

*Ships Passing or A, B, C, D, E, F, G, and H*

Alex

Alexander Middleton wasn't in any great mood before looking over his mail for the day, but that relatively insignificant daily routine made the remainder of this particular day a complete write-off. Revenue Canada was after him - they wanted payments on his personal arrears as well as those of the Middleton and Richards Fine Arts Gallery, of which he was one of the two partners. And to compound matters further, Mr. Ian Richards had flown away indefinitely to parts unknown-paradise or hell or some other mysterious purgatory. The hot young artists that Middleton and Richards had initially hit pay dirt with were now has-beens while still in their twenties. His highest profile artists-Brian Convery, Peter Gallon, and Rebecca Anderson-still believed that they could sign not only with more reputable dealers than himself, not only in tony old Yorkville but in the Big Apple itself. The fools! If they were washed up with Middleton and Richards then they were washed up period! Not that any of the brat pack ever listened to him-especially not Brian Convery.

Alex didn't need to call up his accountant Terry about any particular messages secretly coded within the Revenue Canada notice. The feds wanted yet another installment on his arrears and they would be getting it. No point drawing further undue attention to outstanding accounts-the last thing Middleton and Richards Fine Arts and Middleton personally needed was any sort of audit. The problem was that he personally was very low in the cash flow department. He stood and called his loyal friend Frances Bryant who had always been there for him. The gallery was barely paying the rent now and he had put himself and his secretary Dora King on constrained salaries while hiring installation assistants on time and site-specific contract basis only.

Frances promised him another ten thousand but insisted that Alex really did need to begin looking into alternative sources of income. Perhaps he could moonlight as an art consultant and in the process snag a few new hot shots for the gallery? Yes, and perhaps Ian Richards might miraculously return from the Twilight Zone or the ozone or the dead or from wherever he had mysteriously disappeared to some time ago now. Any possible audit by the government would demand an answer to the ongoing question of where is your partner these days anyway. Alex did not in the slightest miss the man personally but financially this was another matter entirely. It was nothing more than a terrible coincidence that, almost the minute Ian had vanished, Brian Convery and Peter Gallon and Becky Anderson-the three hot shots of that all too brief golden era of Middleton and Richards Fine Arts-had become practically non-commodities. Washouts and burnouts were the more polite descriptions used by art world pundits to describe the stable. Sure, their buyers had overwhelmingly been Ian Richards' friends and contacts. But the art world local national and even international had become so cynical and just plain jealous. Convery and Gallon and Anderson and even relative plodders such as Harold Lester and Quentin Farnsworth sold because they imagined and then executed appealing images with flair and acumen. But the whiners thought they had become successful because they were vulgar and without talent. How typically Canadian-that inverted socialist snobbery! The whiners all too frequently preferred grant-subsidized experimental and unmarketable crap as championed by that inverted snotty queer who wrote for The National Paper-Charles Drake. How did a fur coat socialist like Drake ever get hired by such an avowedly market-mandated newspaper? Alex snarled.

He guessed that Drake must have provided somebody with ongoing good copy.

The telephone rang and as he recognized Dora King's incoming number he realized that he should take the call. It was unlike her to call him before arriving for work unless the matter was important. But Dora's call - while not about something unimportant-was about something Alex had become numbingly familiar to. Brian Convery had yet again blacked out in a local art bar and become involved in a fight. Dora had fortunately broken off her relationship with the artist; but her friends Patrick and Elinor had been forced to get the mad artist into a cab and drop him off at his apartment; where yet again Brian would wake up this morning and not remember what a fucking asshole he had been the night before in some home or bar he could not recall having been to.

He realized that he had yet to look at the day's edition of The National Paper. The headlines alone turned him off-more bloodshed in Kosovo and yet another high-school student shooting at fellow students or teachers or whatever. He did not want to read any of these lead stories-the headlines told him everything. As much as Alex disliked state interference in the personal business of individuals; he conceded that militant gun control advocates had a valid point. It was far too easy for just any nutbar to obtain a lethal weapon. According to Dora King; Brian Convery owned a gun because he feared some sort of personal retribution. Alex snorted. Brian Convery had such an inflated view of his own importance that he would think somebody even crazier than himself might have it in for him.

He scanned the art section and groaned. Ever since he had complained to Ken Waddell at The National Paper about Charles Drake; the epicene journalist had co-operated by refusing to even mention let alone review artists represented by Middleton and Richards. So there was no shotgun review of Harold Lester's collages- only more bullshit puff pieces about lesbian photographers' collectives and radical body-defying performance art. The kind of art that only the artist and his pelvic affiliate ever saw-the kind of exalted art that exists outside of the vocabulary of does it or does it not sell.

Alex now flipped forward to the daily Buzz Off column and there indeed was a tidbit about Brian Convery's altercation with a patron at a prominent but unnamed local art bar the previous evening. Alex clenched his fist. He knew that Buzz Off was often written by a young lady named Mary Radford who sometimes deputized for Charlie Drake at the National Paper and who probably had been drinking quite heartily at the notorious but unmentionable watering hole. According to Buzz Off; a large gentleman-also not identified-had questioned Brian Convery's masculinity and Convery had predictably swallowed the bait.

Brian's masculinity was constantly being questioned. Brian was as male as they came- he was widely rumoured to enjoy the company of males in male-only establishments. Alex suspected that Dora was right. Since gay men were indeed the ultimate patriarchy it followed that someone like Brian, who really did fear and loathe women, was a man who sexually appreciated men. Not that anybody could talk to Brian about this issue, let alone get him talking. Brian hated queers. They weren't masculine enough for him. They were snotty and prissy like Charles Drake and his art-consultant friend Walter Stirling, whose sister Xandra was a wonderfully funny lady who had inexplicably stopped dating Alex and returned to her wretched husband in Vancouver.

He walked out into the gallery, past the reception area where Dora had by now arrived and begun working, and cursed at Harold Lester's second-level collages. Harold was an artist who had rode in on the coattails of Brian and his cronies and now the entire bloody lot of them had no coattails. The only artist in Middleton and Richards' stable who still proved her worthiness by actually selling art was Natalie Weinberg; and her exhibition slot was well down the road. This did not exactly bode well for the gallery's financial woes.

Alex observed Dora through the window at the top of his office door. His secretary seemed far more alert than she had in a long time, now that she had seriously cut down on her drinking. Breaking off with Brian Convery had been an obviously smart decision; but Alex wondered what she might possibly see in that writer Eric Cosgrove. At least on the surface, Eric was Brian Convery's polar opposite. Eric appeared to be quite asexual, which might well be attractive to Dora. Alex speculated that Eric Cosgrove might have once been a Goth who had now changed his exterior and opted for a neurotic librarian persona. Or, possibly Eric Cosgrove was a closeted Lothario who lacked the necessary self-confidence and income to follow through with any of his fantasies. The man's wardrobe was low-end-to put it mildly.

Alex checked to make sure that Dora wasn't looking at him and then poured himself a snifter of brandy. He did not wish for Dora to see him drinking this early in the afternoon.

He toyed with calling up Janice and inviting her out for drinks and maybe even dinner. Janice had become cold to him again, ever since Xandra Stirling had abruptly deserted him and returned to her by all accounts dreadful husband in Vancouver. Janice had of course leapt to conclusions about Xandra's breakup with Alex—that Alex's financial instability was the cause of her rejection of him. His financial incompetence and his vile temper—what else could it be? Janice had a colour-abstractionist's disdain for any messiness. Xandra, in contrast, had an extremely high tolerance for messiness. That was probably why she hadn't wanted their relationship to develop beyond being a briefly hot affair. That was also the main reason why Xandra kept on tolerating her at least emotionally abusive husband.

Alex finished the snifter of brandy and decided against another. He paced the floor, trying not to make any noise in the process. He wished to close the gallery early as traffic was practically non-existent and then go out somewhere for more brandy and perhaps a cigar. Should he invite Dora King to join him or would that be a stupid mistake? Alex mulled this over and then decided not to invite Dora to join him after work. He feared that he might over-imbibe and then ask her what the hell she actually saw in a wimp like Eric Cosgrove

Alex looked at the gallery's timetable and then sighed. The Harold Lester exhibition that had so far been such a bust was soon to be replaced by a Quentin Farnsworth exhibition which also didn't hold out any great promise. Obviously some new blood was needed in the gallery—new artists at least. He wasn't seeing anything or anybody that he liked out there. He was seeing a lot of trendy abstractionism and too much work that deliberately referenced older seminal works. What the fuck had ever become of originality?

He thought of Ian and knew all too well that Ian had left the building. The only problem was that Ian hadn't sold of his half-partner percentage and no

further moves could be made without his signature. Alex more than suspected that he needed another business partner— somebody to both attract new young artists and then help out with the books.

At least the gallery's books were in order. If Revenue Canada did decide to audit Middleton and Richards, they would find nothing out of order unless they themselves were about to invent it. Some of the gallery artists might lose out in the event of an audit, however. Alex knew damn well that Becky Anderson, Peter Gallon, and Brian Convery all sold instant drawings to friends and bypassed their dealer in the process. Nickels to dimes they were also bypassing the tax man. If they got caught that was their fault and certainly not the gallery's. But the last thing Alex needed was to have any of those artists — especially Gallon or Convery—even more anxious for their residuals.

Alex again scanned the calendar. Six more months until Natalie Weinberg's next show. Natalie Weinberg was the gallery's steadiest seller. If only Alex knew a way of generating pre-sales for her work? He wished that Natalie already had her work completed and available to show to select people. He wished that Brian Convery hadn't alienated so many of Frances Bryant's friends at her summer soiree. Brian Convery had the nerve to pester him for residuals when it was primarily his fault that gallery artists' sales had dropped so drastically.

Alex wished that Brian Convery, as well as Peter Gallon and Rebecca Anderson, would all somehow manage to get themselves killed. What if they were to be held up and then shot by some punk kid who naively believed the three artists to be rich? What if Brian Convery were to get so drunk that he mistook a line of unusually pure heroin for coke and then overdosed? What if Brian were to finally follow through on his suicidal impulses and shoot himself neatly in the heart?

According to Dora, when Brian expressed a desire for himself to die he was always a safe distance from the drawer where he kept his gun. By the time he could theoretically reach the gun the impulsive moment was over. Alex knew that Brian often took the gun out with him; but he would never use it on himself in a public or crowded situation. At least so far Brian had managed to avoid publicly or privately acting on his suicidal urges. But how much longer could Brian hold on without finally yielding.

Alex decided that he had to get out of the office. A change of scenery was necessary or else he would keep on thinking unpleasant thoughts about unpleasant subjects. Alex decided to visit a local bistro and eat a sparse but healthy lunch, without consuming any alcoholic beverages.

At the local bistro he felt comfortable. He didn't know anybody dining alongside him—he believed most of the other customers were actors or theatre types. Alex had little interest in the theatre world. Janice often enjoyed plays and in fact had designed sets for several. Alex simply thought that the performing arts were of a different world. He enjoyed not having to talk to anybody and being able to listen to Billie Holliday singing. He was able to listen to the music without getting fixated on the lyrics. Alex knew that many of her lyrics were depressing and also quite angry.

When he returned to the gallery he was able to distract himself by looking at art history books from his modest collection. He could see how his collage—

artists were pale echoes of earlier pioneers. He could look at really big paintings by artists who had deservedly been assigned to the canon and he was painfully aware of how insignificant his artists as well as his self were.

At about two o'clock the telephone rang and Dora informed him that the caller was Frances Bryant. Alex then picked up the phone and Frances was waxing wildly about a hot young artist named Juan Escobar whom she felt Alex should immediately sign on and then sell. Young up and coming artists were the obvious solution to the gallery's current stalemate and Juan Escobar was a triple threat. He worked with video installation, painting and drawing. He was a compulsively wonderful draftsman and he had been noted in group exhibitions stateside. Frances was offering to drop over with Juan's slides and video documentation in roughly an hour's time.

Alex had seen some of the drawings and recognized an obvious talent but he wasn't sure about the video art. He wasn't in the mood to set up a VCR and appraise the young artist's work just yet. He was attempting to temper his distaste for the medium with the fact that Juan Escobar was an artist who worked with different materials and that video projection had indeed been the meal ticket for many contemporary younger art stars. He told Frances to drop by for a chat in roughly an hour's time but not to bring the support material until after further discussion.

He hung up the receiver and then stood silently at the window of his office door, observing Dora as she went about various office businesses that involved standing and leaning. Dora was so much like a couple of other women he had been intrigued by—they presented themselves as being so asexual that they were in fact highly sexual. And Dora King knew this all too well — the woman was anything but stupid. Yet she was prone to liaisons with truly wretched men. Before Brian Convery there had been another loutish painter and Dora had at least flirted with Peter Gallon before taking up with Convery. And now she seemed to have shifted a hundred and eighty degrees with that anemic-looking writer. Eric Cosgrove appeared more asexual than Dora did to those whose tastes favoured the obvious, but Dora used this as bait. Alex had once speculated that Dora was probably a closeted lesbian who intentionally picked creepy men, but she knew damn well that she appealed to a lot of different men. Eric didn't seem like any sort of closeted fag—he just seemed asexual. Dora probably felt safe in his company after overexposure to Convery. But what sort of a writer was Eric, anyway? Probably a purveyor of smut masquerading as a pompous intellectual type, Alex had known a few men like that in his time.

When Frances arrived she brought a bouquet of chrysanthemums along with her. Frances Bryant was Alex's absolute best friend—the only person in his life who could cheer him up without forcing serious issues. Of course today she did have an agenda, but they agreed to drink brandy and discuss sweet nothings for roughly ten minutes before getting down to the matter of hot trendy younger artists who might just give Middleton and Richards Fine Arts the kick in the butt that it so sorely needed.

Alex! Look out! Alex!

Brian Convery stormed past Dora at the reception desk and now barged into Alex's unlocked office. He was momentarily startled by Frances' presence but he recovered his focus quickly.

'It's about money, Alexander. Your artists' residuals.'

Alex glared at Brian. How many times had he already been obliged to inform the ungrateful bum that everything was currently on hold? Middleton and

Richards were hardly the first art dealers to request that their artists please be patient and additionally why was Brian Convery so impoverished since after all he had enjoyed a lucrative sales boom only two years previously? It was Brian's fault if he was truly broke. Too much and too soon—the usual pattern with immature boys and girls. And couldn't he see that his dealer was occupied—that he had an important visitor. Frances had of course once been a patron of Brian Convery's art until the lout had acted out at her summer party and disgraced himself. Now Frances had come to him with some constructive suggestions for moving the gallery out of the red zone and here was Brian—again blowing it for everybody else in addition to himself.

Brian stood only a few inches in front of Alex.

'I'm sick of being given the run-around. It's all bullshit, Alex. Cough up or face the consequences!'

By this time Dora was standing by the office door, her face clearly registering panic. She looked to Frances for signals — should they perhaps call the police?

'Relax. Dora. I believe Mr. Convery has concluded his temper tantrum.'

Brian flushed and then stalked out of the office and past the reception area then down the stairs all with neither a word nor a glance backwards.

Alex poured more brandy, offering Dora a snifter. Frances and Dora lit cigarettes and then Frances stood and began pacing the office floor.

'Brian Convery must be dropped from your stable of artists, Alexander. If he stays on, then I can no longer be a benefactor to the gallery nor to you personally. Brian Convery goes or I go, do you understand?' Alex sat behind his desk glumly. He certainly did understand.

But what if Brian Convery were to actively seek and then receive psychiatric help? Obviously, Brian was some variety of manic-depressive or 'bi-polar person' or whatever the currently correct medical description was for such an individual with dangerous oscillating mood swings. Brian would have to be prescribed serious medication — something far stronger than Prozac. He would have to quit alcohol and cocaine cold turkey because they were negative influences in their own right and because they would be incompatible with whatever the prescribed psychiatric medication.

Would psychiatric treatment be an alternative to dropping Convery from the gallery's roster?

Frances shook her head sadly and sweetly. You are being naive as you are all too frequently, Alexander. That boy needs help, all right. But he also needs someone to tell him that he can no longer get away with the sort of bravado we have both just witnessed. He has to stop playing the hero when he has become completely incapable of backing it up. He knows that he's lost his talent, Alex. If he hadn't lost his talent he would be productive.

Alex nodded as he poured some brandy for himself and Frances. She was right—Brian Convery was no longer worth all the bullshit that came with the package. Fresh and younger artists were the only possible salvation for Middleton and Richards, since Peter Gallon was also as dispensable as Brian Convery and Becky Anderson could go to Yorkville or New York or Wherever and fuck her as well. New artists with strikingly different aesthetics were the gallery's only hope—this had become clear to him.

'Well, Frances, Let's finish these drinks and then I'll look at Juan Escobar's video work. I agree, there are some good young artists using the medium and doing quite nicely for themselves—and their dealers.'

"Yes," Frances lit another cigarette and exhaled. "The facts of the matter, Alexander, are that you often have to hold your nose until the money begins rolling back in. I know that you understand this."

Alex nodded. If he did decide to begin negotiations with Juan Escobar then he would have to retain Frances Bryant on at least a consulting basis. He wished for nothing more than for Ian Richards or, even better, somebody acting on Ian's behalf to make Ian's departure official.

He decided to leave the gallery earlier than usual that day. He hurriedly told Dora that he was going to a movie, and then he decided that going to a movie was actually the best thing he could do at the moment. He retrieved a copy of the Weekly Movie Timetable and accompanying reviews from a convenience box and settled on what was rated a subtly promising thriller.

The movie certainly didn't immediately signify 'thriller.' It focused on two slightly retarded brothers in a stylized rural setting and on the one brother's weird wife, who may or may not have been having an affair with the other brother. Although suspense mechanisms did effectively kick in after about forty minutes, Alex found himself distracted by what he perceived as overacting. One of the actors in particular seemed more concerned with potential Academy Award nominations than in playing off what the other actors were doing.

He wished that Dora was there watching the movie with him—as a viewing companion whose reflexes he could test and then respond to. He wished that he and Frances Bryant didn't know each other far too well to ever date. He suspected that Frances was now seeing a woman—Susan or Suzanne McGillivray, who had recently broken off with a local supermarket magnate. He wouldn't have been at all surprised if Frances Bryant had indeed taken up lesbianism. Many of her art-patron friends were the sort of apolitical rich dykes who frowned on both noisy politics and indiscreetly gay men—the sort of lesbians who Alex actually felt quite comfortable being around. And if Frances no longer had any sexual interest in men then it would be much easier for him to enter into a business partnership with her.

As the dim-witted rural policeman finally clued in that the two brothers were both thieves and murderers, Alex was relieved when the movie finally concluded. As he stood to leave, he thought he recognized Natalie Weinberg in the audience with a male date. He began walking towards Middleton and Richards' most reliable artist; but then realized that it was another woman out on a date with a heavysset gentleman. Alex was glad that he was not about to encounter one of the gallery's artists. He did not wish to see or talk to any of them until he had decided whether or not he would be entering into a partnership with Frances Bryant.

When he arrived back at the apartment he was pleased to find no messages on his answering machine. Nobody wanted to talk to him and he wished to speak to nobody. He intended to watch the news and then wear his eyes out playing solitaire on his personal computer.

As he absently watched the final fifteen minutes of some generic television movie; Alex found himself wanting to live the rest of his life in a warmer

climate. He didn't wish to miraculously slip into Ian Richards' shoes; but he wanted all of the wonderful comforts that Ian probably enjoyed and then more. An idyllic, stress-free existence, with painkillers and somebody like Dora for company—that held out tremendous appeal to Alex now. He yearned for a charmed predictability without obligations or addictions. Ian probably had become a junkie. Junkies tended to lose their sex drives and Ian had never been much of an enthusiast for anything sexual. Alex could not himself imagine any sort of paradise without constantly available sex, without the burden of barter or negotiation.

He turned on the news and watched for about fifteen minutes until he couldn't stand it any longer. Alex killed the late night news broadcast angrily. The ongoing borderline war involving Serbia, Kosovo and the remains of Yugoslavia was beyond depressing. He did not really wish that certain young virile male artists still in their twenties should get drafted and then shot in the name of patriotism or duty or whatever. He switched on his personal computer and called up the solitaire game. This was a mindless activity that he occasionally wondered about becoming too wrapped up in. He would tally his scores and then have to remind himself that solitaire was only a game in which one competed against oneself.

Somebody was knocking at his apartment door. Who could this be—there was nobody whom he might be expecting and nobody in his life who had any right to be calling at this late hour? Alex called out to the caller to identify his or her self but there was only silence.

