavelength spectroscopic imaging of optoelectronic devices; 2) semiconductor material characterization from high resolution photoluminescence and tuned excitation; 3) local heating determination under operating conditions for optoelectronic devices with shear force microscopy; 4) fluorescence imaging of biological systems, including chromophore tagged DNA array structures; 5) local excitation and adsorption profiling to determine structure and functionality in thin films; 6) basic studies of new types of spectroscopy possible with large momentum of the evanescent fields in the near-field regime.

Title: Development of Near Field Spectroscopy for Semiconductor and Biological System

Type: Award

NSF Org: DMR

Latest Amendment Date: October 20, 1994

File: a9313855

Award Number: 913855

Award Instr.: Standard Grant

Prgm Manager: Otsoko Guretxea

DMR DIVISION OF MATERIALS RESEARCH

MPS DIRECT FOR MATHEMATICAL & PHYSICAL SCIEN

Start Date: September 1, 1993

Expires: February 28, 1996 (Estimated)

Expected Total Amt.: \$183200 (Estimated)

Investigator: S. Raymond Kowalski (Principal Investigator current)

Sponsor: Northwestern University

NSF Program: 1750 INSTRUMENT FOR MATERIALS RESEC

Fld Applctn: 0106000 Materials Research

looking from me to him to me again, laughs delightedly, “–I was able to retrieve my position with quite a solid threat that his afterlife, existent or non, was rather closer than he thought it was if he didn’t immediately emerge from his chosen snow bank.”

“And that worked?” Ray asks, sliding off the table to sit beside me on the floor, balancing his mug on one knee.

“Yes. Well. No. I then tried the empathetic approach: ‘I am *not* an Arctic wolf, however, and I *will* freeze.’”²⁶

He snorts.

“Yes, that was rather his reaction as well.”

“So how’d you get him back in?”

I sigh ostentatiously; my sigh is echoed within two seconds by a very similar sound from Diefenbaker. “I must confess that doughnuts were then introduced into the conversation.”

Ray laughs outright. “Doesn’t surprise me. How much did he take you for?”

“Three quarters of one and skating in the morning. Which portion of the bribe is subject to external conditions, Diefenbaker.” I turn my head so he can see my lips and I enunciate clearly; as I more than half expected, he’s not even looking at me. I turn back to Ray, shrugging. “Are you any warmer? Would you like more soup?”

“Fine, I’m fine, Frase. How – where’d you get Dief?”

“He got me, actually. I’d fallen into a deserted mine shaft – no, don’t bother, neither my father nor Diefenbaker will ever let me hear the end of that – and he happened across me. He wasn’t more than four months old and willful even then, of course. I asked him to fetch help; he jumped into the mine shaft with me.”

Ray chokes on his soup and splutters, wiping his mouth on the back of his sleeve. “Why?”

“Well, if you ask him now, of course, his reasoning is along the lines of providing me incentive to do for another what I would not do for myself. In reality – and, yes, Diefenbaker, you know I know this – I think he succumbed to panic or delight and emotion overcame sense.”

“Was he deaf then?” Ray asks after a few moments, fingers playing with the rim and handle of his mug.

“No. No.” I swallow hard for a moment, and despite myself my voice drops a note or two. “He – that was an extremely unfortunate incident. I was on an ice floe; it cracked; he leapt into the water and brought me the rope to the boat. His hearing was... affected.”

²⁶ AuKestrel: “FINE. I will leave you here to freeze and you will be sorry in the morning.”

“Of course you’ll be dead but you’ll I still be sorry.”

AuKestrel: “No, I do think wolves have an afterlife. I’m quite certain you will, at least.”

AuKestrel: “Just as I’m quite certain that it’s rather closer than you think, if you don’t come out of that snowbank immediately.”

AuKestrel: “Yes, I’m aware of the fact you’re an Arctic wolf. Point taken. Very well then. I am **not** an Arctic wolf. Do you want me to freeze to death?”

“He saved your life?” Ray asks, and he sounds not only astonished but impressed.

“Yes.”

“Oh,” Ray says, but there’s such a wealth of understanding in his voice that uncomfortable and unexpected tears prick my eyelids. When he reaches out to squeeze my hand, the tears threaten, abruptly, to make their descent in reality: that Diefenbaker is somehow a part of me is something I have never questioned; just as I have never analysed why or how he is, simply that he is.

“He’s always been quick on the uptake, albeit willful,” I say, and I squeeze his hand back before releasing it as I get to my feet. “Your hand is no warmer. Let me fetch a blanket or two, if you won’t consent to such practicalities as robes and socks.”

“Yeah.” He yawns suddenly, surprising both of us, it would appear. “Okay.”

“Shove the coffee table back,” I say as I leave the room. “I’ll change as well and we’ll set out the bedrolls now.”

To my surprise, as I pull blankets out of the closet, I hear the pad of his feet; then he’s standing in the doorway, watching me. “Come for the blankets?” I ask, holding them out.

“Um... yeah.” He takes them from me but seems, still, hesitant to leave, even when I begin to unbutton my shirt. My fingers falter for a moment: he’s acting oddly. But then, so am I and it may only be his reaction to my mood. After all, if he can strip in front of me, unselfconsciously, to prove a point, I can certainly do the same, no matter that this is not just any man nor simply a locker room scenario. It’s cold enough now, in any event, to keep me from embarrassing myself.

“You don’t work those muscle groups, running.” He indicates my now bared chest with a small gesture of his free hand. There’s the faintest catch in his voice, and I look at him, trying to ascribe a deeper meaning to the words, before I realise that I am again projecting. He is simply and insatiably curious, and much as I would like his reason for standing, watching, to be more than either curiosity or friendship, I can’t bring myself to believe it, and even silent speculation will result in embarrassment, a very distinct possibility at the moment, I fear.

“Push-ups, Ray.”

“Genetics. I hate you,” he says without any particular animosity, following that statement with a half-smile that leaves me feeling uncomfortably flushed and peculiarly warm despite the chill in the air. Discretion is certainly, at the moment, the better part of valour and I hastily turn my back and finish pulling off my pants, breathing deeply once or twice, and everything is in order by the time I finally turn back to face him, buttoning the last two buttons.

He’s still watching me, that odd half-smile on his face. It’s almost affectionate; amused, certainly. I’m well aware of the effect that the mere idea of one-piece underwear generally has on Americans and the inhabitants of this

city are undoubtedly no exception. “Ridiculous, I know,” I say. “Survival gear in the Northwest Territories; and one then becomes habituated.”

“Not ridiculous,” he says. “Warm. And – uh, warm. To put another log on the fire, do you have to stack it like you did before or can you just sort of toss it on–”

“I’ll show you, ex-Scout, come on.”

We fix the fire and he drains the last of his soup sitting cross-legged on his bedroll.

“More? Are you still hungry?”

“I’m fine. Warm. I wonder when they’ll get the power back on. You think the university’s generators are okay?”