Damn! He now had to open the door and see who was there. If he chose to ignore the knocking it would only persist.

Hold on! I'll be there in a moment!

Alex opened the door and a masked man with a gun wordlessly commanded him to move backwards with his hands over his head. The man forced Alex back a toward the still humming computer and then shot. The killer's aim was accurate on his first shot. Alex fell to the floor while the masked man wearing gloves quietly exited.

Brian

Brian Convery finished his coffee and then grabbed his unwashed paintbrush. He was about to prove to the art world why abstractionism mattered to him right now at this moment in time. Abstractionism made sense because he was too angry to make pictures. Words could not express emotions and neither could figures. But colours could—at least for a few minutes if that. Now royal blue, now regal red, now emerald green, now canary yellow. Restrict himself to one particular hue of each primary and secondary colour. Brian had once read that Jackson Pollack had been an enthusiast for angry free form jazz and this made sense to him. He was still angry this morning but last night he had been furious.

According to his best friend and fellow artist Peter Gallon; Brian had struck a man in a local artists' watering hole because the man had called him a faggot. Apparently the jerk had been trying to pick a fight and Brian had finally swallowed the bait and was consequently barred from the watering hole.

He couldn't actually remember the exact sequence of events leading up to his banishment as he had experienced another one of his blackouts. This was hardly the first occasion on which Brian couldn't remember the events of the previous evening. When he had been dating Dora King—his dealer's secretary—he



had apparently been a frequent sleepwalker and blackout drinker.

Still, he was not at all sorry to be persona non grata at this particular watering hole where an obnoxious stranger had provoked him into losing it and then acting out. This bar was populated by cliques of stupid artists who talked about their damn work instead of making it. Academic whores and whores for academics. Painters who painted with their brains rather than with their eyes and their instincts.

He stared at his canvas. This painting was a performance—one had to be there to see it happen. The painting would have no life after the performance, unless he Brian Convery were to somehow suddenly become a hot art commodity again. Six months ago anything bearing his signature was hot property and now he was a washout or a burnout or some variety of has-been.

And he knew damn well that there was no way he could ever have a second career as a painter without getting rid of Mr. Alexander Middleton. His dealer had lost his former Midas touch. All the artists represented by Middleton and Richards Fine Arts were biting the dust, with the exception of that professional nice girl Natalie Weinberg. What the hell could possibly be her secret? Whatever the reason, Alex could only connect with patrons who favoured her variety of shit. Like that Frances Bryant woman who used to buy his art but who cut him off after he and his best friend Peter Gallon had acted out at her summer soiree for stupid rich people with no eyes and no taste. Alex had lost his touch pretty well the minute that his business partner Mr. Ian Richards had vanished into thin air. Ian had been the money and probably the brains to boot. Ian might still be the one holding the money bag, which might explain why none of the artists represented by Middleton and Richards were receiving their financial dues.

He had to confront Alex Middleton, but how? He needed to somehow put that incompetent double-dealer on the spot so that he had nowhere to go except to the safe or the vault or wherever he stashed his savings. If indeed there were any?

Brian's eyes registered a cocoon of dust lying beside the extension cord between his wall outlet and his computer's power bar. He stood, retrieved a kleenex, scooped up the dust, and then dumped it into the waste paper basket.

Brian! Take your life!

He stood and gritted his teeth for an extended second. Then he flung himself onto his bed and opened up *The National Paper* so that he could read the weekly zap reviews by that snot-nosed poofter Charlie Drake. There was Charlie—up and at it again. Trying his damndest to say absolutely nothing while filling up one hundred words with far too many meaningless adjectives and adverbs. Well, did Charlie like any of the fucking art on the wall or the floor or — Charlie's favourite—on the video projector? Not this week he didn't. At least he didn't give any brownies to the boring abstractionists who had taken over Kenmore and Oliver—like the former Mrs. Alex Middleton herself.

He glanced at a flier that he received telling him about a party that might be fun and reckless and taking place later on tonight. The party would be more upscale than usual and devoid of art queens and grant-subsidized wankers. Brian dialed Peter Gallon's number and they agreed to meet in an out of the way West End tavern later that night. Becky Anderson would also be joining them at the bar and then driving them to the party where the host would certainly be generous with the coke. He liked coke, especially when it

was on the house.

There was no way he could get to Middleton and Richards' office and confront Alex about the residuals because Dora King would be there to block him. Dora who for all purposes had ceased speaking to him since she had broken off with him and begun dating that sensitive man. That writer who was not an artist. Eric Cosgrove was such an eighties heterosexual man who paid lip service to feminism so that he could get laid. What bullshit! Heterosexual women preferred real men when the chips came down. Brian knew it and so did Dora and so did Alex, who was poised to strike the second he could tell that the iron was hot. Eric Cosgrove was going to learn this basic fact of life the hard way.

He poured himself a glass of ginger ale. Ginger ale combined with aspirin was good for hangovers. By the time he and Dora had finally broken up this was pretty well the one subject the pair of them could agree about. Ginger ale and aspirin, it always worked and it never failed.

The West End bar, which actually advertised itself as The West End Bar, proved to be somewhat less inconspicuous than Brian had been led to believe it would be. This was not a problem, however. He and Peter and Rebecca Anderson found themselves intrigued by the four walls which tonight showcased dreadful photo montages, but which might be quite amenable to better art such as their own. Over Guinnesses, the three artists entertained fantasies of showing exclusively in bars or restaurants and thus eliminating useless middle persons such as incompetent dealers who did not deserve their hefty percentages. Sell directly and then reinvent themselves as anarchist entrepreneurs and thus become fashionable again. Sure, Brian. Becky Anderson laughed as the three of them departed for the mysterious party, which turned out to be heavily populated by ad types and a few budding art impresarios. Brian and Peter quickly deduced that Becky was having a little fling with the fledgling dealer who owned the house and who doled out the party favours. Becky was pursuing a golden opportunity that didn't seem to be open to Brian or Peter and not only because they were a pair of boys. So after imbibing a few lines and a few cocktails Brian and Peter called for a cab to transport them back to the West End Bar.

The bar was busier now. It was already becoming too trendy, Brian and Peter decided. Peter pointed out some androgynous performance-art types and Brian winced. Why would anybody want to make non-profit art unless they were protected by either an inheritance or the granting systems? He had access to neither and he resented those whom he considered sponges. He'd worked hard to get to where he was and therefore so should they. Except, he wasn't going anywhere. He was in rapid downfall with no brakes working.

Peter Gallon stood to leave and clearly expected Brian to follow suit. But the night was still young and unresolved. And he hadn't finished his Guinness, so he let Peter leave before him.

Ten minutes later, Brian decided that he'd spent quite enough time at The West End Bar. He felt that he could avoid the place for the remainder of his life without needing to get himself barred from the place, but he suddenly needed to get the hell out of that bar and indeed that neighbourhood.

Brian flagged a cab and instructed the driver to drive him quickly over to the ghetto. At least twice a month he treated himself to fast anonymous gay

sex. If he could barely see his partners—just get a sense of how hairy, how muscular and how uncut they were—it was all for the better. He didn't want to see any of them in the light and he sure as fuck didn't want to be seen in the light. Tonight was going to be hot—he could smell it. Dark and hot, hot and dark. He didn't have to perform in the dark zones, he relished being performed on. And the rhythms helped. Those eighties disco hits he'd missed the first time around were now sweet music to his ears and to his cock.

Within an hour Brian had achieved what he had come here for. He knew that he had taken a risk by allowing a stranger to cum in his mouth but the risk had made sense at the time. What the hell, if he were to get infected it was no big deal because nothing usually happened for at least ten years.

The licensed evening still had a couple of hours to go so he flagged a cab to an arty bar just around the corner from his own apartment. He was about to sit by himself and order a draught when he noticed Natalie Weinberg sitting at another table with a man who was apparently her boyfriend. Natalie invited him to join herself and the man whose name was Russell. Russell was an architect who enjoyed a drink and an argument. Brian had never previously witnessed Natalie Weinberg inebriated and he was beginning to wish that Russell would just go away.

He did manage to steer the conversation toward the subject of Middleton and Richards' tardy residuals when Russell had temporarily excused himself. It had occurred to Brian that Natalie might be the perfect front person for all the artists in Middleton and Richards' stable as she was the most socially compliant and the briskest selling. In fact, at this moment in time she was the only gallery artist whose works were selling. Nataile Weinberg promised to speak to Alex but not until at least the following week and she did have a pair of commissions and her course load at the local art college had become demanding.

Oh bullshit! All that was required was one strategic phone call, for Christ's sake. Brian flared up when Russell returned to the table and indiscreetly slipped a little packet under the table to Natalie who immediately announced that she had to pee. So the pair of them had drugs that they weren't about to offer him. So fuck Natalie Weinberg and her architect boyfriend.

Brian finished up his draught and then angrily walked home. He still had at least an hour to burn up before he would be able to fall asleep so he switched on his computer and began to play solitaire. This stupid game was the ultimate anti-social activity—even more than masturbation since it required neither images or fantasies. Even heroin addiction among rich people involved irritating other factors such as suppliers or dealers.

And what the fuck had ever become of Ian Richards? One of the persistent rumours was that Ian had blissed out into a very pampered heroin addiction somewhere unknown to and far away from Alex Middleton who needed money from Ian in order to pay off an entire roster of angry starving artists.

Die!

Brian heard his own voice speaking out loud and now struggled to regain his concentration. If he were to really pay attention to his game he might be able to top his personal record of one hundred and sixty-five points before finally calling it a night.

When he awoke very late in the morning he decided that he was too angry to do

any painting—even a throwaway that would be impossible for any competent dealer to see let alone an asshole like Alex. He resolved that he personally would have to confront Alex right to his face and in his office that afternoon and no later. This stalemate could not be allowed to continue any longer.

He was the only artist in the stable who would have the guts to do anything besides talk. Even Peter Gallon was ultimately nothing more than hot air. Becky Anderson thought she could lose Alex by signing on with flashy younger dealers. What a cop-out! And Natalie kept on selling steadily to rich crones like that Frances woman who had made such a tempest about a little teapot at her summer soiree what now seemed like ages ago.

Now he picked up a brush and washed it off. Brian was about to revisit his early life studies courses by painting Alex Middleton and Frances Bryant, sitting in some tony Yorkville bar with Alex's eyes clearly saying it all—Give me money or else I'm history.

He flagged a cab and immediately wished that he hadn't. The cab driver was an aspiring actor or stand-up comedian or maybe even a performance artist. Brian was relieved that he hadn't mentioned being an artist to the loquacious driver but he still insisted on being dropped off almost half a mile away from Middleton and Richards' Fine Arts Gallery.

He walked steadily and briskly. There were other galleries in the neighbourhood—publicly funded institutions which had once been radical and were now relics. These galleries were uniformly managed by boards of commercially hopeless artists who all taught at the local art college and the trade schools. Brian hated these professional marginalists with a vengeance. Toward Middleton and Richards the neighbourhood became dominated by new and used bookstores. At least these served some sort of constructive purpose.

Upon arriving at the gallery, Brian took a deep breath, composed himself, and then almost ran through the gallery with its lame Harold Lester pseudo-collages. He marched right past Dora King who sat at the reception desk attempting to appear formidable. Dora tried to stop him — she attempted to raise her squeaky little voice at first to detain him and then to warn Alex Middleton that his office was about to be invaded.

Alex! Look out! Alex!

Dora had always been such a sniveling hypochondriac. Brian was not about to cause any trouble— he had only come to pick up what was rightly his. He had not counted on Alex having company—especially an old money person like Frances Bryant. That old bird had always been a negative influence—obviously the pair of them were cooking up something sinister like perhaps some sort of merger, or some form of serious gallery downloading. He did not look at Frances Bryant. He looked hard at Alex.

'It's about money, Alexander. Our residuals.'

Alex could barely restrain himself. He reiterated his party line about everything being on hold until notice so therefore the artists should just control themselves and stay cool calm and collected. Brian in particular but also Peter and Rebecca had not all that long ago sold artworks like hot cakes and what had become of all that money? Why hadn't they stashed it safely in the bank or thought of the month invested it smartly? The spoiled little brats thought that the world owed them a living well guess what—it didn't. Brian had almost memorized Alex's party line. He couldn't bear listening to it yet again.

'This is all bullshit, Alex. Cough up or face the consequences!'.  
By now Dora was standing and shaking by the office door. She looked to Frances for a signal. What was she now supposed to do— call the police?  
'Relax, Dora. I believe Mr. Convery has concluded his temper tantrum.'

Brian clenched his fists. How he would have loved to just wallop Frances Bryant in the face. But he held back—he stormed out of the office back past the unoccupied reception area and through the gallery with Harold's stupid pseudo-collages on its walls. He needed a drink and quickly, but not in this neighbourhood. He did not want Alex or probably Dora following him and attempting to rationalize everything. He did not need to be pacified thank you very much — he had threatened Alex with consequences unless Alex found the residuals money damn quickly and Brian stood by this threat.

He ran for the street car rather than wait for a cab to flag. Street cars were both more public and more anonymous, and he was not in the mood for chatty cab drivers. He had decided to go for a drink at that arty neighbourhood bar where he had run into Natalie Weinberg and her architect asshole boyfriend the previous night.

Brian ordered a Molson Dry and a toasted Western sandwich, and then he picked up the day's National Paper. He flipped through the daily Kosovo report—he had come to feel that warring religious fanatics should all kill each other and make the world safer for true non-believers. He did read a long story about two students somewhere in Colorado who massacred twenty-five other students and teachers before taking their own lives. The killers were allegedly Goth types— Y2K obsessives who yearned for the Great Dark Ages. They were probably Marilyn Manson enthusiasts—just what the world fucking needed. But he himself dreaded the upcoming New Millennium hoopla. He knew that he would wish neither to be in a crowd of lunatics nor alone with nobody to talk to except for the walls of his tape recorder. He was entirely sympathetic to those who wished to get off of the fucking planet in time for the Big Apocalyptic Countdown.

He then read Charlie Drake's pontificators on the redundancy of figurative painting and drawing and even collage. Drake argued that pictured desire had long been co-opted by advertising lingo and that rigorous abstractionism was in fact the queerest approach one could take to making art. Of course, Drake also championed stupid performance artists who actually did nasty things with their bodies while supposedly resisting commodification. Brian had once met Charles Drake, and the man had actually talked the way that he wrote. The man was the sort of professional homo snob that Brian loathed. Charles Drake was a professional overpaid bullshitter who denied space to people who actually had valid points to make and who actually made art instead of just castigating it.

The sandwich arrived and Brian lost his appetite after three bites. He decided to order a cup of coffee and then go to a movie— some million-dollar techno adventure starring Keanu Reeves. Brian was in the mood for mindless fun entertainment. He decided that he should pee before the coffee arrived.

When he returned from the john he stopped in his tracks. Dora's boyfriend Eric Cosgrove was sitting six tables in front of him with his back turned. Brian composed himself. He must have been downstairs when Eric arrived so therefore Eric couldn't have seen him. Brian hoped that this was the case. He did not want to get trapped in some stupid conversation with Eric Cosgrove

about detective novels and pulp fiction and the politics of the 'alternative' press. These seemed to be Eric's only subjects for painfully awkward conversation—unless of course Eric had just been talking to Dora who of course would have spilled the beans about Brian's little temper tantrum when he had confronted Alex Middleton about the residuals that Alex legally owed to his entire stable of artists.

Brian watched Eric ordering what appeared to be ginger ale. Brian then signaled the waitress for another coffee. The movie still didn't start for another half-hour and he did not wish to walk past Eric Cosgrove. Fortunately, Eric helped matters by almost inhaling his ginger ale and then leaving his money on the table for the waitress to collect on her own.

As soon as he was outdoors he hailed a cab. Because of Eric Cosgrove now he had to take a cab or else probably be late for the movie. He gnarled his teeth as the traffic became more and more gridlocked.

The movie wasn't worth all the stress involved in trying to make the opening credits. He could tell that the art director and the story-editor either didn't speak to each other or else fought like cats and dogs. Not to mention the star-sexually ambivalent bad actors were de rigeur in techno-action movies but the script too frequently demanded character believability.

Relax, Brian. It's only a kitsch sci-fi movie. Who gives a shit about the plot, for Christ's sake?

The movie had depressed him—it had been unable to decide whether it was nail-biting drama or high art or pseudo-postmodernist camp. One minute there were kitsch special effects but then everything would decompose into this terribly earnest and annoying drama. The only redeeming factor was the actor playing the passive protagonist.

Brian decided that he didn't want to see Peter or Becky or any art friends. He did not want to go home and begin painting another stupid canvas either depicting or ridiculing stupid people. He didn't want to see any friends but he was definitely in the mood for strangers. Five o'clock in the afternoon was hardly too early—especially on a Wednesday. The after work crowd could be quite rewarding. When the lights were all down then the time element could easily disappear. He found that he could enjoy losing himself by not immediately making sure that he was super hard and then consistent. When he let another man start working him or when he completely surrendered to another man then he felt free from any pressure to be a performer. He could only feel this free among nearly invisible and interchangeable men and he could easily lose complete track of the time. After maybe three good and a few more unfulfilled encounters—including one with a man who enjoyed having his underwear licked more than his cock—he decided that he had accomplished his mission and he opened up his locker and began putting his clothes back on.

At the next locker he became aware of a man staring at him intensely. It wasn't any sort of sexual once over—it was more like the other man was attempting to recognize him. The man at the next locker was not somebody whom Brian had serviced that afternoon—this man was black and he was too skinny for Brian. The man looked familiar, although Brian could assign neither a name nor any other association.

He quickly dressed himself and did not look up at the other man. He had come to the bathhouse to get away from people and not to meet them. Strangers by definition had to remain strangers.

He did not see the overhead clock as he did not turn to look behind him as he walked to the attendant 's station. After returning his key and towel he walked up the stairs into the cold night. Brian knew it wasn't all that late, even though he had successfully managed to kill the time for at least a few hours. If only he could stop the time permanently.

He walked briskly toward the nearest subway entrance and decided to travel southbound. As the train approached he felt an urge to jump. But he managed to check himself so that he could safely board the train.

He decided to get off the subway train at Union Station. He wasn't sure exactly where he wished to end up but he felt like hanging around the railway station for maybe half an hour. Who knows, he might suddenly decide to catch a train to Montreal—sleep on the train and wake up in a different city. Then he decided that he would have to take out more money from the instant teller and that he really couldn't afford to take a vacation.

Take your life!

He walked briskly toward the nearest men's washroom and decided to take a shit and then walk back outside. This was the last detail of the evening that Brian Convery was later able to recall.

Charlie

Charlie Drake clasped his hands around his face in utter desperation as he realized that he had less than half-an-hour to write, proofread, and finally correct his obituary of Mr. Alexander Middleton. He had barely known the man and he had strongly disliked the little that he had known about him. Nevertheless his editor—Mr. Kenneth Waddell of The National Paper—expected something relatively devoid of harshness or bitchiness or whatever too snide for the recently departed. Middleton and Richards Fine Arts had for a long time been one of the few commercial Toronto galleries to buy and place ads in The National Paper as well as in the local competition. Charlie sipped his brandy and began listing the brat artists whose careers had briefly flourished while being represented by Middleton and Richards. Rebecca Anderson, Peter Gallon, and especially Brian Convery—those were the three stars or anti-stars or whatever the flashy but untalented kids defined themselves as. Charlie remembered to put in a good word for Natalie Weinberg—a subtle colour abstractionist who was the one Middleton and Richards artist that he actually had any respect for. He briefly noted that Alexander Middleton had once been married to Janice Carter, an abstract painter who had formerly been an extravagant figurative collagist in his and Richards' stable but who was now represented by rival Toronto dealer Kenmore and Oliver. He avoided any speculation on the exact whereabouts of Mr. Ian Richards, who had not been seen in Toronto for over two years now and who was allegedly the money man in the partnership. Everything he Charlie Drake of The National Paper had ever heard about Richards was hearsay—the man was certifiably insane in some foreign asylum or he was a hopeless but rich junkie in some tropical paradise or he had either committed suicide or been murdered by his mob connections. But Ian Richards was a probably worthwhile subject for an entirely different investigative column—it was his business partner Mr. Alexander Middleton who had met with foul play only last night. Reports stated that somebody who had knocked on the dealer's apartment door shortly before eleven thirty had then pulled out a .38 and shot the man quickly and accurately. A neighbour had heard the shot but done nothing immediately—it had been Middleton's secretary Dora King who had found the body upon arriving

for work this morning. But these details of the murder were for the crime reporters to fool around with, and The National Paper didn't devote a lot of space to unsolved Toronto murder mysteries or any other local news.

The telephone cut him off. Charlie identified his editor Kenneth Waddell as the incoming caller. He now braced for the worst—another ultimatum on top of the one that he was racing against.

The message was a bad one all right, but not another ultimatum. Ken Waddell was conveying a piece of additional information that now had to be included within the obituary. Brian Convery—local bad boy artist whose career had flourished and then crashed under the guidance of Richards and Middleton Fine Arts—had now been charged with first degree murder. This changed everything, Charlie gritted his aching teeth. He wasn't sure how this development changed everything, but he knew that it did.

Brian Convery was definitely a braggart and a blowhard a nasty drunk and a fledgling coke fiend. But a murderer?

Charlie decided to perfunctorily conclude the obituary with the factual news that Brian Convery had been arrested and charged with the murder of his dealer, followed by the official statement that a private funeral was to take place at a yet undisclosed time place and date. This sign-off of course begged questions as to who exactly would be the executor of Mr. Middleton's estate and whether or not the art dealer had in fact made out at least a preliminary will. After all, the man hadn't exactly been expecting one of his star artists to suddenly turn up at his door and then open fire at him.

Or, had he? Middleton had probably been enough of a paranoid individual to constantly imagine that somebody in his life just might have it in for him. Bravado was such a component of the man's persona that paranoia had to be a key component of his private life. Charlie wondered what just might have been the unpleasant details of his breakup with Janice Carter. Surely it had to have been something stronger than artistic differences? Was he or she a philanderer? Did fidelity matter, or was Alex Middleton a lousy fuck? Had Middleton been, like his male art stars, a very ugly drunk indeed?

Had Alex Middleton also been prone to alcoholic blackouts? Brian Convery was known to do things that he couldn't for the life of himself remember the next day, like pick fights in bars and even at art openings. Convery had once come to blows with a notoriously macho abstractionist painter at one of Kenmore and Oliver's openings. He remembered now that Dora King—Middleton's personal secretary and Convery's former lover—had been the one in charge of damage control. Brian Convery could not that evening be held accountable for his actions because he had not in fact been conscious of his actions.

Had Convery blacked out and then shot Alex Middleton? Was the murder an unconscious and therefore unaccountable act—a variation of sleepwalking in which the subconscious might be argued to be the killer? Would Convery's lawyer—whomever he or she might be—use this strategy in the accused's defence?

And, then, what about some of the other rumours Charlie had heard about Brian Convery's life outside of his turbulent local art world?

Don't go there, Charles. He finished his brandy, lit a cigarette, and then called George. He wanted to see George tonight but first he had to finish his



weekly zap reviews. He had to remember one solo or group exhibition that he had actually been impressed by and this had not been a particularly resourceful week with regards to art. Ken Waddell was constantly reprimanding him for writing about installations and videotapes and performance art pieces that didn't command formidable price tags. Ken insisted that non-profit art was a big pointless waste of the taxpayer's money and this of course was The National Paper's position with regards to all things cultural. He, Charles William Drake, wrote for The National Paper not because he agreed with any of its wacky right-wing politics but because freelance writing helped him pay for his far too tiny and overpriced apartment

George wasn't home after all. His boyfriend was possibly at a bar or a movie or a bathhouse or somewhere more exciting than seated in front of a run-down personal computer. Charlie had by now given up promiscuity and anonymous sex but George had to have it. Charlie did not challenge George on this point. He felt a complete blank about worthwhile local art exhibitions that were now up and running. He flirted with calling up Mary Radford and subcontracting her to stand in for him. But he resisted this temptation. The last thing he needed was that tweedy old priss Mr. Kenneth E. Waddell scolding him over complete non-issues such as whose stupid byline is on the weekly anti-art reviews most of which are frankly puff pieces for individuals and their galleries not worth puffing up to begin with.

Charlie managed to complete five roughly one hundred word zap reviews without really offending or commending anybody. He loathed this weekly chore but he couldn't afford to jettison it—the weekly zaps largely paid the rent. After feeling somewhat pleased with himself for not writing any too obvious puff pieces, he called George and was pleased to find his boyfriend home and horny. George announced that he would immediately get his ass over to Charlie's apartment and this was music to Charlie's ears.

Except that Charlie's concentration and thus his erection withered after a promising round of foreplay. George wanted to know what was wrong—George who had probably enjoyed sex with at least one other man earlier in the evening. Charlie wanted to dodge the question by pleading exhaustion, but then he decided to talk to George about Alex Middleton's murder and Brian Convery's arrest and his own disbelief in Brian Convery's guilt.

You realize that Brian Convery is a serious closet case, George looked at Charlie warily.

Yes, of course Charlie had heard these juicy rumours. His bon vivant gadfly friend Walter Stirling, whose sister Xandra had briefly dated Alex Middleton, had prattled on about Convery's subterfuge activities during that dreadful art party last summer at which Convery and Peter Gallon had acted out and upset the hostess who had also been one of their primary patrons. And Walter's slacker rival—Tim Stratford who wrote for his pseudo-punk monthly rag—had also printed suggestive hints about Brian Convery's peccadilloes. Tim Stratford of course considered closet cases to be true subversives in the face of middle-aged and middle-class gay orthodoxy, so he anointed Brian Convery to be a sex radical instead of an overgrown and untalented adolescent

Charlie wondered as to what were George's sources concerning the accused murder's bisexuality. George didn't mind the company of post-gay punks who considered Charlie to be a very traditional queen indeed. And Tim Stratford was rather tight with Mary Radford who wrote his columns on particular occasions and who was dating an eagerly-ambitious National Paper crime

reporter named Olivia Wardock, who would be covering the Middleton and Convery criminal investigation for The National Paper.

George gently kissed Charlie and suggested that further sexual activities be postponed until the morning. Charlie agreed. Mornings were safely stimulating, provided that they followed a sound and uninterrupted sleep. The problem was that Charlie wanted something more dangerously stimulating.

After an uneventful sleep not marred by any perversely unusual dream, George and Charlie both woke up with expectant erections and thus formulaic but intense enough sex was able to proceed. Then they both drank coffee while scanning the new day's National Paper. Then George excused himself to do whatever the man did with himself throughout the day. He and Charlie never did talk about money and obligations—they both quite conscientiously avoided these subjects.

Charlie prepared himself more coffee and reread the crime reports section. The murder weapon used to kill Alexander Middleton was a .38 revolver owned by the accused—Brian Convery. The body had not been found until the morning after—by the deceased secretary. Charlie had always found Dora King to be fiercely protective of her employer. He himself had always been given the cold shoulder by Alex Middleton and by Dora King, since he had only written one favourable review about only one of the gallery's artists since he had taken on The National Paper's art critic position. However, Charlie had been out and around the gallery circuit to know that Brian Convery and Dora King had been lovers until a few months ago and it was well-known that all of Middleton and Richards' artists were angry at Alex Middleton over delayed residuals.

He could all too easily imagine Brian Convery having a gun fetish. But, would Dora have conveyed this information to the police in addition to being a negative character witness? Perhaps she didn't even need to do this—tracing weapons to their owner was no longer a time-consuming chore for investigative officers.

Probably the rapid identification of the gun's owner made fingerprint identification merely a formality. Except that it all seemed to neat to Charlie—ust too damn pat.

Since her break-up with Brian Convery, Charlie had seen Dora King out publicly with another man—a literary type named Eric Cosgrove. Mr. Eric Cosgrove was definitely a fish out of water among the boisterous painters and their patrons that Dora and her employer still favoured socially. Charlie wondered whether or not Eric was a published writer and, if indeed so, then what sort of writer was he? Did he publish under his own name or was Eric Cosgrove a nom de plum? Was he a serious language poet or experimental writer who taught at one of the universities? Or did he support himself by writing advertising copy or perhaps even pornography—presumably a heterosexual variety? Or was Dora King supporting her new paramour on her probably paltry income from Middleton and Richards Fine Arts which would presumably dry up due to the murder of her financially-troubled employer?

And what in the world had truly become of Mr. Ian Richards? If that man were indeed still alive, then where and in what condition?

Charlie internally debated calling Janice Carter and then decided against it. His previous exchanges with Alex Middleton's former spouse had been cordial

but cold, which he had always assumed to be the woman's professional manner. Janice Carter had changed her style upon breaking up with Alex and taking up with a bearish abstractionist named Nick Chisholm. Many individuals of all genders and sexual preferences changed their wardrobes and artistic tastes along with their lovers.

Instead he called up his gossip columnist friend Walter Stirling. Walter's sister Xandra had been dating and presumably sleeping with Alex Middleton until mid-summer. According to Walter, Xandra had picked up Alex at his former spouse's fortieth birthday party. Xandra had since returned to the West Coast and her husband whom she had been separated from during her tryst with Alex Middleton. Walter had always described Xandra's husband as being an unpleasant man indeed—probably far more unpleasant than Alex Middleton had ever been or behaved.

Walter suggested meeting Charlie and possibly George that evening at a book launch scheduled for a new bar and eatery calling itself The Purple Spot. Walter claimed that one of the reading writers was a very cute bisexual skateboard punk and that the crowd would therefore be very interesting. Charlie wanted Walter to elaborate further but he knew this would not happen. Walter was chronically attracted to younger bisexual punks who scorned older people's labels and conventions.

Charlie wondered whether Xandra Stirling had simply been looking for a quick fling or a matinee and then found herself becoming too emotionally involved with Alex Middleton. He suspected that underneath the late art dealer's gruffly macho exterior there had lain the heart of a bleeding romantic, with all of the unpleasant associations of romanticism such as possessiveness, dependency, and dominance. When combined with financial instability, such unpleasant personality traits had the potential to become violent and even lethal.

He decided that he wanted to meet with Natalie Weinberg, who had always been quite pleasant to chat with, and pry information from the artist concerning Middleton and Richards' exact financial situation. Natalie Weinberg quite eagerly agreed to meet Charlie in an hour's time at an Annex cafe near to her own apartment. He wondered what exactly had been the nature of any associative relationship Natalie had with Brian Convery as well as her professional relationship with Alex Middleton. He also wanted to know more about Dora King, the fiercely loyal and protective secretary who had found the body and who had once been romantically involved with the accused artist.

Natalie Weinberg, along with her current partner Russell, had indeed seen Brian Convery on the night before the murder and Brian had manipulated the conversation subject toward the matter of the outstanding residuals owed to all of the artists represented by Alex Middleton and the mysteriously unaccountable Ian Richards. Mr. Convery had requested that she, presumably capable of dealing with Mr. Middleton in ways unknown or unavailable to all of the remaining gallery artists, should be their spokesperson. Natalie had feigned her heavy teaching load as an excuse not to confront Alex Middleton and Brian had obviously been annoyed by her wafting. Now she felt quite guilty about not having taken this bull by the horn. Perhaps Alex Middleton might well still be alive and negotiating. This was hindsight, Charlie shook his head. Hindsight was by definition a useless blind alley. Yet Natalie Weinberg was clearly upset about Alex's death and she had no qualms about describing incidences of Brian Convery's bluster and his violent temper.

Yes, but stronger evidence against Convery was required. Charlie more than suspected that the artist was being railroaded but why? Many individuals make physical threats and then back off when they realize what they have just uttered, and he suspected that Brian Convery was such an individual.

Natalie had nothing much to say about Dora King aside from the fact that she must have been a strange girl indeed to have dated Brian Convery. She did think that Dora and this writer Eric Cosgrove were also an unusual match, but she supported the right of consenting adults to do whatever they wanted to do with each other. Then she excused herself so that she could prepare for an art history class that she had to teach in the next hour.

Charlie then drove south from The Annex toward Middleton and Richards' gallery in the semi-gentrified downtown west. Just as he was about to park his car, he observed Dora King briskly walking away from the gallery. He could read a sign indicating that the Middleton and Richards Fine Arts Gallery was closed for the day except for appointments. What appointments, he scowled.

Dora King had always radiated hostility to him, which was to be partially expected since he had never written anything pleasant about any gallery artists with the exception of Natalie Weinberg. But Dora had always seemed to take her job too seriously—she took professional rejections too personally. She had been the one who had found her employer's body and she had then blown the whistle on Brian Convery. Either she could not hear Charlie calling out his window after her or else she was pretending not to hear him.

He parked the car and then ran after her. When she realized that it would now be impossible to ignore him, she abruptly turned around and stopped. What the hell was his angle, anyway? She had already talked to the police and The National Paper's crime reporter and other similar journalists and why the hell should she talk to a mean-spirited art critic who didn't have a license to be anything more than a professional bitch? Dora had seen the body, the upstairs neighbour who had heard the gunshot was to put it mildly rather unreliable and the bullet matched the revolver owned by Brian Convery. So that was that. The gun was one of the prime reasons why Dora had broken off with Brian. Not only was he violent but he had become trigger-happy.

And, on the afternoon of the evening's murder, Brian had stormed past her desk and interrupted a meeting between Alex Middleton and Frances Bryant and thus made the situation even worse for all of the other more tactical gallery artists. Frances Bryant was Alex's best friend and major benefactor and Brian Convery had simply blown it. So what other choice did Brian have but to return to Alex's apartment that evening and then shoot the man? That was all there was to it—those were the facts of the crime—and would Charlie Drake please just fuck off and stop harassing her.

Charlie turned around and walked back to his car. He wondered whether he should call The National Paper's crime reporter Olivia Wardock and pry into the identity of Brian's lawyer and obtain some other details in the process. But he knew he was getting ahead of himself. Probably his editor Mr. Kenneth Waddell had commanded Olivia and her snarky girlfriend Mary Radford to avoid him or at least give him the brush-off. So he now drove over to the gym where he would subject his body to a serious workout. Blowing off steam was, he believed, the polite expression.

A good hour's workout was in fact just what the doctor ordered. The changing room was also as charged as it had ever been and Charlie was nearly tempted by a couple of younger muscle boys. But he had already made plans for the evening and plans had to be honoured so therefore temptation had to be resisted.

Back at the apartment there were but two messages. The first was from Kenneth Waddell of The National Paper, complaining that Dora King had complained to him about personal harassment. The Crime Department was now handling the investigation into Alex Middleton's murder and this case no longer had anything to do with Arts and Culture. Oh bullshit, Charlie snarled as he forwarded to the second message, which was from his frie4nd Walter.

Walter was inquiring about a possible early dinner date before mutually attending the book launch at which George would likely be joining them. Charlie accepted this invitation so he drove to a nearby Thai restaurant which enjoyed a five-star reputation. Charlie ordered a carafe of red wine and schemed to get Walter talking freely about his sister Xandra. Had Xandra backed away from Alex Middleton because of the art dealer's shaky financial situation on top of receiving warning signals from her friend and Alex's ex-wife Janice Carter.?

But Walter laughed and emphasized that Xandra wasn't all that likely to give a shit about Alex's financial dealings because she herself was rather well-off. Walter opined that Xandra had genuinely liked Alex—that he was not merely a matinee to satisfy her considerable libido during her trial separation from her obnoxious West Coast husband. Xandra was by all accounts quite aggressive sexually and this apparently hadn't been threatening to Alex. Charlie could imagine Alex Middleton having a preference for dominant women. But the straw that finally broke Xandra's back was Alex's ongoing obsession with his secretary.

Dora King. Charlie hadn't especially wondered about her relationship with Middleton aside from its peculiar loyalty. Had this obsession of Alex's also affected Dora's relationship with Brian Convery? And then what about the writer Eric Cosgrove? Had Dora tolerated Middleton's ongoing crush or had she attempted to discourage it or had she taunted him with it or what?

Charlie decided to pick up Walter's tab and then he drove over to The Purple Spot. Three young poets and experimental prose writers were scheduled to read at their parallel book launches. The young man who so captivated Walter was third on the bill—the star of the evening Rafael Gutierrez was a rising young star in every possible sense of that expression. The other two writers were both young and hot as well—Sue Banning and Courtney—Jane Simmons.

As he and Walter found seats relatively by themselves at the back near the bar, Charlie recognized Jennifer Echols of Trunctured Press which had published all three of the evening's writers. Jennifer Echols was herself actually a serious writer who had taken on the publishing and younger, more performance-oriented writers. He could also see a contingent of young performance art types, some of whom he had previously met and talked to but none of whom he felt like talking to right now. He and Walter both ordered draughts and listened to Sue Banning whose writing did not especially appeal to them. However, Sue Banning certainly had her own audience contingent who uniformly rushed to the publisher's table the second the author's writing had concluded. Her audience also included National Paper crime reporter Olivia

Wardock and her girlfriend Mary Radford who occasionally deputized for Charlie as the paper's art critic. He did not need to talk to either Olivia or Mary right now, especially because they both appeared to be either drunk or high on drugs and they were attending the book launch with gossip columnist Tim Stratford, whom Charlie detested.

Aside from themselves, it appeared as if the only audience members not swarming the publisher's table were the ones who had already bought all three books being launched at the top of the evening. But now Walter tapped Charlie on the right shoulder, alerting him to a tall bespectacled man who was quite tentatively walking towards the table and attempting to make eye contact with Jennifer Echols. Eric Cosgrove—this certainly wasn't his scene? All these early twenties types were queer-punks—many of them were transgendered. Eric more closely resembled a library worker who worked late into the evening and then fell asleep in his already rumpled suit.

Good luck finding time to talk to Jennifer Echols tonight, Eric. And what on earth might be his business with her, anyway? Charlie reminded Walter that not everything published by Trunctured Press was young and in your face and queer. Maybe Eric was pushing his own manuscript, or attempting to learn the fate of a manuscript he had long ago sent for to Trunctured Press for possible appraisal and subsequent publication. But what sort of manuscript could it be—a Harlequin, a detective story or murder mystery, heterosexual porn? It had to be something low-end and funky because Trunctured Press kept everything short and speedy and subtlety was entirely beside the point.

Maybe the conversation was about a manuscript Eric had submitted to Trunctured Press, for Eric was now talking to Jennifer who was smiling at him while shaking her head. Be patient my friend, we do have quite a backlog so please be patient—that was what she appeared to be telling him. Jennifer gave Eric a copy of Sue Banning's volume of short stories and then Eric walked away toward the bar until he recognized Charlie Drake and Walter Stirling. At that point, Eric Cosgrove made a one hundred and fifty degree abrupt turn and almost ran toward the stairs leading to the front door.

What the hell was that all about, Walter Stirling asked Charlie. Charlie knew that Eric's loathing of him certainly would have involved his own badgering of Dora King, but Charlie suspected there might be something more to Eric's abrupt detour. It's one thing to indicate hostility to another person while remaining in the same mediated room. But it was something else to almost run at the sight of that same individual. Charlie decided that it might be quite interesting to follow Mr. Eric Cosgrove around town during a day in the man's life. It would have been tempting to shadow the man tonight. He didn't particularly need to listen to either Courtney-Jane Simmons or Rafael Gutierrez for that matter. But George knew Rafael and George was supposed to be arriving shortly, so Charlie was not about to leave the Purple Spot just yet.

He found himself becoming fidgety during the second writer's presentation. Courtney-Jane Simmons was an admirable individual and probably a good writer; but her writing made more sense on the page than off of it. Charlie generally felt that literature made perfect sense on the page and was meant to exist on its own value—not as a vehicle for performance. He quickly became distracted by Eric Cosgrove's panic exit from The Purple Spot as well as George's late arrival at the same destination.

He excused himself to Walter and found a quiet spot in the hallway leading to

the washrooms so that he could check his messages. Not that George was prone to leaving them when the going or the shopping or the whatever became hot and wonderfully timeless. But tonight there had been no negative messages from George, so Charlie assumed that his wandering boyfriend was indeed mobile and due to arrive shortly.

There was another intermission after Courtney-Jane's reading and another swarming of the publisher's table. Charlie observed Jennifer Echols appearing relieved that no cloak-and-dagger eccentrics such as Eric Cosgrove were now demanding her undivided attention. And it now appeared to Charlie and Walter that the entire audience except for themselves were either buying Courtney-Jane's book or else requesting autographs.

Walter directed Charlie's eye-line toward Rafael Guttierrez who was drinking soda water in a corner by himself, and Charlie nodded nonchalantly. Yes Rafael was incredibly attractive and no Charlie was not going to literally drop his drawers and neither was Walter so therefore enough was enough.