“Oh, probably. That’s why they’re there, after all. Obviously you didn’t bring your laptop.”

“No. I did bring my hard drive.” He indicates his coat, on top of the pile by the door, with a nod. “I put it in a baggie.”

“Ah. Good thinking.”

He yawns suddenly and grins at me and then climbs into his bedroll in a flurry of arms and legs. “I’m tired.”

“Hiking through blizzards will do that to you, Ray.”

“There enough snow out there for a dog sled now?” he asks, putting his hands beneath his head, elbows akimbo.

“There may well be.” I get up and cross to the window. The snow is still falling thickly; it’s drifted a foot deep on the outer sill already. “It’s hard to tell. We’ll see in the morning. We’re adequately provisioned at least.” I blow out all the candles in the window, resolutely ignoring my reflection this time, leaving the room to the flickering light of the fire and the kerosene lantern in the kitchen and the candles on the dining room table. I blow those out next, and then the lantern last of all.

“This is so cool,” Ray says, half asleep already by the sound of him. “So cool. I’m... I’m glad to be here, Frase.”

It takes a moment for me to gather my composure, ensure my voice remains steady. “I’m equally delighted, Ray.”

“You not sleepy?”

“I’ve been running on adrenaline, I think. I ought to shut down any time now.”

He chuckles sleepily and reaches out to pat my bedroll, a couple of feet from his. “C’mon. Shut down then.”

Deep breath; Dief raises his head to look at me and then drops it back to his paws with a soft exhalation, closing his eyes, a rare display of tact.

“I forgot to turn the faucets on, Ray. I’ll be right back.”

“God, yes,” he says fervently, opening his eyes again. “No frozen pipes.”

“Inevitable, I’m afraid, if the power doesn’t come back on, but we can hope.”

I linger in the bathroom, brushing my teeth slowly and carefully. By the time I return he is, as I had hoped, asleep, one hand still on my bedroll. I remove his glasses and put them on the coffee table and then push Dief’s tail out of the

way as I settle next to him on the couch, staring at the fire with unseeing eyes, the chill at my back a welcome contrast to the heat on my face from the fire, trying not to think, not to think at all: in that wretched way lies madness.

I awaken to a gentle hand on my shoulder and then on my face, an insistent voice, a genuine frostiness to the air. It's almost pitch black; although Ray is mere inches from me I can see only a looming greyness against the dark, the fire barely glowing.

"Fraser. Power's not back on," Ray says. "Fraser. Wake up. Do the fire."

"God, Ray, sorry. Get back in your bedroll." I'm already on my feet. The fire's mere embers now. Fireplaces are notoriously inefficient space heaters, of course, but in this situation heat is heat. "What time is it?"

Ray, kneeling beside me, presses a button on his watch. "Three."

"Mmm." I busy myself with the fire; he watches intently. "Just as well we haven't got to work tomorrow. Today. I doubt anyone's going anywhere."

"What were you doing on the couch?" Ray asks. "Aren't you freezing?"

"I think I shut down unexpectedly. There." As the fire gains strength light returns, first, to the room, and then the beginnings of warmth. Ray shivers and I shake my head "This is quite a blizzard."

"Yeah, like the one in seventy-six," he says. "Power was out for a couple days in some parts of the city." He crawls back into his bedroll. "Where are you going now?"

"Just to see if I can see anything." I light a candle, trying to peer into the darkness beyond the window. "It's stopped snowing, at least."

From the couch Dief whines. Ray laughs. "He doesn't sound happy about it."

"His priorities tend to differ from ours."

"He can pull a toboggan tomorrow."

Diefenbaker barks and jumps down from the couch to lick Ray.

"It's three in the morning, Diefenbaker, settle down."

"I'm not tired any more," Ray says.

"Yes, you've had more than your usual five hours. Would you like some coffee?"

"Would you like to get under the covers and get warm?" Ray says, sounding exasperated. "Even your face was cold. Jesus, Fraser. Coffee can wait. Come and tell me about dogsleds and that ice breakup thing in the spring."

Of course I comply; it's rapidly becoming difficult for me to envision a situation in which I could say 'no' to Ray. The bedroll feels good; it's warm and familiar. I settle on my stomach and rest my head on my hands, turning to one side so I can see him, his face dark shadows and warm light, changeable yet unchanging in the flicker from the fire. He grins, obviously pleased that I listened to him. "Spring breakup, eh?"

"Yeah. I read somewhere on the 'net that you – that they – that you use the rivers for highways in the winter. Is it that smooth? Do you really drive cars on it or whatever or just snowmobiles or dogsleds?"

He listens, wide-eyed and intent, as I explain the intricacies of transportation near the 66th parallel. As always, the concept of dogsleds seems

to hold an inexplicable fascination for him. The romance of the North, I suppose, that clichéd call of the wild.

He sighs happily. “When you go – did you mean it, when you said I can come with?”

“Of course I meant it.” After a pause I say, “I spoke to my father the other night, in fact. He was talking about putting a team together for me again.”

“He should,” Ray says, sounding unexpectedly decisive. “You should. You should go there more often. The city – how do you handle it?”

“I’m certainly not opposed to modern conveniences, Ray. And I’m fairly good at cocooning.”

“Ha. Yeah. That’s – that’s what we’re doing now, huh.” He rolls onto his side, tangling himself further in his top layer of blankets.

“Almost literally, yes.”

“Talked to your dad? That’s cool. That’s – that’s modern technology, huh? Does he email you or–”

“No, oh no. His cabin is fairly isolated. He’s got a generator and running water, at long last. And a cell phone. But a computer isn’t quite in his line. He prefers to write longhand.”

“He writes, huh?”

“Mmm. Yes. Journals. More than a few. I think he’s got well over a hundred by now.”

“Cell phone, huh? Do those work all the time?” He sits up, then, frowning. “Is yours working now?”

“I have no idea, Ray. I imagine so–”

“Radio waves? So radios are working?”

“Well, if there’s no power to transmit the signal, then, no, I suppose not.”

“How many of them have generators?”

“I have no idea.”

“No power? No power? You think all of Chicago is just out? We’re all in our own little tiny snow cocoons? Igloos, that’s it. Build an igloo. They’re warm, aren’t they? I read that.”

“Yes.” I’m used to his rapid fire subject changes but this is unusually fast, even for him. His eyes are bright; he’s on his knees now, an air of suppressed excitement about him. He fumbles for his glasses on the coffee table. I smile to myself and throw off the covers. “I could use some coffee. You?”

“Yeah. Yeah. It’s a lot warmer in here now.”

“A wood stove would be more efficient.” He follows me into the kitchen, leaning against the counter and fidgeting. I hand him the matches and the kerosene lantern. He takes the lantern, intent again, as I busy myself with the kettle and the stove.

“We’ll have to fake it with ground espresso, I’m afraid,” I say. “The coffee grinder’s electric.”

“That’s okay.” He sets down the lantern, lighted now, with a flourish and replaces the glass on top of it, very carefully and precisely.