It wasn't until nearly halfway through Rafael's presentation that George finally arrived. George hugged Charlie and now the boyfriend's habitual tardiness was again forgiven. The fact that both men fancied Rafael made Charlie even hornier. He wasted to get out of The Purple Spot at the reading's immediate conclusion and then get down to playful business.

After giving Walter some cash to buy a copy of Rafael's book , Charlie threw his coat on so that George would take the hint.

George smiled patiently. There's something I have to tell you, Charlie.

Charlie lit a cigarette and began fidgeting. Couldn't whatever George's confession might be just wait until a later time and place?

"I know where Brian Convery was the night of Alex Middleton's murder, Charles. If not at the exact of the murder then at least approximately the exact time."

Charlie frowned for a prolonged second and then gave George another big hug. Brian Convery had indeed been enjoying a bathhouse on the night of the murder. Brian Convery had an alibi, and now it was up to the man to use it.

Dora

Dora King had found it most unusual that Alex Middleton had not been up and working in his office upon her arrival at work that morning. There was no message on the gallery's answering machine about Mr. Middleton being ill and he certainly would have informed her in case he had planning either a working or personal vacation. So Dora marched upstairs and knocked on the door to her employer's apartment to no avail. After three unsuccessful knocks, she turned the door handle to the left and found the door to be unlocked.

This was both highly unusual and highly disturbing. Although his space-cadet neighbour often left the street door unlocked so that her fellow travelers could come and go at their leisure; Alex never left his apartment door unlocked let alone open - not when at home and never when he was out. She did not hesitate to enter the apartment and her worst fears were quickly confirmed.

Alex was clearly dead, lying on the floor in front of his computer of which

the power was still on. She almost pressed the space bar on the keyboard and then checked herself. Fingerprints would confuse matters, to put it mildly. She lit a cigarette and then realized that Alex did not keep any ash trays for uninvited visitors. Alex had rarely smoked and he had stopped dating that woman who had been such a heavy smoker. She telephoned Homicide, who promised to send officers to the scene of the crime immediately along with appropriate medical personnel. The desk sergeant instructed her not to touch anything that she hadn't touched already and she agreed to comply but then she felt compelled to question the woman living in the adjacent apartment to what had been Alex's.

Karen Sullivan appeared either barely awake or stoned or some possible combination of those two states. The woman had always presented Dora with the impression of being either a junkie or an electro-shock survivor. When Dora confronted Karen and grilled her about her previous evening's activities, the neighbour recalled having heard some sound resembling a gunshot but believing that it had to be either a car backfiring or a sound effect on some movie being watched in the next apartment. She recalled this sound as having occurred somewhere around eleven thirty. Dora restrained herself from screaming at the woman. Obviously since Karen Sullivan hadn't interrupted whatever her concurrent activities might have been to investigate, then there was no way that the neighbour would have seen a person either arriving at or departing from Alex's apartment.

Dora lit another smoke on her way downstairs to where she quickly drew up a sign indicating that Middleton and Richards Fine Arts was indeed closed for the day, with only appointments being honoured. Of course there weren't any appointments. This had become a frequent source of despair but today this was just a minor relief.

She exhaled and recalled that earlier on the previous afternoon Brian Convery had barged right past her reception area and into his dealer's office, where he had proceeded to confront Alex about outstanding artists' residuals. Alex had been engaged in an important meeting with Frances Bryant—a personal friend and a gallery benefactor. Now she feared the worst. Brian had finally lost it. Even up until Dora had finally left him; he had been able to pull back from his most extreme impulses. Even when he had been in one of his blackouts; there had always been somebody there to grab hold of him.

Dora felt angry at herself for having deserted Brian. She had no longer loved him but she had known that he needed her.

Stop it! This would have happened even if there had some other woman—or man—in Brian's life. Mommy or Daddy or Big Sister wouldn't be able to control him all of the time. Unless there had been some means of declaring Brian Convery a person unable to control his own impulses and thus incapable of being left to his own devices.

She wanted to pour herself a drink. She knew that Alex had kept a bottle of brandy in his office cabinet. Alex had been killed in his apartment and not in his office so there was no risk in her helping herself to his brandy.

Dora walked down to Alex's office and poured herself a shot. There wasn't very much remaining in the bottle—she knew that Alex and Frances had been drinking after Brian's intrusion on their business meeting—the important



meeting now seemed so ancient and irrelevant.

While waiting for the homicide cops to arrive, Dora called Eric from the gallery office phone. Eric seemed even more shocked by the news about Alex's murder that she did; but he seemed to regain his composure when she talked her way through what she had witnessed yesterday afternoon while at work.

She had overheard Brian Convery threatening Alex with harm that previous afternoon, after the artist had barged right past her as if she no longer existed. Cough up or face the consequences—those had been his exact words that she had overheard. All of the gallery artists were undoubtedly angry about their delayed residuals but it was only Brian Convery who had physically threatened Alex. Even Peter Gallon had constrained himself to publicly snubbing his ineffectual dealer. But Brian had purchased that revolver last summer. Brian felt that everybody was out to get him and therefore he had to protect himself.

Yes, she agreed wholeheartedly with Eric that Brian was paranoid and quite likely certifiable. Yes, she agreed with him that it would be best to tell the police everything that she knew and that she had overheard. The physical ultimatum, Brian's booze and coke-fueled paranoia, his violent temper and his alcoholic blackouts—it would all have to come out in the wash. Dora informed Eric that it would be best for them not to see each other tonight, although he offered to be there for her. She felt it best not to burden Eric—that he needed the time alone to concentrate on the pulp mystery novel that he wished to soon complete and then send out to possibly-interested publishers. And Eric had never particularly liked either Alex Middleton or Brian Convery; since neither of them had ever made any effort to become acquainted with him.

She was about to light another cigarette when she heard multiple footsteps on the stairs leading up to Alex's apartment. The Homicide police had arrived at the scene of the crime. A senior homicide detective named Arthur Brent presented himself at the apartment door, accompanied by three assistant detectives who all wore gloves. The three assistants immediately began fine-combing the scene of the crime. While this investigation was proceeding, Inspector Brent interrogated Dora in the gallery's office. Dora cleared her throat and then outlined how she had been suspicious when Alex had not yet appeared at work—this was unusual especially because there was no message indicating illness or absenteeism. She told the detective that she had knocked on his apartment door and had been quite surprised to find the door ajar; although Alex's neighbour was far too casual about leaving the street door unlocked. So Dora had taken the liberty of entering Alex's apartment and thus she had discovered the dead body near the computer which was still running. She told the inspector that she had already talked to the neighbour Karen Sullivan who had indeed heard what later turned out to be a gunshot but what she had mistaken for either a car backfiring or a simulated gunshot in the late night TV movie.

Then Inspector Brent inquired about Middleton and Richards Fine Arts—about the gallery's structure and its stable of artists. Dora lit another cigarette and told the detective about Alex Middleton's partnership with Ian Richards and how Ian had vanished into thin air almost two years ago. She studiously avoided all rumours and hearsay about Ian's current whereabouts or his fate. She did convey the undeniable fact that the gallery's sales had been steadily declining over the past eighteen months and how this was a subject of consternation not only for the artists but also for Alex. She ran through the

gamut of gallery artists—their work and their personalities. The final artist on her list was Brian Convery. Dora informed Inspector Brent of her past relationship with Brian that she had broken off because of the artist's drinking and substance abuse, his inability to save any money, and his violent temper. She again stuck to the facts; and the facts did not look good at all for Brian Convery.

On the previous afternoon she had been working at her reception desk at approximately three o'clock in the afternoon when Brian Convery had stormed right past her and barged into the office. She had overheard Brian Convery threaten Alex Middleton physically. Cough up or face the consequences those had been the angry artist's exact words. A friend of Alex's named Frances Bryant had also been present in the office. Frances Bryant was a patron of many gallery artists and indeed many other artists both locally, nationally, and internationally. She had been helping out Alex financially, this was something that Dora knew without knowing any exact details or amounts involved.

Dora cleared her throat and then informed Inspector Brent about Brian's alcoholic blackouts. She had personally on a few occasions been forced to throw Brian into a taxi and then drag him onto the bed, only to observe him immediately rise and then walk around the apartment unaware of what he was either saying or doing. All of his blackouts that she had witnessed had commenced in public spaces rather than at home; but she had feared for her own life as well as his. Fortunately, Brian had never been able to get his hands on his gun while in this semi-conscious state. However, what if he had indeed been carrying the gun while semi-conscious and unaware of his whereabouts or company.

Detective Brent manually recorded Dora's information about Brian Convery's blackouts and then demanded to know whether or not Convery had been in such a somnambulant state when confronting Middleton earlier in the afternoon. Dora shook her head and told the detective that Brian hadn't even been intoxicated let alone in any unconscious state.

Detective Arthur Brent recorded this information and then called upstairs to his team of assistants. He instructed them to obtain Alex Middleton's personal telephone directory and a list of the gallery artists with their addresses, phone numbers, and E-mail addresses. Alex used a personal address book backed up by a web page which had to now be downloaded. Dora said nothing further to the detective, for she really did have nothing further to say about Alex's murder. It seemed to be an air-tight case.

As soon as the detectives vacated Middleton and Richards' premises, Dora locked all of the doors and shut off all the lights. She then drove home and swallowed a combination of a Gravol and a Valium. She slept for what seemed like eternity until she found herself stirring with the sunlight creeping through her west venetian blinds.

It was already eight-thirty in the morning, she groaned as she pulled herself out of bed. She automatically walked toward the front door where she retrieved her daily National Paper. She took a second to realize what stories were the ones she simply had to read; and then fast-forwarded to the local crime section. Here was the printed verification—Olivia Wardock was detailing the murder of Alex Middleton and outlining the arrest and detention of Brian Convery. All evidence pointed to the disenchanting artist — the gun had been

traced to Convery.

Dora angrily lit a cigarette and began to prepare her coffee. That gun had been the death knell in her relationship with the murderer. She had feared that eventually Brian would turn on her and then use the gun. All of his ranting about requiring self-protection was nothing more than substance-addled paranoia. Now that she had reduced her drink intake and sworn off all drugs, this fact had become crystal clear. Brian would have shot her if she had stayed with him; and now he had used the gun on Alex.

She flipped through the newspaper until the obituaries where she now focused on Charles Drake's appreciation of Alex. The tribute was forced and not even perfunctory—Charles Drake had never made any secret of his contempt for Alex Middleton and all of his artists except for the durable Natalie Weinberg. Drake's tastes favoured minimalist and conceptual forms which did nothing for her—Charles Drake was an elitist who was jealous of anybody who became successful. She drew on her cigarette as the art critic methodically outlined biographical details—Alex's separation from Janice Carter and the mysterious disappearance of his business partner Ian Richards. He signed off with the news of Brian's arrest and the fact that Alex Middleton would be privately buried. Dora snarled. She knew that Janice was Alex's executor and that Janice had always despised her because the wife had always suspected her husband of fucking his secretary.

She bit her lip and then telephoned Eric. When he picked up the phone she could tell that he'd been up for at least a good hour and that he must have by now read the crime section. The report said it all so what more details could she possibly add? She had often complained to Eric about the gallery's diminishing finances but she couldn't really ascertain how closely he had paid attention to her complaints. She was somewhat surprised that Eric hadn't yet read Charlie Drake's reluctant obituary. Charlie Drake was a nasty piece of work indeed.

Dora was relieved that Eric did not pressure her to meet with him. He was quite sensitive—quite adept at deciphering when she wished to be by herself. She didn't yet wish to meet with Eric because she was afraid that she might say something best left unsaid for now and yet she really couldn't add any further details to Alex's murder and Brian's arrest. It was a clear-cut case—who other than Brian would have taken a grudge about outstanding residuals to such an extreme.

Brian had been only one of the gallery's artists, and they were all owed residuals. The gallery hadn't been turning any profit and both it and Alex personally were in arrears. Dora knew that Alex had been borrowing money from Frances Bryant, and she wondered why Alex hadn't possessed the humility to bring Frances on board as an equal partner. Middleton, Richards, and Bryant would have sounded impressive—more like a legal firm than a fine arts gallery but then that was the true nature of the beast. Frances had been championing a particular young artist that yesterday afternoon, when Brian Convery had so rudely interrupted herself and Alex.

If only Ian Richards' exact whereabouts were known; then Alex could have moved towards either expanding or dissolving the Middleton and Richards partnership. Ian could have remained in whatever his current paradise as a silent partner while consenting to bring in an active partner like Frances Bryant. If only Alex hadn't been so damned stubborn, but then that had been the man's personality. Stubborn and bullheaded, but with a flair for it and

with conviction. And now Alex Middleton was dead, thanks to Brian .

It would only be a matter of a day or two until the lawyer for Middleton and Richards' Fine Arts would be requesting her company. Dora was certainly not looking forward to any meeting with either Frank Wolfe the lawyer or, for that matter, Terry the accountant. A copy of Alex's will would be directed to the gallery and to whomever the individual who had been designated to take care of outstanding gallery business in the event of Alex's death. Dora wondered whether or not Alex had ever prepared a will. He had been a young brat—still only in his late thirties and assuming a lengthy successful career. Although Alex had also been prone to paranoiac behaviour on more than a few occasions, it was a mystery to her whether or not there would be a will and then whatever might be its contents.

Who was to take care of the gallery in the event of his death? Frances? Janice? Herself? Certainly not Ian Richards? And then what were the instructions involved? To declare Middleton and Richards bankrupt and thus defunct? Declaring bankruptcy was itself an expensive proposition; so just exactly who would hypothetically be paying for the necessary procedures?

She then absently drank coffee and smoked a succession of cigarettes. She did not feel like getting dressed as she knew that somebody from the Crown attorney's office would be calling her. She had realized that she had no choice in this matter — she would have to be a witness for the prosecution. She had already informed that Inspector Arthur Brent about Brian's threat to Alex's well-being. She would be expected to outline Brian's probable bipolarity— his violent mood swings and his suicidal urges. It was all but a miracle that Brian had never simply put a bullet through his own head.

Brian! Die!

And then the shot. He had always been able to check himself and stay away from the gun; but it probably would have been only a matter of time until he had gone all the way. Dora recalled Brian once nearly jumping in front of an oncoming subway train—when she had stood directly in front of him so that he could not move until the train had arrived safely. She remembered the occasion on which her friends Patrick and Elinor had overheard Brian commanding himself to die and then telephoned her about this incident. She suspected that Brian's real motive for killing Alex might have in fact been to provoke somebody else into killing him, whether perhaps Alex himself in self-defence or an intruding police officer or maybe even the state..

Dora decided to take a shower and then get dressed. She did not feel like reading anything else in The National Paper and she did not wish to run out of cigarettes until after the phone call from the Crown Attorney's office. She closed all of the blinds tightly and then began running the shower. The water was exactly the right temperature and she decided to take a very long shower. The answering machine could talk to the Crown Attorney's secretary or whomever the caller might actually be.

She knew that within a couple of months she would have to begin looking for another job and that the competition for jobs in the cultural-sector was pretty fierce. Eric was living on a skimpy inheritance that was going to be running out in the none too distant future. Then what would he do for money? Already he was expecting her to pick up the restaurant tabs and how long would it be until he found out one way or the other about his murder mystery?

The only thing she knew about his manuscript was that it was written under the pseudonym Frederick Leacock. Eric insisted on not showing his writing to anybody other than potential publishers and Dora could not argue with this secrecy. Still, she was curious as hell to read not only his murder mystery but also the boys' adventure story that he rigorously kept writing and then revising. She found Eric comfortable to be around in comparison to Brian and other previous lovers; but she realized that her attraction to Eric revolved around the fact that she barely knew him at all. Sooner or later, that would have to change.

Eric had recounted his Goth period and his junkie period, which had somewhat overlapped. Probably he associated the Goth look with heroin since all visual traces of Gothic sensibility had long vanished. Dora was curious to look at photographs of Eric as a Goth but he insisted that he had destroyed them all. This struck her as being rather extreme; even though so many other former junkies had also thrown away what they took to be reminders of their addictions.

She wondered whether Eric had ever gone through a period of sexual experimentation—perhaps even a gay phase. Her friends Patrick and Elinor had wondered whether or not Eric was bisexual and she had attempted to broach the subject with him late one evening. Eric had denied ever having slept with or even kissed a man in all of his thirty-one years.

This was fine by Dora. She wanted no further relationships with men who preferred the company of men either sexually or emotionally or whatever combination. Eric seemed to prefer women to men without obviously wanting to fuck other women. When he wasn't with her; he seemed to be asexual. But when he was alone with her he could be aggressive without making her feel any obligations. And he hardly even drank, let alone used any recreational drugs.

If only Brian had done something about his addiction. She herself recalled once waking up without any idea of what she had done the previous night. Of course Brian had been no help whatsoever since he had also blacked out. Peter Gallon had convinced Brian and herself that they had been caught having group sex in the ladies' washroom at a big party thrown by Kenmore and Oliver. It was only when Peter identified the other parties involved as being Natalie Weinberg and her strong silent boyfriend Russell that Peter had admitted to pulling both of their legs.

The writing had been on the wall and she had chosen to do something about it. Brian had chosen to ignore the warning signs and now he would have to face the consequences.

The telephone rang and the caller was Janice Carter. Janice managed to inquire about how closing procedures were progressing without saying anything else that was best left unsaid. Janice had always been suspicious of her; but at least she had always known how to act professionally.

She decided to take another Gravol and then an extended nap. She wasn't expecting any more calls and she didn't feel like talking to anybody—not Eric and not any lawyers and not Karen Sullivan. She could hear Karen watching television, alternating between some stupid soap opera and a cooking showcase.

And then Dora fell asleep again. The Gravol was dependable and probably not even addictive.

When she awoke, she made some coffee and then poured herself a Scotch. She had followed through on her vow to cut down on her drinking after breaking off with Brian but right now she felt like she needed a good stiff drink. She still had idle time before having to deal with the closing procedures for the gallery. She had no further responsibilities to anybody or anything that day so if she felt like drinking than that was her business.

She realized that she would have had to eventually give Alex notice anyway. His constant staring at her had gone on for too long and she had known that it would continue unless she did finally surrender to him. Dora had been able to work around the fact that Alex wanted her until it became clear that his unrequited love had been the prime factor in Alex's breakup with Xandra Stirling. Alex's financial ineptitude hadn't been an issue since Xandra herself was quite wealthy indeed. But Dora had once heard Xandra complaining to Janice Carter about Alex's inability to resist staring at his secretary; and of course Janice had smirked and warned Xandra that she had told her so.

Dora ground out her cigarette and decided against drinking any more Scotch. The drink had made her tired but not tired enough to fall back into a deep uninterrupted sleep. She decided that music would be the perfect companion. Music spoke to her without demanding any necessary response. Music was a solution because it did not consist of assembled or edited information—it offered emotion without demanding reciprocation. She looked through her CDs and realized that she needed to hear instrumental music Brian had been correct about one thing—that emotion was non-verbal. Eric also believed this dictum. Eric believed that verbal language was all about the denial of emotion.

Dora settled on Ravel's Pavane For A Dead Princess and then lay down on her sofa, after tossing The National Paper into her recycling pile. She realized that she had unintentionally bypassed Charlie Drake's column this morning and she allowed herself a subdued chuckle about her negligence.

She felt that she should at least prepare a light supper; but she did not feel up to any cooking. So she walked toward a nearby Thai restaurant that she didn't really like but that would suffice. She never saw any artistic types at this restaurant, unless theatre people counted. She could overhear two actors at the next table talking about some sleazy horror movie that they were both working on for questionable minimal pay. It seemed that some producer or director named Manfred had quite the tidy racket going.

Dora wondered whether she should tell Eric about this Manfred character. Perhaps this profit-making charlatan could be a tacky but necessary little gold mine? Eric certainly did need to begin making money and soon—there was no doubt about it. But Dora could only catch snippets of the two actors conversation without obviously eavesdropping, so she forgot about the matter and concentrated on her meal and her wine.

She was pleased that she would be able to fall asleep again without taking another Gravol. She knew that she would be able to get out of bed early the next day and be coherent when the Crown attorney telephoned.

In the morning she was relieved that it was raining heavily. At least it wasn't snowing. If the forecasters were indeed correct; the approaching winter would be snow-deficient and that would suit her nicely. Dora hated snow with all of its traffic jams and slush and foul tempers

The telephone rang. She didn't recognize the incoming number but she guessed that the call would be official and important..