When the coffee’s finished we take it to the couch and sit there, staring at the fire and sipping in a companionable silence.

He breaks it, finally, with a completely unexpected question. I should have expected it eventually although I had hoped it was an issue that had been laid to rest; but immediately following my flare of anger is the thought that it probably took both courage and the security of intimacy to broach the subject to me now.

“Are you going to get your Ph.D. now, Fraser?”

I take a slow, deliberate sip of coffee, and then another, before I answer him, trying to sound uninterested. “I doubt it, Ray.”

“Why not?”

“I told you why not. No ideas. And I’m too old. I’d rather be working. You know what they say about after thirty...”

“Oh, come on, Fraser. You’ve done the coursework. You’ve got the whole lab to run loose in for research. Dr. Thatcher or Dr. Wellner or almost anyone would be your advisor. I—” He hesitates, longer than is his habit, forcing me to look at him; he is looking at me, steadily, slightly apprehensively, “I could... if you wanted... I could supervise. It wouldn’t take five years.”

“Thank you, Ray. That’s extremely kind of you. But I have no interest in doing so.” I speak with deliberate finality, hoping to end the subject once and for all. “Let it go.”

He’s silent for a few minutes but any hope I had that he was indeed listening to me is dashed by his next question.

“Why’d you leave Sackler? What’d you do after? I saw – saw the fellowship; I thought maybe you wanted to do research and you say you had – have trouble with theses but—”

“One of my father’s friends knew someone at the Gairdner Foundation. It seemed a good opportunity and it was in Canada.” I attempt to sound casual, tumbling thoughts in my mind, sorting and discarding ways to deflect, change the subject.

He grins suddenly. “Does everybody in Canada know everyone else?”

“No, Ray.” Invisibly tense, I muster a smile in return for him.

“Well, someone at Sackler recommended you for this job, right? Uh – Underhill? I thought... I think he’s Canadian. I think I remember, um, hearing that.”

“Yes; Charles Underhill. I’m reluctant to admit that he knows my father for fear of perpetuating the stereotype. And he knows me. At any rate, things went well at Gairdner and I took the position in Cleveland two years ago.”

“You did good in it but you were wasted there, Fraser. And we – we were lucky to get you here.”

“I think not, Ray.”

“Well, yeah, I know you live for balancing checkbooks.”

“That is hardly a revelation.”

“So why’d you leave Sackler with just the M. Phil.? I always wondered why. Why they let you. Why not finish your doctorate?”

“I tend to be a trifle stubborn.” I look at him meaningfully but he simply looks back at me, eyes limpid and completely innocent and I know by now, after all these months spent in close company with him, that that appearance is

entirely deceiving. I finish my coffee and set the mug on the coffee table rather harder than I intended.

“I read your thesis,” he says abruptly, shifting on the couch to look at me, putting his mug down as well. “It was doctoral work, Fraser. Why didn’t you—”

“Perhaps my standards are... too high, Ray.” My tone is increasingly curt, shorter than I have ever been with him; yet he doesn’t seem dismayed.

“Is that why you were ABD at Sackler?”

“Probably.”

He stares at me, exasperation evident in his face.

I stare back, as implacably as I can, trying in every nonverbal way that I can to discourage him. His gaze never falters.

“Fraser, what gives? Why won’t you tell me? Why didn’t you finish your Ph.D.?”

“Ray, I find it impossible to believe that you find ancient history of any interest whatsoever. It holds no interest for me; it’s in the past.”

“It’s hard to figure you out,” Ray says, under his breath, but I have extremely good hearing.

“There’s nothing to figure out,” I say briskly, getting to my feet. He frowns and then stands too, surprise widening his eyes. “I’m keenly aware of both my strengths and my shortcomings, Ray, and you ought to be working on, say, the problems inherent in viral replication, not waste your time obtaining and plowing through gratuitous masters’ theses. Nor do I think this is an appropriate topic of conversation at four in the morning.”

I collect his mug too and begin to turn away from him and am stopped short by his voice, reciting: “Fraser, B. Comparison of the amino acid compositions and antigenic properties of spirahns purified from the plasma membranes of different spiroplasmas, Ann. Microbiologie, Pasteur Institute, 1989. Fraser, B. Localisation of microglia in CNS amyloid plaques: an immunocytochemical and confocal microscopic study. Journal of Pathology, 1991. Carbohydrate content and enzyn-dc activities in the membrane of – “

“That’s enough, Ray.”

The coldness in my voice doesn’t seem to affect him; he stares at me, steadily, unblinking, and then he takes his glasses off, still staring at me, as if the lenses are hindering his vision. “I’ve got more,” he says at last, deliberately, as if he’s... goading me.

A soundless fury encompasses me, futile and reckless and abortive: I cannot lash out at Ray because he is innocent, guilty only of a relentless curiosity.

One breath, two breaths. My voice is steady again. “Undoubtedly. You appear to have far too much time on your hands if you’ve managed to find a copy of a long-dead thesis, not to mention those entirely forgettable and rightfully obscure—”

“You appear to be lying to me, Fraser.”

“Don’t parse, Ray.”

“What happened, Fraser?”

“Ray.” My jaw is clenched; I fumble instinctively for a cigarette. “It’s not something I choose to waste my time thinking about. Neither should you. My qualifications are adequate for this job.”

He snorts. “More than adequate. You don’t smoke in here.”

“I know that,” I snap, and take the three steps to the kitchen necessary to put the mugs down on the counter, with unnecessary force.

“What the hell happened?”

“Why the hell do you want to know?”

He blinks then and looks away for a brief second. When he looks back at me, though, there is no sign of capitulation in his face. No mercy. “Because. Because I don’t get why you’re here doing my laundry, Fraser, when you should have your own lab and your own—”

“Don’t be ridiculous, I’m so far out of your league, Ray, that you can’t see there from here.”

“That’s interesting, Fraser, coming from the guy who was just telling me the other day how maybe the enzymatic action could be applied to amyloid plaques in neurodegenerative diseases, Mr. I Can’t Formulate Hypotheses.”

“I need a cigarette,” I say harshly, cutting him off, closer than I have ever been to losing my temper, which is almost as distressing as the fact that I am losing said temper, notoriously even, with Ray, who is closer than anyone has ever been to my heart. My feet are shoved untidily into boots and my hand is on the doorknob when I hear him speak.

“Don’t go,” he says to my back. “Stay.” His voice is thin, with a tremor, unsuccessfully masked, at the end. I hear him shift his weight from one foot to the other but other than that he makes no movement.

“Please,” he says softly.

My head drops down, my chin on my chest, as I take a deep, unsteady breath, my hands clenched into fists. I’m not proof against his entreaties: I never will be.

“Aren’t you tired of running, Fraser?” he whispers, a bare thread of sound.

I breathe again and then, despite myself, I nod, a quick, sharp movement.

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” he says, voice still soft but very matter of fact.

That surprises a bark of laughter from me, and I wince at the bitter sound

“If you had, Underhill wouldn’t have recommended you,” Ray says. “And the Ice Queen wouldn’t have hired you.”

“You’re extrapolating from incomplete data,” I say, suddenly very weary, blinking three times in a row.

“I was right, you were calling me a sloppy scientist all along,” Ray says, and, to my amazement, there is something akin to warmth in his voice, which only serves to confuse me further.

“In the nicest possible way,” I say mechanically. He moves, finally, and I feel his presence behind my left shoulder, hear the quiet sound of his breathing.

“Tell me. What pulled the rug out from under you, Benton Fraser? I’ve been watching you for months. You’re not nearly as sloppy a scientist as I am.”

“Why the hell do you care, Ray? Am I not doing my job? Am I not qualified for it?”

“Overqualified,” he says, and puts a hand on my shoulder, pulling slightly at me, coaxing me to turn back towards him. “How you – how you know things, how you think, if Carlo saw that retrovirus, even if Stella saw it, they – she would – they wouldn’t have gotten it, Fraser, not so – not so fast, anyway. You – you did. You’re a good scientist. You’re so damned smart, you see the whole thing, all the angles. And – and you’re my – my friend. Tell me. What happened? I hate not knowing, Fraser, I hate not knowing, I hate seeing you go to waste, I hate – I don’t – there’s, um–” His voice falters again and he looks down at his feet, clearly embarrassed. His next words are whispered. “There’s a hurt inside you, a hole inside you, a singularity, Fraser.”

My heart pounds hard and my throat is so dry I cannot even swallow; I feel sick inside, and yet dizzy and elated too. “A–” I clear my throat. “A theoretical hole, I trust.”

“F-Fraser,” he says, still looking at his feet, long, lean, bare, pale against the dark wood, his voice cracked and shaky. “T-tell me. P-please.”

I turn away from him again; even after these three years the pain is still raw. It’s never been spoken of except to Mark, and even then in half allusions, disguised in pontification. It’s been analysed endlessly in my mind, vicious circles, but the end result is always the same and the conclusion always leaves me with that hole inside, that singularity so astutely noted and described by Ray.

“I was a different person then. A different...” I hardly recognise my own voice; my mouth still dry, it emerges as a croak. I clear my throat yet again, and then the words begin, emotionless, precise. It’s almost impossible to bring myself to – “My advisor–”

“Who was that?” he interrupts, his voice quiet but admitting of no argument. “Was that Cahill?”

I nod once: the name still hurts to hear. All of it still... “He... was awarded a substantial grant by the NGSRI²⁷, a pilot for the Human Genome Project.”

“So that’s why...”

“I left Columbia? Yes. It was seen as... well, it was quite an opportunity... and my strengths were said to lie in... in those directions.”

“I can see that,” Ray says softly, encouraging me. I brace myself: his pity is bad enough but...

“He was working on the X chromosome... there was a lot of scope for our own interests and I was given an area to sequence related to my Columbia work, with sidelines in protein expression and, ah...” I’m babbling; it’s not as if I need explain this in layman’s terms, or, indeed, at all, not to Ray. “That’s not important. His primary interests were, I think now, patents in the areas of DNA purification and new energy transfer methods of dyeing. As – as you probably

²⁷ National Human Genome Research Institute.

know, they – they aren't – weren't – encouraged to patent the raw genomic sequence but if there was some evidence of utility to the sequence..."²⁸

He makes a small sound of assent.

"His line of research was dependent in part on our data, naturally; but he had made certain predictions based on some of the preliminary, rough sequencing for his overall research model, prior to the fine-tuning we began to develop; and then..." I take a breath; he watches me, steady, unblinking, and I find courage from somewhere.

"Then it all... The data were published almost immediately, they still are, of course, as you know. Sometimes it's a matter of weeks, even. My data were beginning to diverge from expected paths: the sequencing and protein expressions were starting to show that his model was, perhaps, overgeneralised... The second report I turned in was rejected by him; but I had already sent it to the preliminary reviewers for data verification, the next step and that was seen as... well, he said I was going over his head... I didn't realise at the time that it... that it was... Clearly I-I misjudged the entire situation. He suggested... softening the data and... well, of course, they were worried about the funding. When I refused to, ah, compromise on the second report, they said the... he said that line of research was... not moving in a productive direction and he pulled it before it was sent on to the public database."²⁹

"The senior faculty, unsurprisingly, closed ranks with him. They didn't know me well; I'd been working with junior faculty on my committee, for the most part. The – the other senior faculty member was frankly incredulous. I did try to contact the person overseeing the research at the agency but she was singularly uncommunicative... At any rate, I – I was accused, of course, of not understanding the real issues; of, in fact, attempting to attract attention and garner publicity by sending it on to the reviewers; of behaving in an unprofessional manner; even accused of trying to sabotage important scientific reputations and inhibit scientific advancement. I was a student. He was a senior scientist with an international reputation and—"³⁰

"And you got hosed," Ray finishes softly. He understands that, thank God. "Fraser, I *know*. I promise you I know. I know how you feel. And I don't think you're a different person at all."

"Very different."

"Maybe," Ray says, still softly. "Maybe you're – maybe you're not so... innocent now. But you're the same person. Aren't you? Would you do it

²⁸ Andrew Cahill, Ph.D., Sackler Institute, New York University, NY (1st year \$4.3 million): Human chromosome X contains some regions with a high density of genes and other regions with much lower gene density. This group will scale up from its current investigational level of sequencing on this chromosome, to learn more about the structure of these different regions. Dr. Cahill's group is fine-tuning DNA purification and reaction chemistry methods, and developing a series of new fluorescence energy-transfer dyes with the potential to improve the accuracy of automated reading of DNA bases. They will test a novel strategy for reducing the number of sequencing reactions needed to complete a region of DNA to high accuracy.

²⁹ Canis Lupus, transcription from handwritten notes, Jun 2001.

³⁰ Kelingtyn. Email message ca. 7-15-00.

differently today? If – if you found out it was – it was me, or Carlo, or someone selling out, fudging, would – would you hide it? Let us?”

“My God, no.” The words burst from me but even as I say them I turn to look at him, straight in the eye, and hope that I mean them. And know that I mean them, that I must, as he returns my gaze steadily, approval evident.

We stare at each other, locked gazes, and his face softens. He raises a hand to touch my shoulder, his warm palm closing over the thin cotton, the heat from his hand branding my skin, and my heart leaps into my throat. He opens his mouth and then hesitates; and then suddenly his eyes shift and he gives his head a tiny shake. “No,” he says, under his breath, as if he’s admonishing Diefenbaker or even himself, as if he’s not talking to me at all, and his hand falls back to his side.

“No?” I echo, and almost wince at the sound of the need in my voice. He blinks once, twice, and shakes his head more definitively.