The Crown Attorney's assistant was brief and to the point. Dora's testimony as to Brian Convery's volatile character in addition to his behaviour on the afternoon of the murder was going to be the centerpiece of the Crown's argument. Forensics and ballistics would supply the necessary facts and Frances Bryant would verify Brian's threats; but Dora was going to be the Crown's star witness. Nobody had seen Convery either entering or leaving Alex's apartment on the night of the murder—Karen Sullivan had heard something resembling a gunshot and assumed that the sound was coming from her neighbour's television. Karen Sullivan was either a junkie or a shock-survivor and of very little use to the Crown's planned presentation.

But, Convery himself did not have any alibi. Brian Convery had blacked out and been unable to account for any of his activities after about ten o'clock that night.

According to the Crown's assistant, Ted Sawyer, the last detail Brian remembered about that night was hanging around at Union Station, where he had briefly contemplated taking a sudden trip to Montreal. He couldn't remember whether he went to the washroom before walking back out onto the street or whether he had suddenly decided that he needed to use the washroom.

Dora remembered all too well occasions on which Brian had blacked out as a result of serious heavy drinking. It made sense to her that Brian would have started drinking earlier than usual that day—after making such a fool of himself in Alex's office in front of Frances Bryant. She surmised that Brian had indeed gone on one of his benders, although the impulsive trip to Montreal seemed to be somewhat out of character. Still, it all made sense. She had often thought that Brian's best career move would have been to get out of Toronto and then re-invent himself in some other city. He could have changed his style and maybe even his name.

It was now too late for any constructive reinvention on Brian's part. He couldn't remember not killing Alex Middleton; and, since the murder weapon had been his gun, this made things look grim indeed. As long as the fingerprints were certifiable and the weapon was not in doubt, then how could Brian not have been the killer? The best possible strategy for his lawyer would be to argue against there having been any intention to kill; although even this would be risky. She herself had overheard Brian's threats that afternoon; and Frances Bryant was also going to be a witness for the prosecution.

Dora telephoned Eric after the crown assistant departed. When she explained Brian's amnesia—his lack of any alibi—to Eric; he seemed nonplused. Dora found this reaction a bit strange; although she had often described Brian's drinking blackouts to him. She wondered whether or not amnesia played a role in Eric's own murder mystery that he was constantly revising—amnesia had indeed been a staple of forties pulp novels, according to Eric.

Again, he seemed to understand when she informed him that she wished to sleep alone at home. She would have liked him to invite her to his place; even though she would have declined the invitation.

Dora poured herself another stiff Scotch and then watched the late night news. There were no further developments in the investigation into Alex's murder. Brian was in custody and the trial date would be announced to her within the next few days.

Before turning the light out; she had an odd premonition that she had forgotten to lock her apartment door. The front door to her building was supposed to be locked at night and it never was. She had at least one neighbour who probably shared the same bad habits with Karen Sullivan—Dora knew that the rock musician down the hall had a drug problem as did many of his visitors. The musician himself seemed pleasantly dazed most of the time but some of his friends seemed more agitated—perhaps their problems were with crack rather than heroin.

She checked her door and realized that she had nothing to fear. She cursed Karen Sullivan for leaving the street door to hers and Alex's apartments. Then she tried to think about something more mundane and inconsequential. She was successful at doing so, for she quickly fell into another deep sleep.

The next morning when Eric again called to see how she was coping she had made up her mind that she was going to finally get out of the house and away from the office. She surprised him by suggesting that they take in a movie together. The film would have to be a comedy—nothing too horrific or for that matter too earnest. She scanned the entertainment section until she arrived at the title Shakespeare In Love. This looked like a safe bet—Shakespeare himself promised literary quality and her friends Patrick and Elinor had been quite keen on the film. She could go out and be with Eric without having to really talk to him or about anything beside the movie that they had just seen when it came time for the inevitable coffee after the film.

Dora then slipped on her winter coat and drove toward Middleton and Richards' Fine Arts Gallery. The yellow ropes had long been removed from the gallery's vicinity and she was able to come and go without any disturbance as long as she locked the street entrance. The business of declaring the gallery closed was unpleasant and it had to be done; and Alex's will had stipulated that in the event of his death coupled with Ian's exile the gallery would be foreclosed. This was doubtlessly an annoyance to Janice Carter, who probably would have liked nothing better than to either take over the gallery herself or bring in her own dealers to completely make it over.

It did occur to Dora that Ian Richards might suddenly reappear and declare himself to be solely in charge now that Alex was unfortunately deceased but the chances of such a resurrection were about one in a thousand. Best to play things by the book; and if Ian were indeed alive and active then he would have to be the one taking the bull by the horn. Dora had long since written Ian off—he was either dead or blissed out or strategically remarried.

She met Eric at the Uptown Cinema only minutes before the movie started. As they sat and watched she found herself laughing quite uproariously at the bumbling Shakespeare who had a serious deadline and who had written only one scene for an untitled play with little if any plot. She found herself appreciating a cross-dressing subplot as women passing as men were indicative of the Elizabethan age and sometimes she thought that women's situations hadn't really progressed all that much since that golden age.

As the movie came to its predictable but humourous conclusion, Dora became



more and more aware that Eric wasn't enjoying it. She now dreaded the probable conversation that would accompany their coffee date after the movie. Eric did have a strange sense of humour—he appreciated what was often justified or excused as 'black humour'. Once a Goth always a Goth—at least when it came down to certain idiosyncratic tastes. Eric also needed to relax and loosen up—he needed to be more secure about money and less preoccupied with his murder mysteries and schemes. Eric hadn't even liked either Alex Middleton or Brian Convery; and here he was acting more wound up than she was. Dora wondered what was troubling Eric; but she decided that this would not be an appropriate time to be opening up any serious cans of worms.

She was relieved when Eric did not invite her to go home with him after their hesitant conversation in the cafe. She certainly did not wish to sleep with him tonight; and she was beginning to think that she and Eric would never sleep together again.

Back at her apartment Dora attempted to read an English comedy of manners by a writer named Barbara Pym. This was a writer whom Dora found familiar while still unpredictable. She was in the mood for light reading, rather than either pure escapism or nail-gripping murder mysteries. She did not wish to have things happening to her, even if they were only happening in somebody's book.

Her novel proved too demanding. The movie had been a good tonic as if had demanded concentration without strain—it had been easy for her to distinguish lovable rogues and comical villains from each other. The Pym novel, by contrast, was too genteel.

She decided to try listening to music—something textural without being too sonically extreme. But the CD she picked out immediately annoyed her. Dora didn't want to listen to anything she was tired of and she wasn't in the mood for anything new.

Dora lit a cigarette and resisted the temptation to pour a drink. She then decided that she should drop in on Eric—without phoning him first to see whether or not he wanted her company. She did not wish to be alone at home and she needed to touch base with him again. She felt that she had better apologize to him for repeatedly cutting her off at the cafe this afternoon, after the movie.

When she knocked on his door he barely opened his door, as if he had company he was hiding. He looked exhausted and was clearly about to call it a night. He momentarily seemed startled to see her but then regained his composure.

Are you going to invite me to come in?

Eric nodded and then opened the door.

Eric

Eric hung up the receiver slowly after Dora had signed off. He was relieved that Dora had been the one who had found Alex's body. Better Dora than some cleaning person or, even worse, that narcoleptic who lived across the hallway. He had been so fortunate that Karen Sullivan had been unable to distinguish between real and television gunshots. And he was confident that

Dora wouldn't hesitate to inform the detectives all about Brian's violent temper and the serious threats he had made to Alex's well-being only hours before the time of the murder.

But his relationship with Dora was going to become strained . She did have an emotional attachment to Alex Middleton, even if her loyalty had long been problematized by Alex's transparent desire for her. Any relief that Dora might feel about the man's death would be clouded by not only her loyalty to the man and his gallery but also by her economic dependence. Dora would soon have to look for another job now that Middleton and Richards' was presumably to be dissolved.

Getting his hands on Convery's gun had been so easy. All he'd had to do was to simply follow the guy to that arty little bar that he often ate late lunches at and then wait for the man to heed nature's call. When Convery decided that he needed to go downstairs and pee, Eric had helped himself to the gun. Dora had complained to him often enough about her ex-boyfriend's bulge in the right coat pocket that Eric had been able to help himself within seconds. Later on that night Convery would have found his gun missing while making his rounds. Eric smiled. What if Brian Convery had himself intended to do a little target practice on the night of Alex's murder?

And Alex's narcoleptic neighbour—true to form—had cooperated by leaving the street door unlocked. Karen Sullivan had always been unlocking the door after Alex had locked it. Alex was afraid of strangers while Karen was always expecting her mysterious friends. Eric had listened to Dora complaining about the hop-head in the adjacent apartment on numerous occasions; and her tendency to leave the street door accessible had suited him perfectly.

Eric had always disliked Brian Convery, even before meeting the man and being subjected to anecdotes about him from Dora. The man was like his art—loud and insignificant while aspiring to heroic status. Brian was a borderline illiterate who believed verbal language to be for the visually impaired. Words and pictures were simply not meant to co-exist and that was that. Such crap!

He particularly remembered that big party last summer at which Brian Convery and his friend Peter Gallon had acted out and began throwing things around. How convenient for him that the party had been given by Frances Bryant, who was in Alex Middleton's office when Brian threw another temper tantrum and physically threatened Alex only yesterday afternoon. Frances Bryant was the perfect witness for the prosecution—regal in her bearing and beyond reproach. Rich people with credibility could do wrong as witnesses.

Dora had been subjected to various rumours that Brian Convery was gay or at least bisexual. Dora had been in denial about it but Eric surmised that the rumours had to be at least partially true. Hadn't Dora complained that Brian had always been 'somewhere else' during sex? He knew that Brian hated women and that was a definite signal. Men who took too long to realize that they're homosexual always wound up declaring themselves at the expense of the women in their lives. Eric had known far too many similar situations. Poor Dora, stuck between Brian who really wanted to be out with the boys and Alex who practically drooled all over her. Well, the sorry pair of them were now finished for life and thus safely accounted for.

Eric now needed to distract himself. He retrieved a leaflet indicating public

readings for the month and noted that three writers all published by Trunctured Press would be launching their new books in a couple of days at a new bar called The Purple Spot. What was the woman's name who managed Trunctured Press? Eric tried to remember the name of the woman whom he had met once at a party which he attended along with Dora and who had indicated a desire to read his manuscript. Jennifer Echols—that was the name he was trying to remember. Ms. Echols was herself a very serious writer who owned a little press that needed to make considerably more money. So then, Eric's pulp novel was just what she should be looking to get her hands on and then publish. Minimal expenses for maximum return.

After writing the date time and place of the launch in his calendar, Eric booted his computer and returned to his adventure story-in-progress. The pulp murder mystery was hopefully to be published under the name of Frederick Leacock and the adventure story under Graham Swift. The pulp novel contained three good murders and the adventure story involved warring nations competing for a small neutral plot of land. War was for everybody while murder was for the elite—this was Eric's motto for his anonymous writing. It would be in his interest to keep both options open.

It wasn't difficult inventing border skirmishes among both major and fictional countries while remaining focused on the adventure story's target audience—young boys with gun fixations. Eric avoided the homoerotic tinges that he had read in similar boys' novels—it was for the better not to become too fixated upon muscles and uniforms. He did have two good prototypical heroes to continually fall back on whenever details became too obscure for younger readers. American General Steve Westlake and Russian General Vladimir Konstlovik were official enemies born to become allies, and Eric was able to concentrate on these characters' initial trajectories with a sense of how he eventually wished to integrate these trajectories.

At eleven thirty Eric checked his word count and declared himself satisfied. He resisted a temptation to watch the late night news and also decided to avoid any of the sleeping pills he took whenever he felt it would help him sleep. He wanted to be alert fairly early in the morning, when he knew that Dora would be calling him with her updates.

He slept soundly. He couldn't even remember the slightest detail of any dreams and this was a good sign indeed. Eric prepared his morning blend of caffeinated and flavoured-herbal tea and then set about reading The National Paper. He fast-forwarded to the local crime page and he was not disappointed. There it all was—Alex's corpse had been discovered by his secretary Dora King; the bullet had been traced to a revolver owned by irate artist Brian Convery; and the weapon had been found and thus Convery had been arrested and then charged.

The gun had been retrieved after serious searching by the homicide investigation team. Eric had carefully deposited the weapon in a plausible but not too obvious place. That school yard near Convery's apartment had been a sound choice. Convery had doubtlessly been reading all about school boys who found release outlets for their long pent-up rages by shooting headmasters and prefects and other authority figures. Eric recalled his own days at one of those schools and this one kid who had always seemed to be on the verge of just dynamiting all of the buildings that made up the deceptively informal-looking institution.

He scanned the rest of the paper, calmly anticipating Dora's call. She must have taken at least a Gravol or a Valium or some other sedative, because Dora was a light sleeper at the best of times.

The book reviews were as lugubrious as usual. There was a lengthy review—written by a local pseudo-experimental publisher—of two serious feminist writers who were both writing under pseudonyms. Pseudonyms here were used to connote alter-egos. Eric snorted. He wanted only a few highly discreet individuals to be aware that Eric Cosgrove and Frederick Leacock and Graham Swift were one and the same person.

Dora's phone call was tense, to put it mildly. Since she could tell that Eric had been up long before she had; then obviously he had already read *The National Paper* so what could she possibly add to the capsule story in the crime section. There it all was—her finding the body, the identification of the weapon and then Brian's arrest. Dora did complain about Charlie Drake and his indifferent obituary for Alex. Clearly Charlie's mind had been on vacation and not working overtime.

Eric inquired whether Dora might want to meet her somewhere low-key for breakfast but he was relieved when she declined. He did not wish to be the one leading the conversation and she really did not feel up to talking very much. He knew that this dynamic would have to change soon but he was afraid of how it might possibly shift. Dora subdued and depressed was definitely preferable to Dora angry and aggressive.

It also made sense for Dora to stay near her home phone as she was expecting a call from the Crown Attorney's office. The Crown would be requesting that she serve as a key witness and they would be asking her questions that she would want to answer in a private situation. She would not want to be talking to a high-powered attorney on her cell phone in her car—Dora had always experienced difficulty concentrating on her driving even under relatively calm circumstances.

He vowed to spend as much time by himself at home as was possible. He did not have to attend anything before the *Trunctured Books* launch and that allowed him to bury himself in the Frederick Leacock and Graham Swift projects. The Leacock progressed more satisfactorily than the Swift—Eric was more interested in murder than in war. Murder involved individuals and war involved those surrendering their individuality. Still, the adventure story contained all the components that might make it an easy pitch to some other desktop entrepreneur.

He kept in touch with Dora over the telephone. She was dealing with those whom she had to deal with and then sleeping as much as possible. He felt sorry for her, having to fend off Alex Middleton's obnoxious wife and being subjected to Crown attorneys and homicide investigators. Eric knew that he could write about such characters without ever having to meet any of them. But he was pleased by Dora's accounts of the murder investigation prior to the trial. Brian's gun was the weapon and there were no fingerprints on it besides Brian's. This was all perfect—Brian had the motive. Other artists had the same motive but they weren't insanely convinced that the art world owed them everything on a silver platter and all at once. Brian Convery's friends Peter and Becky were hotheads—overly ambitious without the talent to back it all up. However, even they probably restrained themselves to throwing darts at Alex's photographs. Brian had been unable to find a safe outlet for his

anger; and now he would suffer the consequences.

He prepared himself for his excursion to The Purple Spot. He visited a local books store and browsed through Toronto's independent publishing section. All of the writers—Rafael Guttierrez and Sue Somebody and Courtney-Jane or Jean Simmons—were archetypal Generation Z types. This of course promised for a drearily illiterate evening masquerading as 'edginess'. But, he had met Jennifer Echols of Trunctured Press and she had seemed genuinely interested in his murder mystery. So it would have been career suicide for Eric not to be putting in an appearance.

Eric's heart sunk as soon as he walked into The Purple Spot. He had been prepared for the event to be somewhat crowded; but this was ridiculous. He could register Jennifer Echols—surrounded by throngs of gender-indefinite punks all queued up for autographs from the writers. And the writers themselves were crap—at least the woman he had just caught the tail end of. Courtney-Jane Simmons was an indifferent reader and none of what Eric had heard made him sympathetic to the kids all lined up to purchase her new book. He did note of course that he himself was hardly an inspiring reader.

What if Jennifer Echols actually did decide to take on his mystery that he had sent to her and to Trunctured Press. He did after all express strongly that the novel should be published under the name of Frederick Leacock. Then there would be no point in himself actually being the reader or, for that matter, even visible at his own book launch. Some 'actor' would have to be retained for such occasions. Eric smiled and laughed out loud at the absurdity of this scheme. He knew that Andy Warhol had once hired an actor to be 'Andy Warhol'. This of course was a very Warhol thing to do; but the ruse went deeper than that. Eric was convinced that 'the self' did not exist and that somebody other than Eric Cosgrove was the actual author of the murder mystery he had submitted to Jennifer Echols of Trunctured Press. However, now he had to introduce himself to her and find out whether or not she had yet read his manuscript. Jennifer Echols never returned phone calls; or else he certainly wouldn't have come here tonight. Eric wished nothing better than to make contact with Jennifer and then leave before the next reader—Rafael Guttierrez or whatever his name was.

The line-up for autographs was finally thinning out, so Eric decided that now was the time to make his move. However, as he stood to take his place at the end of the line he caught sight of Charles Drake from The National Paper. What the hell was that fur-coat gay socialist doing among all these punks and possible street-kids? Charlie Drake wanted to talk to him—Eric could feel it. Charles Drake had attempted to confront Dora earlier that afternoon—right in front of the gallery. Dora had been so upset that she had contemplated calling the police and having the art critic charged with harassment. And now it was Eric's turned to be cornered by the man, who seemed to have some bee in his bonnet about Brian Convery not really being Alex's killer. Well, if Brian hadn't done it then who did Charlie think was the offender?

Eric quickly decided that he wouldn't be able to talk to Jennifer Echols before the next reader began. It was all too easy for Charlie to pretend to recognize him and then invite him over to the table where he registered Walter Stirling and a younger black man who appeared to be Walter and Charlie's link to the queer punk scene that they were both far too old for. He knew that there was a fire exit down the hallway past the men's washroom; so he pretended that he suddenly had to pee and then he kept on walking down

toward the fire escape.

Eric quickly ran down the fire exit stairs and out into an alley located behind The Purple Spot. He could see that the alleyway could take him back to a familiar main street. He did not hear any footsteps behind him so Charlie Drake wasn't going to be pursuing or even following him

Unless Charlie knew his address. Then he wouldn't have to shadow him through alleyways and all of that routine. He would simply stall for time in an anonymous parked car until finally Eric would panic or crack or whatever.

Eric looked behind him as he approached the main street. Nobody was following him. Nobody else was in the alleyway—it wasn't one of those back streets where transactions and other exchanges took place routinely. He hoped that Jennifer Echols hadn't registered his sudden departure. The last thing he wanted to have happen was for the publisher of Trunctured Press to label him some sort of hypochondriac and then refuse to read his manuscript. That novel was Eric's meal ticket out of Toronto. He didn't want to be forced to evacuate before being published, even though nobody aside from himself and Jennifer Echols would know the real identity of Frederick Leacock..

As soon as he safely returned to his apartment; Eric poured himself a scotch. He had no intention of becoming drunk as he needed now to think and then do some writing. The incident with Charlie Drake had spoiled what could have been an important day for him; and now the day had to be rescued. There was still time—it was only ten thirty.

Eric decided to now transfer his adventure story file to disc and then begin working on another murder mystery, hopefully to be published under the Leacock moniker. He already knew the identities and characteristics of the murderer and the deceased.

A chronically bitchy gossip columnist named Walter Drake was to be found dead in his den or study or whatever. Now, the weapon needed to be something more elegant than a revolver or knife. Perhaps a letter opener? No, poison would be the best option. Walter Drake was typically entertaining a coterie of waspish gay men and one of them endeavored to spike his drink. But, the resourceful gentleman was not in fact a waspy gay man but he was in reality a heterosexual or celibate book clerk somehow passing as an epicene gentleman.

Yes, this could be his breakthrough. Eric prepared himself a cup of his favourite blended tea. This could be an easier sell to ambitious publishers since the character element was already stronger than in his first Frederick Leacock mystery. Now, the murderer's masquerading—his dual identity so to speak—this had to be perfect or else the novel's entire structure would not stand up. This begged the question of just who might be the crucial secondary characters. At least one had to be female—perhaps hopelessly in love with the hopelessly homosexual Walter in the tradition of many misguided heterosexual women?