“No,” he says firmly. “I know you wouldn’t. And I don’t care – I’m sorry it hurt you – but I don’t care that it hurt you because it was the only thing to do. The only thing you could do. I’m not making sense, Fraser, I didn’t want – don’t want – to hurt you, but I – I wanted to know, I had to know, this was my only chance to – to ask and – and you have to take it and let it be part of you, Fraser, it is part of you, and it’s all walled up away. Let it be part of you, it’s a good thing with a bad ending but it’s a good thing, let it stay.”

“Ray.”

He shakes his head again, thoroughly frustrated with himself. “I – I – I don’t mean – I’m not s-saying it should happen that way. I – I’m not s-saying they were – what they should have d-done, I know what they d-did was wrong, but all of it – it was you, and now you’re here and – and–”

“Ray–”

“–and you have to have that be p-part of you, if you l-lock it away, you – you – it’s not – it’s got to b-be all of you, and all of you is – is who you are, you wouldn’t be you if – if it wasn’t who you are, you wouldn’t be you now if you weren’t here, I wouldn’t be me, now, if Stella – if – if you weren’t you, here, I don’t – I don’t know who we’d b-be, F-Fraser, b-but – God, I hate – I hate this–”

“Ray!” I have him by both shoulders now; his body is incredibly tense, coiled steel spring, and he’s shaking, frustration, cold, tension. The urge to hug him, to kiss him is unbearably strong but I am stronger. “Ray. Listen to me. Listen. I understand. Listen to me. I – I want – just listen to me.”

He falls silent at last, breathing hard, misery struggling with something indefinable in his suddenly huge eyes.

“I should have known you were a closet Nietzschean,” I say quietly, gently. He takes a breath and summons a smile from somewhere.

“C-Calvin.”

“Hobbes.”

“I – I always wanted a – a stuffed tiger.”

“Will you settle for a live wolf?”

“He’s, um, half.”

“He has an extraordinarily rich fantasy life.”

Diefenbaker, looking up from his water bowl in the kitchen, agrees with that analysis of his character with a smug whine.

“Yeah, he’s – he probably isn’t into Nietzsche.”

“Peter Pan, I suspect.”

“Yeah.” He laughs, short, sharp. “I – I can see that. “

Through my fingers on his shoulders I can feel the tension beginning to leave his body, relief starting to make its way through his frustration at his perceived inability to communicate. I don’t know how to tell him that he needs no words to talk to me; I can’t tell him that, of course, but I succumb, very briefly, to temptation in the name of reassurance: I hug him quickly, hard, then squeeze his arms and release him. He reaches quickly for one of my hands and squeezes it in turn, hard, gratefully, before releasing it again.

“I’m – it’s okay?”

“Perfectly okay, Ray. I – I understand. I don’t know if I agree but I do understand.”

“God.” He expels a gust of breath, pent up tension all, and shivers. “Good. I – I needed to know. I didn’t – I thought it was something like that. I didn’t know. I – I hope it’s okay.”

“I said it was, Ray. I don’t lie.”

He rubs his eyes quickly and blinks at me again. “Yeah. I’m – I – I was afraid you – you might be really angry. You might, uh... leave.”

“You? The lab?” This thought stuns me; but of course Ray has no way of knowing what it all means to me, what he means to me. “No, Ray. We’re friends. Even if I took another job someday, that wouldn’t end. And as for another job, that’s not something I’ve even considered, would consider – I haven’t even been here a year yet and I’m needed here, I’m happy here.”

“Yeah. Big need,” he says solemnly, and then cracks a grin. “Mouse cages to clean. Artificial viruses to, um, design. Skating to do. I... yeah, I definitely... need you.”

“I’ll stay as long as you need me, Ray,” I say, but there is no answering smile on my own face, and the words sound uncomfortably like a vow, enough to make me step back, enough to make me hope that he takes them only at their surface meaning.

His smile fades; he says, very seriously, “Even if I make you angry?”

“Yes, Ray.”

“Stella used to – she’d get – she wouldn’t talk to me. She got – right before she – I – she was on the phone, I heard her say she didn’t need this, she could do it herself... “ His voice trails off; his eyes are unhappy, fixed on a distant memory. He gives himself a little shake. “So... you’ll, um, you’ll stay?”

“Yes, Ray.”

“Why?”

“That’s what friends do, Raymond Kowalski.”

“What – what do you get out of it, Benton Fraser?”

“A friend in equal measure. I hope.”

“Yeah,” he says. “Absolutely. Don’t – don’t even–”

“I’m not.”

“Good. So – so we’re good, then?”

“Ray.”

“Great.” He cracks his neck swiftly and smiles again, and then yawns hugely, surprising both of us, his jaw cracking in the middle of it. He looks at my feet and then back at my face. “Are you still going to have a cigarette?”

“I – no. Yes. A quick one. Get back in bed. Find a book; the lantern’s not bad to read by. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“I – I’m... I’m sorry.” He fumbles with both the words and his glasses as he puts them on again, hooking them absently and neatly over his ears.

“Ray, my nicotine addiction is in no way your fault.”

“Ha. No. I know.”

I have to push the outer door hard to open it enough to slip through. I light a cigarette, welcoming the dark, the cold, the solitude outside almost as much as the scent of the smoke and the craved rush of nicotine. The city’s encased in white and in the total darkness, never seen here, the stars appear larger than usual. I assess the weather absently: cloud cover’s gone, there’s a sharp wind from the north west; tomorrow – today – will be clear and cold. The snow is hip deep at the porch; it seems to have drifted to man-height near the street. It’s going to take days for the city to dig out from under this.

Days. Nights. And Ray chose this day and night to come to me, to give me this, his presence, at least, which is almost enough; his friendship, which is more than enough; and I will be, can be, must be content with both and no more: this is, after all, so much more than I ever could have imagined, certainly more than I would have thought to ask for. But now that I have this, it is my fatal flaw that I want more: I want him here, day in and day out, across the breakfast table, drinking milk from the carton, using the last of the toilet paper and forgetting to tell me. I want all of it now – all of him.

And this is the dark underside of obsession, I think wryly, with a stray thought or two for the Russian melancholy of this age-old dilemma, the juxtaposition of the melodrama of unrequited, hopeless love and cozy domesticity played out against the requisite backdrop of ice and snow.

There’s a snuffle behind me and I sigh inwardly as Diefenbaker plunges into the snow beside me, gloriously happy. Another sound makes me turn; Ray’s standing there too, my Hudson’s Bay blanket around his shoulders, feet shoved into my moccasins, lantern in hand.

“Wow.”

“Indeed.”

Diefenbaker barks, sharply, once, from under a tree, and then plunges again, comes up and lunges over a snowdrift, already fifty metres away.

“You ever think he might not come back?” Ray says after a few moments.

“No.” Utter certainty and I can’t explain it; I hope Mr. Curiosity doesn’t ask. He doesn’t; he accepts it with a nod. After another few moments, he holds out a hand; I hand him my cigarette. He looks at it, half smoked, and hands it back to me with a shake of his head. “Never mind.”