Walter Drake? Yes, that sounded not as archly rococo as Charles Stirling while obviously signaling anglophile.

There would also have to be a detective or investigation angle, Eric surmised as he sipped his tea Or....perhaps the detective might actually be redundant. Another character might wind up usurping the detective's function in the novel. Yes, this now made sense. Perhaps the main female character—

what could be her name? Helen, Ellen, Eileen, Kathleen, Maureen... something Irish but not too specific? And the murderer should be Henry Somebody masquerading as Oliver Somebody at Walter Drake's final fatal soiree.

Yes... this was all beginning to jell. Eric decided to enter all of these points into a new file for now just titled mystery number two. Wait a minute... a title was now occurring to him. Poisoned Pens... that could at least suffice as a working title. Yes... he should commit these names and titles and details to memory immediately or else risk losing everything.

He knew that a coroner would also have to be a crucial or pivotal character. And then the coroner should be female and rather hard—not at all sympathetic to upper-class gay men and their chatterbox society. The coroner should be in her late forties and she should be working-class—antagonistic to those whom she considers to be privileged. Eric knew that he already had a good model for this character—Dora ten or fifteen years down the line. He could easily imagine Dora becoming quite hard and quite bitter.

This female coroner, the fag-hag bookstore proprietor, and the murder victim himself were all ready-mades—just waiting to be realized. The Henry character was another matter entirely. Henry had to be both an object of curiosity or desire and then an incredibly sophisticated operator behind a relatively innocent surface. Eric now realized that Henry had to be incredibly attractive—a Dorian Gray type who could infiltrate parlour milieus thanks to his intrinsic beauty. He could mingle with moneyed classes without drawing undue attention to his rougher origins—Henry would be capable of affecting perfect table manners and he would be casually familiar with quality wines. He would understand camp sensibilities while actually despising them.

Henry would have to be far more attractive than Eric himself.

The telephone rang and the caller was Dora, almost begging him to meet her at the movies. She made it clear that she was in the mood for something light and playful and literary. Eric scanned the daily movie guide and agreed that Shakespeare In Love would likely be the best choice; so they agreed to meet at the theatre in an hour's time.

Talking to Dora after the film was more than awkward. Eric was unsure how to obtain information about legal procedures from her without appearing overly interested in the subject of Alex Middleton's murder. He was indeed very curious as to who might be retained as Brian Convery's lawyer and who indeed might be the retainer. Did Charlie Drake actually feel strongly enough about Convery's innocence that he might successfully persuade one of his prominent homo lawyer friends to go to bat for an infamous closet case? Dora was clearly avoiding the subject of the murder investigation and her agreement to be the Crown's main witness. This was all proper and dandy; but her avoidance of these subjects left her without any other real subjects of conversation.

Again, when Dora informed her that she wished to go home and then sleep alone, Eric did not beg her to reconsider her decision. If conversation was awkward; then sex would be impossible. That indeed had been the prevailing pattern ever since he had begun dating her. Throughout his brief previous affairs Eric had appreciated the fact that all of the women involved had preferred to not really talk to him all that much—that they weren't really all that interested in his private thoughts and feelings. But Dora was an entirely different kettle of fish.

Eric opened his apartment door and took his coat off while letting out a sigh of relief. That movie was mercifully a thing of the past. Dora had hoped that a literate but light comedy would help the pair of them relax and it had temporarily distracted her while annoying him. That sort of barely-disguised Masterpiece Theatre adaptation was such a waste of film. Eric divided the movies into those who were literate with the medium and those who retained their visual illiteracy. The first people to seriously develop the invention of moving pictures were German Expressionists and that trajectory had sustained throughout the entire history of the movies. The Germans and Eastern Europeans who had emigrated to the United States before and during The Second World war had imported their expressionism and made some great movies as a result. Comedies annoyed him rather than amused him. They focused on the actors rather than on the lighting and the shadows.

He booted up his computer and returned to the fresh mystery he was going to write—the one in which a wealthy gay chatterbox named Walter Drake was to be oh so subtly poisoned by one of his salon guests who would be named Henry Somebody...

Eric decided that he would stay up for at least another good hour so he prepared some tea Yes, Henry Whatever—His—Surname would have to be a complex and sympathetic character; since Walter was obviously such an example of a corpse-in-waiting.

Yes! Yes! That's it!

Henry, who managed to get himself invited to Walter's upper-crust homo salon, was actually a bisexual bookstore clerk who disdained wealthy gay men who had completely banished women from their lives. Henry could not be a macho homophobe but he could certainly be influenced by radical feminists who considered strictly gay men to be the ultimate patriarchy.

Eric poured cup of his blended tea and began compiling notes on Henry Surname's character. He would be a true Freudian who believed that all humans carried the inherent potential of bisexuality and who would resent those who restricted themselves to either heterosexuality or homosexuality. So far so good, but there would have to be a more narrative or structural connection between Walter and Henry. Perhaps Walter... Yes! Walter was of course attracted to young Henry. Walter would become aware of the young clerk at some book launch at the store at which Henry would be employed. Yes! And the bookstore's owner would be one of Walter's salon cronies. Yes, even better.

The bookstore's owner would be a classic fag hag, who herself perhaps fancied young Henry. Eric decided to give this new character a temporary name. Dorothy... no no, too obvious. Helen was more likely. Everybody named Helen was at least forty so he would use that name at least for the time being. And Helen would be the sole woman among Walter's coterie of friends, who all considered Helen to be something resembling an old drag queen.

Eric relaxed that some research would be in order. He would have to read Wilde again and Gore Vidal and even Tennessee Williams. Weren't all of his women really men? Eric felt pleased with himself. The fifties would never die even though the Millennium was rapidly approaching. Repression was such an interesting subject compared to liberation. Yes! Henry Somebody would have to be so reactionary that he was actually radical. This was the territory Eric knew that he would have to stake out.



Charlie Drake must have had the goods on Brian Convery's clandestine gay sex life. Or, at least Charlie must have heard some hot gossip regarding Brian's exact whereabouts on the night of Alex's murder. But why hadn't Convery presented the police with a credible alibi upon being taken into custody and then interrogated? Either Convery's actual whereabouts were themselves incriminating; or else the man literally could not remember where he was and what he had been doing at the time of the murder Dora had frequently described Brian's alcoholic blackouts. If this were indeed to be the case; then this could be the break that Eric needed.

And then there would be the angry coroner—the woman looking for nothing but the facts and getting very stymied in the process. Eric decided that she could be named Nora. No... too much like Dora Something harder—Barbara perhaps. Yes... for now Barbara would suffice. The gentlemen could of course call her Babs behind her back.

Eric decided to begin composing biographies of the novel's major characters. Let's see... obviously there was Walter who combined Walter Stirling's repellent flippancy with Charlie Drake's self-righteousness. There would be Henry, who would be himself crossed with... whom? Henry had to be a bit of a chameleon... an actor. Perhaps Henry modeled himself on epicene stereotypes common in forties movies. Yes... that could be Henry. Dustin Hoffman playing Clifton Webb in that movie Laura. And then Helen have to be a classic character—Dorothy Parker crossed with Fran Liebowicz and with somebody else who would act out hysterically when far too drunk. And Barbara was to be his projection of Dora in fifteen years time. And then... there had to be at least another suspect. There had to be some other man who Helen would be convinced was the murderer. Helen had to consider Henry either negligible or else she had to be quite fond of him. Eric decided to not define the characters too rigidly before he would begin writing.

Somebody was knocking on his apartment door Eric looked at the clock and became apprehensive. Nobody ever just dropped in on him, let alone this late in the evening. He knew that he couldn't pretend to be either out or asleep as his living room lights were on.

Damn! Eric realized that he had better see who was at the door. Hopefully it would be some harmless misguided stranger.

His late-night visitor was Dora.

She needed to talk to him — face to face. She did not wish to sleep alone at her apartment as she was afraid that she might be being followed. Dora was being stalked?

Not exactly sexually, she clarified. But Charlie Drake had pursued her on an earlier occasion and she feared he would attempt to accost her again. Charlie Drake was obsessed with his belief that Brian Convery was innocent of Alex's murder.

That was absurd—he reassured her. If not Brian then who? Who else would have a motive, aside from a psychotic like Brian? None of those to whom Alex owed money would kill him for financial motives; because they knew damn well that Alex had been on the verge of declaring bankruptcy.

Eric was relieved when Dora agreed with his reasoning. The only other possible killer that even occurred to her was Ian Richards; but why on earth would he risk everything he had by blowing his cover?

Dora had been drinking and now she wished to fall asleep. She made it clear that sex was not on her agenda tonight and that was fine by Eric. He did not want to have to satisfy her when she was in any desperate mood. They lay together in bed for awhile, still talking. Eric managed to maneuver the conversation away from the subjects of Alex's murder and Brian's upcoming trial. He smiled when Dora revealed that she hadn't really been impressed by the movie that they had seen earlier that evening. It was an actor's movie and there really hadn't been any other content. Eric couldn't have stated his case any better than that.

When he turned out the lights Eric and Dora kissed each other and then lay close to each other—holding hands. Eric began to feel an erection and he briefly hoped that she was also becoming aroused. But then he heard Dora begin to snore; so he poked her gently and then himself fell into a deep and peaceful sleep.

As soon as Dora registered Eric's snoring; she tiptoed her way out of the bedroom and into his work room. She proceeded to boot his computer.

As soon as she entered Microsoft Word 6.0; Dora scanned the list of files she now had the option of opening. She passed one simply titled 'Battle' and wondered whether or not that file contained Eric's burgeoning adventure story. She wouldn't have opened it even if she felt that she did have time to do so—Eric wasn't interested in war but rather in murder. War was social and murder anti-social. She moved the mouse down to the title 'Fred' and then saw that there was 'Fred1' and 'Fred2'.

The second 'Fred' must be more recent work, she deduced. This was the file she now had to open up and read.

'Fred2' was a tentative plot-synopsis—nothing of the novel itself had yet been written. But the synopsis was accompanied by character notes—her heartbeat intensified. Eric's protagonist was a sexually ambivalent bookstore clerk named Henry. This didn't hold much promise... yes, it did! Henry was not only the protagonist—he was the murderer. The murderer was to be the hero.

So, who was the main victim? The novel's antagonist was a wealthy gay gossip columnist named Walter Drake. Dora felt her pulse stiffening. The character was clearly an amalgam of Charlie Drake and his friend Walter Stirling, whose sister had briefly dated Alex. And this 'Walter Drake' was to be poisoned by Henry, who passed himself off as a young gay men so that he could be invited to one of his victim's soirees and then drop lethal poison into the host's cocktail.

This could be nothing more than fantasy, she reminded herself. But why would Eric be so antagonistic toward Charlie Drake?

Because Charlie Drake was the person insisting that Brian hadn't been Alex's murderer? Charlie Drake was the enemy who had to be eliminated.

Stop!

Dora made sure to save the file and then closed down Eric's computer. She wanted to smoke a cigarette and help herself to a drink but she feared that she would awaken him by doing so.

She looked for reading material, something to distract her. She could only find a book on the psychologies of serial killers, a volume she had never noticed before in Eric's bookcase. She noticed other books that seemed to mix up fiction with documentary in their gruesome obsession with the forensic details of fantastic crimes. She had avoided looking too closely through the book case in Eric's work room up until now; and now Dora was regretting her curiosity.

She resolved that she would try resuming her sleep and then she would excuse herself first thing in the morning. Then she would write a letter to Eric, informing him that she really didn't feel she should see him any longer.

No, that would be counter-productive!

Dora realized that her best strategy would be to tiptoe back into bed and pretend that nothing had happened. In the morning, she and Eric would talk about sweet nothings and perhaps even make love before drinking their morning coffees. Then, upon arriving back at her apartment, Dora would weigh her options.

She wanted to talk to somebody ; but she still wasn't sure whom that person should be. She certainly didn't want to talk to the police. What did she have to tell them aside from the fact that her intuition told her that, on the basis of Eric Cosgrove's notes for his new murder-mystery; Eric had a burning desire to kill Charlie Drake because Charlie Drake knew something dangerous. And she had no desire to contact Charlie Drake. He would laugh at her. She had always disliked the man and now she disliked him more than ever.

The one person Dora thought that she could talk to in confidence without negative consequences was Frances Bryant. Frances had been present when Brian had threatened Alex; and Frances had been a close friend of Alex's. Frances was also slated to testify for the Crown; so it made sense that she and Dora should clandestinely meet somewhere and talk about the case.

Dora awoke bright and early and convinced Eric that she had chores to do back at her apartment. She had the impression that Eric wanted her to leave as quickly as possible—that her presence was an irritant to his creative regimen.

#### Frances

Frances Bryant frowned as she finished reading the three page article about methicilin-resistant staphylococci aurea or MRSA, a super-bug that had become rampant throughout hospitals and was transforming far too many routine patients into contagious individuals. This virus or bug existed on such a strictly physical level and that was why it was so damn frightening. Psychology didn't even begin to enter the picture until well after the physical reality.

When Dora King had initially telephoned her to speculate about her boyfriend's murder mystery in which a character modeled on Charlie Drake was to be poisoned by a character modeled on Eric Cosgrove himself; Frances at

first wondered whether Dora had caught some computer virus from Eric's word processor that had mutated into some sort of strangely-hybrid mental illness. Eric was a writer, for God's sake. Writers by definition had mordant imaginations and it was their absolute privilege to exercise those imaginations. She and Susan had quite by accident watched a male pornography programme at the recent gay and lesbian film festival. In one of the short films or videotapes; a male pornographic writer complained that all his dates considered his writing to be autobiographical. Frances had been quite impressed by the film—the director made a succinct point quickly and with a media-literate flair.

Yet why would Eric Cosgrove even give Charlie Drake more than a passing thought unless he were for some reason afraid of the man? Charlie was convinced that Brian Convery hadn't been Alex's killer; and Frances had initially considered Charlie completely daft. Hadn't she herself witnessed Brian threatening Alex with force the very afternoon of the day on which the murder had taken place? Who else would have any motive to kill Alex? The murder had seemed like a completely senseless act that had, ironically, defeated Brian's purpose in confronting Alex. If the dealer was no longer around to make out the cheques then how on earth could the artist expect to finally get paid?

But Charlie had seemed, if anything, maddeningly logical when he had laid out the facts to her earlier in the day. Charlie's boyfriend George had indeed seen Brian at one of the lower-end bathhouses during the early evening on the night of the murder. After an initial hesitation; George had now agreed to testify for the defence. A detective working for Brian's lawyer had located a witness who could identify Brian as the man who had been walking in and out of the men's washroom at Union Station. Brian had appeared to be somnambulant—apparently he blacked out after particularly heavy drinking binges. So, Brian Convery had gone drinking after his bathhouse adventures and then gone to Union Station for whatever reasons? More anonymous sex, possibly a train ride?

It seemed implausible to Frances that a man not conscious of what he was doing would be capable of carrying out a such an efficient murder such as Alex's. The marksman had only needed one shot—this was somebody who moved quickly and accurately. The killer was somebody who also had been counting on Alex's junkie neighbour to leave the street door open; but it wasn't one of her friends since there had been no robbery. However, Dora insisted that Eric would know about Alex's neighbour's tendency to leave the door open. She had ranted about this subject to him on frequent occasions.

Frances lit a cigarette and telephoned Susan. She did not feel up to attending a cocktail party at the home of Susan's friend Nancy Westlake because she didn't really feel like talking to other people. She needed to be alone so that she could think about the implications of Dora's phone call—if indeed her speculations panned out to be true.

If Brian Convery had not been Alex's killer; then the killer had to be somebody with access to Brian's revolver?

She wasn't aware of any one individual whom Brian had been dating since his breakup with Dora. Widespread gossip, that Dora had consistently denied, was that Brian Convery preferred men but had never publicly come out about it. Frances had some sympathy for his reticence—she disliked the public face of the male gay 'community' and she understood that the illegality of his sexual

activities was significant part of the thrill.

So... had Brian Convery been dating a man? Not likely; but perhaps the killer was somebody whom Brian had taken home with him. The trick had seen the gun and helped himself.

But... why Alex Middleton? There had been no robbery— Alex had been killed by somebody who held a grudge. Perhaps Brian's friend who had stolen the gun thought he was doing Brian a favour by doing what Brian himself wanted to do but was afraid to?

Frances lit another cigarette and scowled. The killer was somebody who knew Alex and who had access to Brian's gun. Perhaps one of Brian's cronies... Peter Gallon? Where was Peter Gallon on the night of the murder and who might be able to corroborate his alibi?

She decided to call Dora and suggest that she met Peter for a drink. She knew that Dora disliked Peter Gallon and that his feelings were mutual. But it might be advantageous for Dora to talk to Peter; or to hear why Peter might not be allowed to talk to her.

Possibly Peter Gallon might be a defence witness? Possibly also Rebecca Anderson? That pair of artists were Brian's friends among Middleton and Richards' stable. They had been the other ones constantly needling Alex about their residuals.

Perhaps she herself should be the one contacting either Peter Gallon or Becky Anderson and persuading them to talk about Brian's activities prior to the murder. She certainly disliked both of these artists—especially Peter—but holding her nose had always been one of her ultimately necessary skills.

A chill ran through Frances' blood. Supposing Peter Gallon, being Brian's best friend and frequent partner-in-crime, had been the person who somehow had gotten his hands on Brian's revolver and then used it on Alex? Peter Gallon had just as much of a motive for killing Alex as Brian did?

She extinguished her cigarette and tried calling Peter Gallon, taking a chance that the P. Gallon listed on Albany was indeed the washed-up young artist. The voice on the answering machine was enough like Peter Gallon's that Frances felt confident enough to leave a message stating that her business was urgent.

Two minutes later, her telephone rang and the caller was indeed Peter Gallon. His tone was belligerent. After all, Frances had evicted the lout from her property only the last summer. But he was smart enough to realize that Frances wouldn't be talking to hi unless the matter truly was urgent.

Peter had not seen Brian Convery at all on the night of Alex's murder. He was thus incapable of providing his friend with any crucial alibis. Upon hearing of the murder and subsequent arrest; Peter had called Becky Anderson and she hadn't seen him that night either. Peter did explain to Frances that Brian often pulled sudden disappearances; and Frances informed him that Charlie Drake's boyfriend George had seen Brian at the bathhouse earlier in the evening.

When Frances told Peter about the train station sighting; Peter became silent for a moment. He slowly responded that it was anybody's guess what Brian

might have done next. He had been with Brian during previous blackouts – for Peter was assuming that Brian had blacked out – and he knew damn well that Brian did things he couldn't later remember when in these somnambulant states.

But.....usually these escapades are confined to the places where they suddenly kick in. Brian never travels, or gets on the subway, when he's somnambulant. He would have jumped on the tracks years ago if he did.

Frances digested this evidence. Peter had been with Brian during these blackouts and she had no reason to believe he was covering anything. But Brian still had no alibi for after eleven o'clock that night; and his gun was the weapon.

She thanked Peter Gallon, who promised to contact her if anything new developed. Peter had been visiting Brian in jail; and Brian had consistently been sullen and depressed. Peter was worried that Brian might find a way to kill himself before his trial began.

Frances decided to again hold her nose and this time she called Charlie Drake. She had been in touch with Walter Stirling, who had let it slip that a high-profile gay lawyer friend of Charlie's was indeed going to be Brian's lawyer. Frances wondered how relevant gay details might now become to the defense's case. Would Brian's visit to the bathhouse—that weirdly male meeting place where gay male sex addicts intersected with seriously closeted gentleman—turn out to be important evidence? Brian's itinerary for the night of the murder was known up until Union Station—where he went and what he did after Union Station was the big question? And was Brian able to remember this itinerary or was he dependent on somebody else's selective memory?

Charlie answered the phone and agreed to meet her for drinks at Byzantium in the Church-Wellesley village. Frances disliked that particular neighbourhood; but if that was where Charlie wanted to meet then she didn't feel like arguing about it.

At least Charlie and Frances could agree that they both absolutely had to sit in the smoking section. Frances attempted to understand why a man who had just emerged from the gymnasium would need a cigarette so badly; but for her to complain would be the pot calling the kettle black.

Frances wondered why Charlie was so certain that Brian hadn't been Alex's killer.

Brian was probably manic-depressive, seriously closeted and generally disturbed emotionally, but Charlie strongly doubted that he was a murderer. He felt that Brian's ultimatum earlier on the afternoon had been all bluster; and that Brian was immediately disgusted with himself and more likely to do harm to himself than anybody else.

Frances recounted Dora's phone call to her in which she had been upset by the plot outline of Eric Cosgrove's new murder-mystery.

Charlie lit another cigarette, sipped his red wine, and remarked that Eric at himself always seemed a mystery. Eric seemed so much Brian's polar opposite that he probably wasn't; or why would Dora gravitate to him so quickly after breaking off with Brian?

Frances had never been able to gain a clear reading of Eric. Sometimes he seemed sweet and very quiet and sometimes he seemed morbid. Charlie ventured

that Eric had once been a Goth; and that could or could not explain his humour and his frequently gaunt bearing.

Then Charlie reiterated the book launch at The Purple Spot at which Eric, upon recognizing Charlie, immediately ran out the fire escape. It was almost as if Charlie was a cop or something—it was really quite ludicrous. But Eric had definitely been fleeing Charlie—not anybody else among the throng of queer punks and literary types.

This behaviour seemed bizarre to Frances, but certainly consistent with Eric's apparent loathing of Charlie Drake. She lit a fresh cigarette and then began outlining the intended plot of Eric's murder mystery—as recounted to her by Dora King.

At first Charlie laughed at Frances' description of 'Walter Drake'. He tried to imagine someone who might be an exact combination of himself and Walter Stirling and failed. But then the obsessive persistence of the Henry character, who was clearly Eric Cosgrove's alter ego, began to grate on him. It was one thing to model heroes and villains on real-life prototypes; but it was another thing entirely to be so caught up with these prototypes that the characters don't begin to take on lives of their own.

At least, that was how Charlie suspected Eric's novel would read. Not that he had read any other examples of Eric's writing. Charlie knew that Eric wrote under at least one pseudonym. Dora had learned his pseudonym for his military adventure stories. And she had taken the liberty of opening up a file labeled 'Fred'; and then discovered the character profiles that had so upset her. But Dora still had no idea where Eric hid the manuscript that he had submitted to Trunctured Press.

Who did he know who might know Jennifer Echols? He groaned when he realized that he might have to ask Mary Radford and Olivia Wardock for a big favour that might not pan out for him.

Still, this was a possibility. Frances decided to order another carafe of red wine and Charlie appreciated her enthusiasm. He found himself wishing that Alex Middleton had come to his senses before being shot and entered into some sort of business partnership with Frances. Ms. Bryant would have not only been the money part of the operation—she would have also been the brains. She would have reinvigorated Middleton and Richards' gallery by recruiting fresh blood.

But....would she have been able to deal with the old blood. The has-beens like Brian Convery who needed their overdue residuals because they weren't selling any more and because they knew that nobody else in their right minds would be taking them on?

It was all beyond hypothetical now, Frances smiled as she lit another cigarette. She had indeed stipulated that Convery had to be cut from the gallery's roster or else she would no longer bolster Alex financially. But Brian had been well out of earshot by the time she had made this ultimatum.

Charlie realized that getting his hands on Eric's first mystery manuscript wouldn't accomplish much of anything. He had his suspicions as to why the victim in Eric's planned second manuscript was modeled upon himself. How could he prove that this wasn't just a writer's moderately sick fantasy? Because Eric had been fleeing from him at The Purple Spot that night. And why

would Eric be panicking at the sight of Charlie; unless he also knew that Brian Convery hadn't killed Alex Middleton?

Because Eric had done it himself. But how had he managed to get Brian Convery's gun?

This was indeed the penultimate question, Charlie nodded. But he expressed confidence in Brian's lawyer—Vern Smithson. Mr. Smithson was a high-profile defence lawyer and middle-class gay rights activist. He was the favourite media spokesperson on issues of spousal benefits and he had no sympathy or understanding for either promiscuity or the closet. In fact, Vern Smithson considered promiscuity and closetry to be synonymous.

An unusual choice of lawyer, Frances observed.

Charlie snapped that Brian no longer had any choices. Charlie's own boyfriend was going to be the one telling the judge and jury exactly where Brian had spent the early part of the evening. Charlie had heard all the fashionable rhetoric about closet-cases and how cool they often were in relation to the respectable gay community; and he didn't buy any of it. George had once stated with a slight degree of irony that closeted men often made excellent sex partners because they needed to fuck or get fucked so badly; but Charlie was alarmed at the possible risks involved in such encounters. He'd had to deal with his own mood swings and he had no inclination to dealing with those of strangers.

Frances remarked that she herself did not understand promiscuity. She and Susan had noted an advertisement for a girls' night at the baths and not even been curious.

Charlie changed the subject back to Vern Smithson's witnesses, in addition to George. Vern had located and interrogated a man who had observed Brian at Union Station in a possibly somnambulant state—first contemplating a train trip and then walking in and out of the men's washroom until finally leaving the station.

This was all good, Frances remarked as she lit another cigarette. But where had Brian gone after leaving Union Station and where had he gone to?

Charlie also lit a cigarette and smiled at her. It seemed that Vern Smithson had a star surprise witness up his sleeve. This witness was such a top secret that Vern would not reveal the man or woman's identity to Charlie, which was probably the correct tactic. Frances had no difficulty imaging a composite character of Walter Stirling and Charlie Drake—the pair of them were compulsive gabbers or gossip queens.

She looked at her watch and decided that she should return home. She did wish to watch an old friend's programme about Emily Carr on Arts and Entertainment at ten o'clock; and she was expecting a call from Susan. Frances' girlfriend of course would enjoy lingering at her own ex-girlfriend's party; and Frances hoped that she hadn't offended Susan's ex by begging off in favour of another engagement.

Before bidding a fond goodnight to Charlie; Frances remembered that Eric had slept with Dora on the night of the murder but he hadn't arrived at her apartment until almost one in the morning. According to Dora, this timing wasn't at all unusual and Eric had not been acting any more strangely than he



usually did. She and Charlie agreed that partners in convenience relationships often had no clue as to what was on each others' mind.

She of course had not forgotten that she was slated to be a Crown witness—she had been in conference with Alex when Brian had barged in and uttered physical threats. She chose not to immediately call the Crown attorney's office after her meeting with Charlie. She would answer the questions as literally as possible. Simply because Brian had made his threats did not mean that he had returned to the scene of his crime and then committed the far more serious crime.

Frances indeed was largely able to assign the upcoming trial to the back burner. She and Susan never talked about it—this was an unspoken rule. She was not supposed to talk about the trial and her role in it to anybody else; and she appreciated the fact that Charlie did not call her again with any updates.

But she also worried about this lack of updates. No news was not good news—it meant that the defense's investigations were not getting anywhere and that Brian Convery still looked guilty as all hell. And she had agreed to be a witness as to Brian's unstable violent character.

Yet... what exactly did The Crown know about the testimony the court would be hearing from the defense's witnesses. There would be Charlie's boyfriend George, who would casually be 'outing' Brian Convery—not that she wasn't unaware of gossip from journalists at least a generation younger than Charlie and his art-consultant friend Walter. And then there would be an unknown witness who would testify as to Brian's presence and behaviour at Union Station after George had seen him at the bathhouse. Who else did the defence have lined up to testify; and how would they be testifying?

Then the Crown had their ace in the hole—Dora King. She would elaborate on Brian's instability and probably manic-depressive behaviour. Frances did not know whether or not Brian had ever been physically violent to Dora in addition to his emotional violence. If indeed he had and Dora was forced to tell the Court about it; then that would be game over for Brian Convery. Anything in his defence would be immediately suspect, since he was a wife-beater then he must also be a murderer.

She had long suspected physical abuse in Convery's relationship with Dora. Alex's personal secretary had often seemed under the weather and it couldn't have been strictly the booze and the drugs. Frances had wanted to be there for Dora; but the girl had never been one to confide in others. Until just recently.

Dora would also be grilled about Brian's somnambulant escapades. She had indeed been witness to many of them—she had seen him do and say things that he could no longer remember doing or saying. Often these escapades occurred as a result of Brian's alcohol and drug abuse. If Brian had been in one of his somnambulant states according to the mysterious witness at Union Station; then this would also be highly damaging testimony.

Frances had been in communication with Dora on one occasion since Dora's initial phone call. Dora had called to inform her that she had decided to stop seeing Eric. The official reason that she had given him was that she was too generally upset to be emotionally involved with another person and that

she needed privacy more than anything else. The unofficial version was that Dora was afraid of Eric. She had become completely convinced of his guilt and she did not wish to be anywhere near the man.

Frances wished that Dora had held out longer with Eric—that she had attempted to make him loosen up and thus possibly trip over himself. Dora did not know how Eric had really reacted to her decision. Eric had always been a loner and Dora herself had become something of a hermit. She confined herself to outstanding gallery business and tried to sleep as many hours as possible.

Frances realized that there was little she could do regarding her uneasiness about the upcoming trial. She attempted to distract herself with voracious reading and some current movies. Susan shared these interests and thus they could spend quality time together without having to speculate about Alex's murder and Brian's trial.

She spent the afternoon before the trial's commencement looking at art. Some newer young painters who combined a formalist abstractionism with an underlying fascination with figures and bodies impressed her, as did the young video-installationist Juan Escobar. Frances had to pull herself away from the gallery circuit, however. When she looked at art works and installations and found herself seriously appreciating them; she also found herself wishing that Alex was still alive. She would persuade him to take on the particular artists and rejuvenate his gallery while purging the deadbeats like Rebecca Anderson and Peter Gallon... and Brian Convery.

Back home she took a break from her reading and lit a cigarette. The telephone rang and she did not recognize the incoming caller.

The voice was male and distantly familiar.

George

It had now been two months since George had broken off his relationship with Charlie Drake. This had not been so much a matter of either George or Charlie wishing a greater commitment from each other; but more a recognition that some things including most relationships were not intended to last forever. George had been the initiator of the breakup. He had finally found a moment alone with Charlie at the celebration of Brian Convery's acquittal. After the judge and jury had learned that Eric Cosgrove and not Brian Convery had been Alex Middleton's murderer; Charlie and Walter Stirling and their new best friends Frances Bryant and her partner Susan MacGillivray had treated themselves to expensive bubbly and they had remembered to invite George along for the ride.

This was hardly the first occasion on which George had realized that he did not especially enjoy the company of Charlie's friends. This feeling had been unspoken throughout the duration of their open relationship. George usually felt that unspoken feelings were left unspoken—that attempting to rationalize and analyze obvious truisms only served to make mountains out of molehills. But now he felt that it was time to tell Charlie what they had both long known — that two passing ships in the night were never going to become any more than convenient acquaintances.

George didn't even dislike Frances Bryant, and Susan MacGillivray also was not an unpleasant woman. He was even rather fond of Walter Stirling; although

Walter was incapable of acting like anything else than an ultimately professional Rosedale fag. George knew that fresh alliances had been cemented as a result of Brian Convery's trial and that since these alliances did not include George. There was no reason for them to pretend to include him.

He poured himself more ginger ale and mused about Brian's trial. The preliminary prosecution witnesses had been just that - preliminary. The homicide detective and the coroner and the ballistics person did their jobs - they stuck to the facts and the facts that they had been working with all computed. It was the human elements that hadn't yet factored in.

As a witness for the defense George was unable to sit among the spectators - the freelance journalists and art scene-makers and courtroom groupies. He did observe Charlie quite religiously covering the trial-always sitting with Walter. Charlie's younger cohorts at The National Paper-Mary Radford and Olivia Wardock always sat together and giggled. On the several days, they were joined by their friend Tim Stratford, the punk gossip columnist who was no doubt already creaming his dungarees. George was on friendly terms with all three of them socially; but he disdained their politics. Mary and Olivia and Tim all thought they were more radical than radical; but they were in fact extremely conservative. When it would finally become George's call to testify for the defense; all the gossip queens would either have their moments in the sun or they might lose a good part of their purposes for existing. The problem with the procedures of 'outing' even minor celebrities was that everybody already knew that the celebrities were at least sort of queer.

Frances Bryant had been called to testify for the Crown and she too had kept things brief. She had indeed been present when Brian had threatened Alex with some very serious consequences on the afternoon of the murder. Cough up or face the consequences, those had been Brian's words verbatim. You make a threat like that and the ball's in your court to follow up on it or else you're all bark with no bite. A harmless puppy instead of a big bad wolf.

Vern Smithson had tried to get Frances talking about Alex's and the gallery's desperate financial situation but the Crown kept objecting and the judge kept agreeing with the Crown. It was clear that Brian Convery and his artist cohorts had every which reason to be pissed off with Alex but then so what? If they couldn't sell their art with Alex then they had to look elsewhere and maybe there were solid reasons as to why there were no takers. The starving artists all should have taken good long looks in their mirrors. Brian Convery had never enjoyed looking in the mirror. He never did like what he would see there.

Later in the evening, after agreeing to meet Charlie for last call at Woody's and then subsequently go back to Charlie's apartment; George and Charlie had talked long into the night. George had attempted to distract Charlie from the subject of Brian Convery's murder trial because he had wanted to discuss their relationship. But Charlie had been as evasive as usual; and evasion was no longer seductive. When they had had sex at nearly three in the morning; it had been perfunctory. George had realized that his sexual relationship with Charlie had by now run its course.

The Crown then called their star witness-Dora King who had gone out with Brian before switching to Eric Cosgrove. George resisted all the stereotypes about women who dated really fucked-up men; even though the stereotypes were usually true. Anyway, Dora was on the stand for eternity. The Crown wanted

her to be the one telling the judge and jury all about Brian's violent mood swings and his frequent blackouts, when he did stupid childish things that he couldn't remember doing the next morning. On every such occasion that Dora could recall; alcohol often in conjunction with cocaine was involved. The defence asked Dora, during the extended cross-examination, whether Brian ever experienced these blackouts when he was alone rather than in a bar or at a party or at home. Dora couldn't answer this question— Brian had never told her about any such solitary blackouts but that didn't mean that they hadn't occurred.

The Crown attempted to introduce the subject of domestic violence but the defense objected and the objections were sustained. George was relieved for all concerned. Hadn't it already become plain and clear that Brian more than likely did lose it and hit Dora and that this was too damn consistent with his character as already established? There was absolutely no excuse for the domestic violence that he knew had occurred in Dora's relationship with Brian; but George could tell that Dora was relieved by the judge's decisions— even though she was the prosecution's star witness and establishing Brian as an irredeemable hot-head had been their consistent strategy.

After the Crown announced that they had presented their case while reserving the right to call additional witnesses if necessary; George had taken the stand as the defense's first witness. He casually informed the court that he had seen Brian Convery at the particular bathhouse at about nine o'clock on the evening of the murder. There was a hush in the courtroom after this revelation. The Crown prosecutor and his assistant surely hadn't been completely unprepared; but they certainly were angry about George's testimony. True, George hadn't provided Brian with an alibi absolving him of Alex's murder; but the prosecutors knew that their character construction might have more than a few holes in it.

Brian had also been devastated by the testimony; even though Vern Smithson must have spent a lot of time preparing the defendant for this public outing. George felt sorry for Brian; but he also felt that his testimony was essential to the defense's strategy of opening up the possibility that Brian's movements on the night of the murder weren't quite what the Crown was so certain they were. But George had also felt shame when he had been led past Brian in the prisoner's dock. Brian had seemed to recognize him on that night at the baths and now Brian recognized him as being a betrayer—a violator.

The Crown hadn't though much of George either. Although the witness' evidence cast doubt on their portrait of the defendant as absolute macho blowhard; The Crown still weren't panicking. So Brian had been seen at a gay bathhouse at nine o'clock—what was his alibi for eleven thirty? The prosecutor had barely acknowledged George—the man had been clearly homophobic and probably racist to boot. Whatever, he was out of the witness box after less than five minutes of having to answer the man's perfunctory questions.

The next defense witness was a fortyish professional gay man named Michael Standish. Mr. Standish had been returning from a jaunt to Montreal at roughly ten o'clock the night of Alex's murder and registered the defendant Brian Convery walking in and out of the men's washroom on Union Station's street level. Convery had initially walked away from the washroom and toward the stairs leading to the street; but then returned to the washroom. Probably the witness thought Convery was cruising the washroom but this was not

addressed as part of the interrogation. For whatever reason why Convery had used the washroom and then returned to it; Michael Standish expressed the opinion that the defendant was either drunk or under the influence of drugs. Convery had been walking slowly and with little sense of direction, according to Mr. Standish.

In which direction had Convery walked after exiting from Union Station? Michael Standish did see him walking west after his second washroom excursion. Middleton and Richards' Fine Arts was about twenty minutes west and five minutes north of Union Station—if the pedestrian were walking at a typical pace. Brian Convery was walking slowly and uncertainly. He may or may not have been conscious of which direction he was walking in.

But... if Convery were indeed comatose; then he was damn lucky indeed to have made it all the way over to Middleton and Richards' without having some sort of serious accident. And... surely somebody else would have recognized the man—possibly negotiating one of the many major intersections along his route—and later identified the pedestrian after either watching television or reading the newspapers.

The entire courtroom, with a few key exceptions, had been shocked by the calling of the defense's surprise star witness. Ian Richards, looking very tanned and very healthy, calmly informed the court how he had been en route to visit Alexander Middleton at about eleven thirty on the night of the murder but had decided that he would wait until the morning to confront his former business partner.

Ian's sole purpose in visiting Toronto for the first time in over two years was to oversee the dissolution of Middleton and Richards' Fine Arts. He had of course during his exile maintained contact with most of his investor friends, who had been keeping him posted about the gallery's deterioration. He had been on the verge of dropping the bombshell on Alex that night but had decided that it might be best to do it when Alex was fresher and probably more receptive to what Ian considered the only option the gallery had remaining.

As Ian had approached the street door leading to Alex's apartment; he had seen Eric Cosgrove walking away from the gallery building. Ian hadn't connected Eric with Alex or with Middleton and Richards—he had never seen the lad before and he had suspected him to be one of Karen Sullivan's junkie associates.

Eric Cosgrove had not been attending the trial. He had not been there for Dora. Charlie and Frances had explained to George that Dora had broken off with her boyfriend without going into any further details. But now Eric Cosgrove was subpoenaed by the defense; and immediately slated in to be the next witness.

As Ian Richards stepped down from the witness stand after his cross-examination; George could not help noticing that Ian winked at Charlie, who now sat quite intently in the courtroom's upper gallery.

Ian Richards couldn't have just turned up out of the blue. Ian must have discreetly telephoned a select group of friends and potential allies—Frances Bryant, Walter Stirling, Charlie Drake himself?

On the next day of the trial; it was as if Eric Cosgrove had already become the defendant. Eric's movements on the night of the murder all had to now be accounted for; and his alibi wasn't any more convincing than Brian's. When Vern Smithson demanded to know his whereabouts at eleven thirty on that night; Eric could only offer that he had been at home—working on his novel. That was how he nearly always spent his evenings, working away on his murder mystery and his adventure story both of which he ultimately intended to be published under different pseudonyms. He would habitually work until some time around midnight, and then Dora King would come over for a nightcap and then they would sleep together Dora would stay over with Eric perhaps two or three evenings a week—that was the nature of their relationship.

Then Vern Smithson recalled Dora King to the stand. Dora, in a barely audible murmur, told the court that she had attempted to call Eric twice on the night of the murder; and he had not answered the phone on either occasion

This did not necessarily mean that Eric wasn't at home, interjected the Crown prosecutor. Quite likely Eric had let his answering machine take the call since he was deeply involved with his writing. However, Dora had not chosen to leave messages. After Eric had not answered the phone at about eleven-thirty; Dora had chosen to retire for the night. She had wanted Eric to pick up the phone and then tell her to come over in due time.

Then Eric Cosgrove himself asked to be recalled to the witness stand; where he stunned the judge, jury, crown and defense attorneys and the defendant himself by confessing to the murder. He had been jealous of Alex Middleton, he told the packed and attentive courtroom. He had feared that eventually Dora would desert him and take up with Alex—that she would realize that she and Alex were inevitably destined for each other despite each of their efforts to resist their fate. Eric had decided to confess now and not drag the trial to its inevitable conclusion.