I inhale once more and then plunge it into the snow and lean past Ray to drop the butt in the small ashtray just inside the door; my landlady, of German

descent, runs a tight ship though I have yet to see her scrubbing the sidewalk. I'm assured it happens, and on a regular basis, in warmer weather.

"Is this what it looks like?" Ray asks, just as a familiar and heartbreaking sound washes over me, bringing with it the memories of the sight and the sound and the smell of home: the howl of a wolf.

"Is this what it sounds like?" Ray whispers when the last notes die in the wind. I look over at him. His mouth is slightly parted, his pupils dilated: he looks like a child on Christmas morning.

"Yes," I say, matching his whisper, and it's almost the truth: in this snow, in this pre-dawn greyness, it's close enough to pretend.

"A wolf in Chicago," he whispers. "I bet – I bet no one here has ever heard that."

"No."

"Wow," he says again, so profoundly that I am moved rather than amused this time.

Diefenbaker raises his voice again, haunting, hunting: the only pack here is me, and he knows it, but the instinct to find more of one's own, to enlarge the pack, is strong and he can't fight that, is wise enough not to, I think.

And somewhere nearby a dog raises a response. Ray listens with me to the dialogue; it goes on for several minutes. In the absolute stillness that follows, we hear the huff and crunch that heralds Diefenbaker's return. Crusted in snow, he's radiant and, of course, more than smug. He shakes himself hard in the entry way and bounds up the stairs without a backwards glance. Ray watches him go, looks at me, and there's a wistfulness on his face I've only ever seen on Diefenbaker's.

"Maybe we should try to go skating," he says quietly.

"We'll have to clear the ice."

"Fun?"

"Not at all."

"Oh, well." He shrugs philosophically and starts back up the stairs. With one last look outside, I close the door and follow him. Of course this is enough, and my grandmother's voice has the last word, as she so often did: "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth." Which of course would have been much more to the point had I ever received a gift horse, or even a gift puppy; instead I received books and had, in fact, a toy box lined with nothing but the most seditious reading materials available through mail order.

When I fed some to a passing walrus one Christmas I received quite the sternest lecture I had ever had from my grandmother, drawing heavily upon the 'gift horse's mouth' motif; the spanking I got, following my comment upon the walrus' mouth, was worth every second, because my father laughed. It was a guilty laugh, quickly stifled, as he pulled out his belt, but the next day he took me hunting with him for the first time, and told me stories I'd never heard before.

Ray turns at the top of the stairs and looks at me; I can make out a quizzical expression on his face as he pauses, his hand on the doorknob. He

quirks an eyebrow at me; I nod. He shrugs, somewhat apologetically, and opens the door. "I want to see spring breakup," he says softly.

"You will," I say, passing through the door behind him. Gift walruses, horses, they're all the same thing, and I resolve, as I blow out the lantern and then settle into my bedroll, to stop looking either or both of them in the mouth as of this moment.

When I wake, it's daylight. The air is still cool but I can hear the reassuring snap and crackle of the fire behind me. The sound of a page turning makes me glance over: Ray, with pillows propped against the raised brick hearth, is leaning against them, reading, a medical journal, of course, seriously and intently. My heart leaps: so close, this is so close to what I want, to wake with him beside me every morning. And I have it now, I tell myself sternly, the resolution planted firmly in front of me. This is enough because I will make it so.

He turns another page; I watch him read. Timeless, this moment, and I feel as if only we are here in a sort of bubble and nothing exists outside it. A log cracks with a loud snap in the fire, but it's not enough to pierce Ray's concentration.

Another page: I wonder how many hours I could lie here and watch a man read. I'm not entirely sure I want to think about the answer to that, or the implications thereof. Just then, Diefenbaker, lifting his head from his paws, whines at me from the couch. It's not often he has the opportunity to reprimand me for being slothful and he generally takes full advantage of it to gloat: a singularly unbecoming lupine characteristic, as I have told him more than once.

Ray looks up, first at Dief, then at me. He smiles: unrestrained, no shadows in his eyes this morning and I relax further. This is enough for him as well, more than he has ever had, and I have given him this, one small gift.

"Hi," he says, voice husking into a croak from disuse. "You sleep like a log, Frase. I fixed the fire."

"Thank you. I trust I didn't snore."

"Ha. No. Hey, look, I found your bookmark." He holds out a photograph: with a sinking feeling I recognise it. Mark sent it me some weeks ago: he always insisted on having the last word. "This is great. This from Cornell? How come you didn't show it to me?"

I take the photo, my hands steady with a great effort of will. I feel rather as if I have committed a faux pas, unknowing, of course, but nevertheless. "Ah, yes. Cornell. Mark – Mark, ah, found this a little while ago, and thought I should have a copy of it." Or so he said: there was no 'found' about it, I believe. I'm fairly certain I'd seen it on his refrigerator a few years ago, during one of my sojourns in Winnipeg en route to Inuvik.

"That was nice of him," Ray says, but it sounds mechanical, rather like a child being prompted to thank an aunt for a useful gift of clothing.

"Yes," I say briskly. "He was drafted in my junior year. It was... it was exciting. I think Inuvik had a day-long celebration. I skipped classes to find somewhere to watch it."

“You skipped classes?” Ray sounds happier: teasing me. “You?”

I smile reluctantly. “I’m not sure there’s an American equivalent to being drafted by the NHL in Canada, Ray; perhaps being elected President?”

He snorts and then laughs, cackling, as he punches me lightly in the arm. “Ha. Yeah. More useful, hockey’s more useful, huh?”

“I’m a trifle biased, so I really can’t say with any degree of objectivity. At any rate, he showed up one day at practice when he was in Buffalo for a game; he spent a few hours with us.” I can’t suppress the smile, foolishly wide, at the memory the photograph evokes: snapped by one of my more determined girlfriends, it was taken right after practice, before we left the ice. His left arm was around my shoulders; we were both grinning ridiculously, helmets in hand, hair flattened and awry, he in Winnipeg’s sweater, I in Cornell’s; it was one of the happier days of my life.

Ray takes the photograph back from me, turns it over, and reads the inscription aloud: “Hockey’s loss is science’s gain.”³¹

Dear God. “Ah. He’s – he’s never quite understood the allure of the, ah, electron microscope. Hockey is his world. He thought I was good enough to turn pro; I don’t think I was; and it’s a moot point now, of course, but he takes any opportunity to remind me.”

Ray slants an opaque glance at me. “I’m, uh, I’m glad. That you – that–”

“Well, so am I. Clearly. Would you like some coffee? What time is it?”

“Past seven.” He tucks the photograph carefully back into the journal where I’d left it, forgotten: I got them both the same day, and had been simultaneously touched and exasperated by Mark’s thoughtfulness and his insistence on having the last word. I resolve to retrieve it at the earliest opportunity and put it up on my refrigerator: thus do I achieve the last word. “Coffee, yeah. Look at the snow, Fraser, it’s amazing.”

“I take it the power’s still off.”

“Yeah,” he says, getting up too and coming to the window with me. “I told you. Probably be out for a day or two in some places. You have more wood somewhere?”

“Yes, there’s a rack behind the house. Building.”

“Well, it was a house,” Ray says, trailing me to the kitchen. “It’s a cool apartment, you did good, Thatcher did good.”

“As long as they take wolves, I’m indeed ‘good,’” I say, smiling at him over my shoulder. “He complains about the stairs but I tell him at least we don’t have to worry about neighbours overhead clomping, unlike poor Mrs. Gillespie.”

We drink more coffee; he attempts to decline breakfast but I’m adamant, and we manage halfway decent bacon and eggs. I boil water afterwards to wash dishes and he watches even that in fascination. His clothes from yesterday, hung to dry, are still damp but I’ve got some of his laundry here: another pair

³¹ This moment of Canadian nostalgia was brought to you by Canadian Tire and Otsoko Guretxea, who brought solace to my lonely hours by sending me evocative little snapshots like these and then being generous enough to allow me to co-opt them. Chrissie Hynde singing about being back on the chain gang didn't hurt either.

of jeans, two or three shirts, none of them, of course, warm enough to reassure me in the contemplation of a day spent out of doors.

He takes the clothes without comment but a frown creases his brow. I divert his attention, successfully, by telling him he needs to wear long underwear and a sweater or three if he wants to go skating. He tries on various sweaters as I hastily dress, laughing at himself in most of them: he's my height, but lean, and the bulk of some of the sweaters is frankly ridiculous. I have a brain wave and dig a Cornell sweatshirt out of the back of a drawer. It's shrunk in the intervening years and is tight on me now; and, indeed, it fits him better than any of the others. He's very pleased by it, almost smug, and he insists on hearing the story, again, as we walk – snowshoes would not be amiss today – to the nearby pond, of how Mark came to hockey practice.

The pond clearing takes a while, and we break for coffee before putting on our skates while I explain curling to him. He's never heard of it, unsurprisingly, and I find myself making a mental note to see if I can locate a bonspiel in Chicago for him.

By the time we've embarked on a game, neighbourhood children have joined us, some with skates, some simply determined to slide on the ice in boots. Some come, leave, and return in short order with hockey sticks, and we organise an impromptu game, with position assignments and a short, very short, lecture on strategy. Ray's team defeats mine but they seem to be having so much fun they insist on playing again. The second game ends in a draw, as the allure of lunch and hot cocoa makes concentration less important.

Ray is, quite simply, ecstatic, as we return to my apartment. He doesn't mention sore muscles: the more consistent practice routine we've achieved is paying off.

I make hot soup, of course, and cocoa, and follow it up with roast beef sandwiches: if the power doesn't come back on soon, all that food will have to be discarded so we might as well eat it as throw it away. He bubbles through lunch, recalling this play and that child. He stops, literally, mid-sentence, and looks at me and says, earnestly, "They had no idea who I am."

"No," I agree.

"I – that's – that's..."

"Yes."

"I wish... I wish my, um, I wish the – the students... I wish..."

"Your students like you too, Ray."

"Yeah, I – well – yeah, easy A's, Fraser. 'Course they do. But–"

"It's rather more than that, Ray. And I think once they actually take a course from you they realise that the man and the reputation are two entirely different things."

He opens his mouth, then hesitates, then shuts it again. His hand, resting on the table near mine, flexes, then curls into a fist; and then he bumps his knuckles against mine, deliberately, and, finally, smiles. "You think?"

"I know," I say firmly, and indeed I do: for whatever reason, they seem to be under the impression that I am a safe repository for confidences and questions, and I have enjoyed listening to them talk about Ray in the course of

asking me questions about the course material, questions they were too shy, at first, to broach to Ray directly; and now, the semester half gone, they venture into the lab from time to time to tackle obscure points or knotty concepts with either Ray or me. And he has relaxed around them, as the familiarity grows: his ease today was, I think, an outgrowth of that and not, as he seems to think, unrelated or an inverse cause for concern. "I know," I add, and remind him that a week or so ago Linda and Terry not only came to ask a question but stayed for pizza.

"Yeah, they did, I – yeah, I guess they did," he says. "I didn't think about it that way."

"Precisely. Let's go dig out the woodpile."

"You love this, don't you," he says as we deposit a load of wood by Mrs. Gillespie's door and head back down the stairs for another load for us, my landlady already supplied on the first trip.

"Hauling wood? I live for it, Ray."

"No, this – the snow, the, the cold, the – the, um..."

I pause and look back at him. "Well, of course. I was raised in a cold climate, Ray, my family has been in the Territories for generations. I suppose it's in my blood."

"But the work, you like all of it, you like the whole enchilada, the snow shoveling and the wood hauling, not just – it's like when you're a kid and you go sledding, you hate to pull the sled back up the hill but it's kind of fun too."

"Very good analogy."

His face, serious a moment ago, lightens. "That'd be fun."

"There's a hill near the pond."

"Cool. So... but anyway. Why – I mean, okay, I know you can't, um, do this in, uh, Inuvik—" he gestures in the vague direction of the university, "but sometimes I think – I wonder if you're – if you'd been a trapper, or, um, a Mountie, like your dad, you'd do this every day, you'd have this—"

"I wouldn't have this," I say with deliberate emphasis, the words broad enough to obscure my meaning, double-edged. "This is enough. Especially when it snows."

"Oh."

"And trapping is hard work. Poaching, doubly so." He's instantly diverted, and we occupy the rest of the afternoon with tales culled from my father's adventures with poachers as we haul the toboggan, borrowed from my landlady, back up the hill in between rides down. Ray explained my request to borrow a sled – a toboggan, fetched from her basement, tidy as the rest of her apartment – by saying, simply, "He's Canadian," and she nodded as if somehow that does indeed explain everything.

We are rewarded, upon our return, cold, tired, and completely worn out, by the welcome feel of warm air and a well-lighted living room: the power, finally, is back on. Ray occupies himself, nevertheless, with building a fire, and quite handily. I celebrate by putting together a stew. He gets a shower – inordinately long and extraordinarily hot, if his flushed skin is any indication – and I take a quick one myself before teaching him how to make biscuits.

After our late dinner, he settles somewhat apprehensively on top of his bedroll with a sidelong glance at me, which I take to mean that the camping out will continue. I'm too tired to mind his proximity tonight, and, moreover, had taken the precaution of expediency in the shower, so I claim my own without comment. I'm fairly certain that I actually fall asleep before he does, although it's probably too close to call.

I wake in the middle of the night to the feel of a warm body pressed against me, and the terror brings me wide awake within a second or two. It takes a few more seconds to realise it's Diefenbaker, stretched between us.

"Certainly more practical than a sword," I mutter, slightly miffed and wholly relieved. I turn over and fall asleep again almost instantly, and I barely remember it the next morning: Ray's up before me, and in a very strange mood, almost grumpy, though 'abstracted' would probably be a more accurate description. There are circles under his eyes; not for the first time do I wish I understood his sleeping habits better, and that my own were less stolid. He declines everything except coffee, and he sits, draped in my robe, huddled over his mug, staring into it as if it holds the key to unlocking the mysteries of the universe.

I leave him to his mood while I get dressed; Diefenbaker is more impatient than usual this morning. I get my skates and look at Ray, intending to ask if he's interested; the words die on my lips. His eyes are closed, his chin resting in his hands, his face drawn, paler than usual.

"Ray," I say softly, my voice sounding unnaturally loud in the stillness. He opens his eyes slowly and looks straight at me and for a brief eternity there is nothing but his eyes, suddenly defining the limits of my universe. Then he blinks and the moment is gone. "I'll be back in an hour or so. Try to eat something."

"Okay," he mutters, his eyes dropping, his shoulders sagging again. "I – can I, uh, listen to some, um–"

"Anything. Mi casa, etcetera."

A brief, tired grin, not quite reaching his eyes. "Yeah. Okay. Thanks."

Diefenbaker is unusually tactful on the trek to the pond; it would appear he too is affected by Ray's mood. I skate, but my heart isn't in it; and Diefenbaker is ready to start back when I am. I'm hailed as I climb the rise by the pond by two boys, hockey sticks in hand; and to my immense gratification, they express frank disappointment that my friend isn't with me. We make tentative arrangements to meet at two o'clock, and they promise to try to round up the impromptu 'teams' again.

Diefenbaker expresses curiosity and some frank opinions on reticence and the human condition on the walk home; I content myself with the observation that humans have different social needs and rituals. His subsequent remarks on human courtship rituals merit absolutely no response and I maintain as disapproving a silence as I can muster the rest of the way home.

There's low, rhythmic music, loud enough to be heard in the hallway, coming from my apartment. I collect my thoughts, my hand on the doorknob: he's undoubtedly worn out from yesterday, and in addition he's not accustomed

to so little time alone. Not for the first time do I wish that such necessary activities as chopping wood were a component of the modern urban American lifestyle: it was always a convenient excuse, during my youth, to distract me, the teenaged equivalent, I suppose, of sending a younger child out to play in the back yard.

Diefenbaker barks impatiently. I hastily decide to shovel the sidewalk after a cup of hot coffee: Mrs. Gillespie and my landlady haven't even attempted to leave their apartments; and shovelling the cars out will be a project as well, before and after the snowplows come through.

I recognise the music as we step into the apartment: Lhasa, a long-ago memento; not the sort of music I'd have expected Ray to choose³². Haunting and evocative, it stirs bittersweet memories.

He's lying on his stomach on his bedroll, a yellow legal pad, unearthed, probably, from my desk, resting under his cheek. Still grasping a pen, he is sleeping deeply and soundly. Dief gets a drink of water; I, a hasty cup of coffee. I scribble a note for him on the legal pad, below sketches of a carbon atom, a box kite, and a sleek car, and we let ourselves out again as quietly as possible.

I've successfully cleared the walkway and the sidewalk and have begun work on the cars, a daunting task, when I hear Ray's familiar shout.

"Wow," he says, looking around at the sidewalk, bemused. "Lotta snow. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to sleep, I – I just—"

"Not at all," I say, glad of a rest, even gladder that he seems rather happier than he was before. "I wore you out yesterday, I'm afraid."

"Nah, nah, I'm good, I'm great," he says, and his smile is half-shy, half-proud. "I read your note. The kids, they, uh, they want to play again? Really?"

"Yes, really." I laugh at him; his smile grows wider and then he laughs back.

"Cool. Coolness. I – yeah, I'd like to, if you want to. I didn't know, um, about lunch. I found the sandwich stuff and I put on some soup but I looked out the window and you—"

"Ah. I'm afraid I lost track of the time. Dief! Dief!" As we walk up the newly cleared path, I add, "Thank you. I'm starving."

He looks at me sideways, appearing somewhat puzzled; but he shrugs and holds the door open for Diefenbaker and then me. I shrug in response, unable to resist, and he pokes me in the back, laughing, as we start up the stairs, his earlier mood completely gone, and my own fears thus set, temporarily, I'm sure, to rest.

We eat a hearty lunch and reach the pond well before two. Thankfully today we don't have to clear the ice. Ray laces his skates as quickly as he can but he's still far slower than I and I wonder if there is a physiological reason for it. I hesitate at the pond's edge, debating whether to offer to help. He looks up, catches me watching and grins unselfconsciously and infectiously.

"Go on, go on!" He waves me toward the pond. "I'm on the last one, I'll be there in a minute." He does not seem offended by my obvious desire to help, for

³² Lhasa, De Cara a la Pared.

which I am grateful, and in fact seems slightly more... well, 'tender' is the wrong word, but certainly less of his prickliness is in evidence than has been previously.

The day is clear and the sky is a blue I seldom see here in Chicago. It is still early and we have the pond to ourselves for the nonce. The feel of the ice under my blades, the crisp, cold air stinging my cheeks, the scent of snow, still wild, on the wind, all serve to transport me back to the past, to a pond by a barn where I once played hockey with a boy who would one day play for the NHL. I feel briefly nostalgic and catch myself: looking backwards is, after all, just as counterproductive, still wishing for things I can't have, even if it's in a slightly different direction.

A shout from Ray turns me around, literally as well as figuratively. Having attracted my attention, he waves cheerfully as he skates towards me, demonstrating his new proficiency at turning from a forward motion to a backward motion.

"Well done!" I strike out across the pond to meet him halfway. "You've got it down pat." I stop a few feet from him but he continues his backwards motion: stopping is still problematic. He collides with me; I made no effort to move. I wrap my arms around him to keep him from falling, and for a few brief, tantalising seconds his buttocks are pressed against my groin.

My body reacts predictably and I am profoundly grateful for the, I calculate quickly, eight layers of clothing between us. I grit my teeth when his feet slip, causing him to squirm against me to regain his footing.

His laughter is so infectious, his joy so unguarded, though, I find myself laughing with him. "You are a dangerous man, Dr. Kowalski."

"Well, you know me. I – I live for danger." He looks around at me as he regains his footing. His eyes are sparkling, his cheeks are flushed, the day is beautiful and his mouth is so close to mine....

"Oh, really?" I say challengingly and rearrange us so he's behind me. "Then hold on."

He catches on immediately and grasps my hips with both hands. I start out slowly, unaccustomed as I am to his weight behind me. I gradually lengthen my strides until we are flying around the circumference of the ice. He hoots with pleasure.

It isn't what I want, of course, it's not half, not even a third, of what I would like to do with this man, but it's physical, he's holding me and the speed is exhilarating. It's almost perfect. And it's enough.³³

³³ Skating coda and exquisite wrap-up courtesy of the most excellent Journey. Thanks, J.