George was stunned by this development. It seemed to him almost as if Eric was attracted to the idea of a life sentence. Perhaps Eric thought that he could spend the rest of his life in prison—writing murder mysteries and adventure stories without having to worry about food shelter and clothing. Perhaps Eric Cosgrove really was naive enough to be such an idealist. Perhaps Eric truly wanted to die himself and advocated the reinstatement of the death penalty for criminally-obsessed sickos such as himself?

If such was indeed the case; then Eric's wish was not to be granted. The murderer was sentenced to life imprisonment with no eligibility for parole for twenty-five years. George could tell that a young lawyer who had suddenly swarmed into the courtroom was now going to take up the Eric's appeal . But how? Were there any avenues besides the obvious insanity strategy? George didn't consider Eric Cosgrove to be at all insane—only somewhat twisted and curiously indifferent to whether or not people including himself lived or died.

As Eric's new saviour announced appeal processes and the court adjourned; it was now almost summer and time for the annual Gay Pride festivities. Already the Church-Wellesley ghetto was characterized by Pride banners and posters advertising all the different clubs' Pride Weekend schedules. George twitched at the omnipresence of happy consumers and thought about those who were unhappy—all those who were queer but alienated from the Officially Gay neighbourhood. He watched the squeegee kids who occupied the main ghetto

intersection and wondered just why so many local rate-payers hated them. They were here and they were everywhere and such were the facts of life.

Charlie and George had by now realized that their relationship had run its course. Charlie had achieved a new lease on life—he and Frances Bryant had been presented with the ashes of Middleton and Richards' Fine Arts Gallery by the legendary Ian Richards himself. Ian would remain the silent partner and Charlie and Frances would be the gallery's public faces—they would operate it together. George thought this arrangement would work out nicely for all concerned. Frances herself was no slouch when it came to hobnobbing with rich people such as herself with fairly sophisticated tastes in art. Frances' girlfriend Susan was also very well corporately-connected and thus Ian would not have complete financial control. Charlie and Frances would release the deadbeat artists like Becky Anderson, Peter Gallon, and Brian Convery and bring in hot new blood. They would overcome the stumbling block of renaming their new gallery and then they would live happily ever after.

Charlie would become an art maven and have even less time for George. Charlie would not become a complete stranger or anything; but George did not wish any emotional involvement with an art dealer dependent upon different cliques of rich people. Charlie and Frances would open up the gallery walls up to a point; but only up to a point.

And he wondered what might now become of Brian Convery. If George were Brian; he knew that he would relocate to another city or even another country under a new moniker, either reinvent himself as a painter or else learn a different trade; and blend in to the queer underground while remaining relatively anonymous. George himself didn't quite live that way. He was still associated in people's minds with Charlie Drake. Because gossip about their breakup had begun circulating; George was aware of men looking him over as a potential convenient fuck buddy as well as a trick. George himself was thinking of relocating; and he hoped that Brian would find his wits and get on with a new life somewhere else as someone else.

He hoped that Brian or whomever he might become could reinvent himself and would find his muse again quickly. Then he would be able to work and not have to spend all of his life dealing with sexuality. Being somebody who was queer as part of his practice was so preferable to strictly being a recognizable queer.

George realized that Brian would also have to visually reinvent himself. If he didn't go all the way and undergo plastic surgery; then he would at least have to radically alter his personal presentation and demeanor. Not only dress differently but walk and talk differently; or else spend the rest of his life denying the existence of Brian Convery and fending off sycophants who would insist that he really must have been the killer and been found innocent by virtue of quirks in the law or quirks in the personality.

If Brian were to be accosted by such low-lives; he would have to control his temper. George knew that he himself would be unable to refrain in similar situations.

He recalled the last occasion on which he had seen Brian Convery—changing into his street clothes in the locker area of a bathhouse. Brian had stared at him — recognizing him as Charlie the art critic's boyfriend. Brian had feared him, which to George seemed absurd. Quite frequently the locker area

was the spot where men realized that they had enjoyed anonymous sex with the man two or three lockers down from themselves. For all George could remember; he and Brian might well have encountered each other in the dark zones in which recognition barely even entered the picture.

If Brian still clandestinely frequented Toronto bathhouses; he had definitely changed his favourite haunts. Not only did George never bump into Brian in any of the officially gay baths; none of his friends ever saw the man on the circuit either. Not even a friend of his who turned tricks at an ancient steam bath that doubled as a shelter for homeless men ever saw Brian let alone serviced him. The Oak Leaf was allegedly worked by ex-convicts who serviced closeted professionals as well as the homeless. It wouldn't have been unlike Brian to consider himself a convict.

Brian must have blown town, which was a smart move on his part. George himself decided to get out of Toronto for a while. He sublet his apartment to National Paper gossip vixen Mary Radford and then he rode the train to Montreal, intending to stay for a month. If he found work then he would contact Mary and stay in Montreal for an indefinite length. He knew that Charlie and Frances occasionally visited Montreal on studio visits but that wouldn't be any problem. It wasn't Charlie he needed to get away from; it was his history as Charlie's boyfriend.

George realized that only speaking minimal French would be a handicap in Montreal; but he did know people whose French was worse than his. And there were sizable contingents of Haitians in Montreal who functioned easily in the city. Montreal was a more European city than Toronto, which for all of its vaunted diversity still reeked of United Empire loyalism.

He wondered where Brian Convery might have relocated to in order to reinvent himself. Perhaps Vancouver, or even Winnipeg. He realized that he didn't know where Brian had spent his childhood before striking out for Toronto. Did Brian have a supportive family to whom he might be able to turn? Or did his family consider their son to be guilty - if not of murder then certainly of alcoholism and substance abuse and probably mental illness?

Possibly Brian had exiled himself in Berlin or Paris or some metropolis in which Canadian artists too controversial for Canada were often revered? George suspected that this was unlikely; but he was beginning to envy Brian's outlaw status.

In Montreal George ran out of money sooner than he had anticipated doing so and thus he had to look for part-time employment. He was looking for something in a predominantly Anglophile bar or bistro in which his lack of viable French would at most be only a minor issue. But such establishments only existed in theory; and George found himself turning tricks.

He had wished to avoid doing this; but he needed to make money and that was as usual the bottom line. His trust fund support had dwindled and he knew that there was simply no point in begging anything further from either his Dad or his Mom. His Dad had never been comfortable about anything queer and his Mom didn't control the purse strings.

One night, after George had made enough to stop working and treat himself to a few drinks, he met a Montreal-based artist named Jean-Guy Talbot. The artist's canvasses and collages were beginning to sell both nationally and



internationally and Jean-Guy was being courted by none other than Bryant and Drake Fine Arts of Toronto.

George refrained from informing Jean-Guy that Charlie was formerly his lover. Jean-Guy himself was a handsome and generous man; but he was skeptical about Charlie and Frances' true intentions. Jean-Guy thought that the two Torontonians were shopping just a wee bit too diligently for new talent and that therefore their gallery must be in dire economic straits.

Jean-Guy and George began dating; and George reduced the number of tricks he had been turning. He did not wish to become economically dependent upon Jean-Guy; but when the artist mentioned that a Montreal commercial gallery-owner needed a utility person George applied for the job and was successful. Claude Belliveau needed him two or sometimes three days a week-sometimes as a driver and sometimes as an intern-of-sorts. But this income was enough for George to excuse himself from the trick and trade scene that he had not intended to become locked into.

Because he really didn't have any other options; George now moved in with Jean-Guy. The artist was already fairly well-off and thus he had a studio that he worked in quite religiously every day, leaving George the apartment to himself on the days when he did not work for Claude Belliveau. George had all the timer in the world on his hands now, and initially this suited him fine indeed.

But now he felt himself becoming the artist's boyfriend-out on display with Jean-Guy among his many bohemian and business friends. Being an artist's boyfriend was higher profile than being an art critic's boyfriend. Without it ever being stated; George felt that he was expected at every art event that Jean-Guy felt he needed to attend. Jean-Guy needed to maintain profile-he was a rising star and the boyfriend was part and parcel of the package.

George genuinely liked Jean-Guy. The artist was certainly generous and did not mean to be patronizing. But, after a month their sexual routines began to become formulaic and George became unable to conceal his boredom among Jean-Guy's coterie of artists and would-be-artists and scene-makers. So, George broke the word to Jean-Guy one night over dinner. Jean-Guy became angry-accusing George of ingratitude. George left the table abruptly and refused to look back. He had wanted that Jean-Guy understand his decision and not become angry and bitter about it.

He reverted to turning tricks and found himself not doing badly at all. If one must make money then why not sell the body-this seemed so much more straightforward than getting involved with a Sugar Daddy and having that Sugar Daddy find his lover boy some truly token employment. He could maintain distance from other hustlers when he wasn't working. George had previously dabbled in drugs and he didn't want to get too close to anybody who was obviously using.

One afternoon George went swimming at the local YMCA and then met a trick who wished to drink expensive coffee before his session. The trick led George to a nearby cafe at which George was familiar with much of the clientele. There was Jean-Guy Talbot and Claude Belliveau along with his lover sharing a carafe of wine with Frances Bryant and Charlie Drake.

Charlie walked toward George immediately and gave him a long silent hug.

We were hoping we could somehow contact you, George. There's been some sort of incident back in Toronto. Brian Convery is dead.

Home

Dora made one final check regarding the exact placement of the various photographs of Brian Convery that she had placed on display. She needed another eye to reassure her that Brian's baby photographs in particular were subtly but effectively present.

Relax, please. You've done a good job, Dora. Everything appears just as Brian would have wanted it to.

She felt anger at Ian. Certainly he had already known Brian before she had dated him; but he had not known the man in the way that she had. And she still disagreed with Ian's insistence that Brian's paintings and collages should not be present at the memorial. Ian had arrived at this decision along with Frances Bryant and Charlie Drake who had taken over Middleton and Richards and signed on many new younger artists of dubious taste and talent.

Frances had been Dora's ally throughout her breakup with Brian, the murder, the trial, and Eric's confession. But Dora was disappointed by Frances' alliance with Charlie Drake. Charlie Drake, in particular, had never appreciated Brian's art because he had never understood anything that people actually made rather than conceived and then executed according to concept or formula. Charlie Drake had always been a thorn in Brian's side, despite his active role in helping to prove Brian's innocence.

Dora drew the blinds and lit another cigarette. She was not expecting all that many people at the memorial. There would be Frances and Susan, Walter Stirling, Charlie Drake and his ex-lover George whom she had never even talked to; and who else might there be? Peter Gallon and Becky Anderson would be there and she hoped that she wouldn't have to be watching over that pair of alcoholics. Peter and Becky had been unceremoniously dropped from the gallery's roster very shortly after Bryant and Drake had taken over. There would be other artists now represented by Bryant and Drake who were formerly known as Middleton and Richards—Natalie Weinberg and her partner Russell had been specifically invited.

Dora was unsure as to which if any of Alex's surviving friends might be attending Brian's memorial. She had never been friendly with Janice Carter and word had come back to her that Janice still believed Brian to be guilty of Alex's murder. Eric had confessed; so what the hell was Janice's problem?. It was one thing to completely dislike a human being; it was quite another to persistently consider them guilty of homicide when another human being had confessed to the particular crime.

There was also the possibility that Walter Stirling's sister Xandra might be attending. Dora had wanted her relationship with Alex to develop into something more substantial than just another affair. In retrospect; it was unfortunate that Alex hadn't been able to sell off his share in the gallery and then relocate somewhere else with Xandra, who had suddenly and unexpectedly returned to her reputedly abusive husband.

She was relieved that Charlie Drake had completely severed all connections to

The National Paper and its lesser gossip columnists Those two society dykes—Olivia Wardock and Mary Radford—were specifically uninvited. They and their celebrity—fixated friends had never been interested in Brian—they had only delighted in gossiping about and ultimately exploiting him. She wanted guests who, despite everything that the man had done and had stood for, still respected Brian. And she knew damn well that there were many people in the art community and beyond who weren't the least bit sorry that the man had died.

Dora did not want any of these sycophants to be attending Brian's memorial. She and Ian had decided to host a small and discreet event because it was obvious that nobody else would be doing anything for Brian. He was a villain—he did not deserve any respectful eulogies. She took a final drag of her cigarette and then lit another one.

She had already stopped reading the offensive newspaper stories and the trash being broadcast on the television. None of the people eulogizing or condemning or blaspheming Brian had even known the man.

Not one of them.

Dora did not want any of the eulogies to ramble on and lose their focus. She had already edited hers so that it would be no longer than three minutes and she knew that Ian would keep his brief and to the point. Peter Gallon was the wild card. Peter had been even less articulate about his art than Brian had been and Peter was incapable of restraining himself when there was free booze around. She was petrified that Peter might at least verbally attack Charlie and Frances. Yet Peter was arguably the one person expected to attend who could reasonably claim to have known Brian Convery better than she had known him. Dora and Brian had been lovers; Peter and Brian had been buddies.

She again inspected the living room of the house where she now lived with Ian Richards. The bedrooms and the den as well as the top floor and the basement were all designated out of bounds, except for those who needed to use the washrooms. It was crystal clear where smoking was tolerated and even encouraged and where it was out of line. She realized that there was nothing more to be done in the living room and that it was now time to make herself up—to be by herself before the arrival of those who claimed to know Brian Convery.

She had been touching up her face and fine-tuning her speech for some time when the doorbell rang. She knew that Ian would greet the visitors and keep them engaged. She would not rush out to greet the callers unless they were all to descend upon the house at once.

Dora overheard Ian greeting Natalie Weinberg and her friend Russell. She was relieved that the first visitors were this sensible couple. She and Ian had entertained Natalie and Russell shortly before Brian's death and they had been pleasant company. Not to worry. Natalie and Russell knew the house and knew the ropes.

She emerged in her simple black dress and sat down beside Ian while facing Natalie and Russell. She lit a cigarette and decided that it was still too early for her to be drinking. Natalie, Russell, and Ian were all sipping red wine and she knew that these were people capable of pacing themselves and switching to pop or water upon reaching their limits.

Natalie recalled Brian's attempt at recruiting her to be the gallery artists' representative in the matter of the unpaid residuals. This matter now seemed so distantly absurd now that Ian had resurfaced and sunk money into the new gallery. Dora knew that Brian had also fancied Natalie; but this was mercifully left unspoken. Russell seemed uncomfortable enough as it was.

Harold Lester and Quentin Farnsworth arrived and Ian calmly directed them to the guests' signature book. Harold and Quentin had always kept to themselves and Dora didn't expect them to be violating that pattern of behaviour. As neither of the two collage-painters smoked; they both maintained a respectable distance on the other side of the living room while shaking their heads wistfully at the various photographs of Brian.

The doorbell rang and the next callers were a larger party. Frances Bryant, also wearing a simple but effective black dress, was accompanied by Susan MacGillivray. The wealthy lesbian couple was followed in succession by Walter Stirling, Charlie Drake, and Charlie's ex-boyfriend George whose surname Dora had forgotten or never known. George in particular looked like he would rather be anywhere else but at a memorial.

So... the love of Brian's life had now found the Mr. Right in the person of the mysterious Ian Richards—the money man who had returned at exactly the right moment to be the defense's star witness at Brian's murder trial? George knew that Dora had cleaned up her act in almost every aspect. He could tell that she now only drank in moderation and that she no longer indulged in the nose candy. George wondered whether Ian was a religious man and if Dora had herself become a convert.

He watched Frances and Susan cross over to the smoking area while Walter and Charlie perfunctorily glanced at the photographs. George also examined the photographs while allowing Walter and Charlie to walk ahead of him. He saw Brian the baby, Brian the private-school choirboy, Brian the precocious kid artist, Brian the lout who drank and snorted too much at his last big opening. He didn't see Brian who nervously recognized him by the lockers of a prominent local bathhouse. That was how George remembered Brian Convery—as a man afraid of being recognized at the baths. Not as a famous artist.

George waited until Charlie and his associates finished their cigarettes and then walked over to that side of the room so that he himself could have a smoke. He observed the host and hostess both wishing that they could make small talk with him but restraining themselves. Ian Richards and Dora King didn't want to make any mistakes today.

Charlie and Frances walked around the room paying respect to Brian's photographs as Susan MacGillivray awkwardly talked with George, asking him tentative questions about Brian. Charlie was sad that Brian Convery had wasted his life — that he had never come to terms with his self and that his body of work had been such an emptily brave denial of the facts. He knew that these sentiments were to be hinted at this afternoon rather than boldly stated. But he whispered his sentiments to Frances, who nodded and decided that it was time for a refill.

Frances observed Peter Gallon arriving in tandem with Rebecca Anderson and an unidentifiable man whom she assumed to be Becky's lover. The three of them appeared to have been imbibing either alcohol or drugs or both prior to their

arrival. Peter did not appear to be an actor remembering his lines; he appeared to be a very angry man who's youth was now almost gone but not at all left behind. She intended to avoid any interaction with either Peter or Rebecca unless either of the pair actually addressed herself or Charlie.

She looked at her watch after lighting another cigarette. She remarked to Susan, who was walking toward her and away from Charlie's ex-lover George, that the speeches should be beginning shortly since all of the principals had arrived and made themselves feel as much at home as possible Susan silently nodded and then they realized that Ian Richards was on the verge of making the announcement. Frances uncharacteristically made sure that she had another drink for herself as soon as Ian requested silence.

Thank you for coming this afternoon. Now that everybody has had the opportunity to look at the photographs and mingle we will now begin the speeches. I will be speaking first, then Dora King, and then Peter Gallon. Then... if anybody else has any stories or anecdotes... they will be encouraged to speak up with them as long as they are brief. and to the point

Ian cleared his throat and commenced.

We are here to remember Brian Convery , who is unfortunately no longer with us at far too early an age. Yet, Brian Convery arguably accomplished more in his twenty-seven years than most other artists and human beings accomplish in their life times.

Brian came to Middleton and Richards' attention through the wonderful eye and the good graces of Frances Bryant, who is here with us today. Upon viewing slides and other reproductions of his paintings and collages; Alexander and I immediately realized that were looking at something special.

Frances tapped Charlie on the shoulder; and Charlie silently nodded.

We were looking at something unique then; and we still are today. After consulting with Bryant and Drake Fine Arts; a decision was made not to be showcasing Brian's artworks here today but rather at a memorial exhibit to be held at another location to be determined and at a later date.

This had seemed all for the better, the three of them had decided two days prior. Ian had not wanted any scavengers present at the memorial and there had not been any argument.

Brian Convery was, of course, anything but a saint. He was considered by many artists, dealers, and critics to be an anachronism—a certifiably mad artist. He was mud in the face to those who insist that their art and their artists be neat and tidy and easy to categorize. Brian was excessive—the man simply did not know the meaning of the word 'moderation'. The man's excesses played no small role in his premature death—this fact should never be denied. And now we are all now a hell of a lot worse off without hi creativity and his presence.

George clenched his fists and walked briskly toward the lavatory. He wasn't about to literally throw up; but he couldn't think of a more appropriate part of the house to take refuge in. If, as Charlie had informed him on the way over to the house, Ian Richards had insisted on keeping details of Brian's personal life out of the spotlight; then why was Ian tantalizing people.? Why

was he so earnestly hinting at debauchery and not gluttonously reveling in the sordid details.

There was a silence as those present realized that Ian's testimonial had been concluded without his particularly indicating any conclusion. Then there was a barely-restrained movement toward the table on which all of the wine was open and available.

Dora King had been standing in the hallway leading to hers and Ian's master bedroom. Now Dora walked forward with a fresh glass of red wine in her hand. As Charlie observed George returning from the washroom; he felt Frances' right hand touching him on the left shoulder. Yes, Charlie agreed with Frances. Dora King was now either drunk or under the influence of most likely prescription drugs. They observed her as she took a nervous breath before commencing her eulogy.

Good afternoon, and thank you to everybody for being here today in memory of Brian Convery. You must excuse me. I still haven't digested the fact that Brian actually is dead. After so many false alarms after his trial for Alex's murder during which it became evident that Brian was not a killer—after it seemed possible that Brian might successfully reinvent himself and his artistic career; this senseless incident had to be the thing that stopped him.

I knew Brian both professionally and romantically. Brian was already represented by Middleton and Richards Fine Arts when I came to work at the gallery. He, with no offense to any of the gallery's other artists, was clearly the star. Brian was the rare combination of gifted artist and enfant terrible whom critics and members of the public either love or hate—or love to hate.

Brian Convery was a truly larger-than-life individual. He was, underneath all of his bluster and calculated cruelty, extremely moral. He loathed anything synthetic, anything dry and calculated, anything overly academic. Brian worshipped life; and now he is dead.

Yes, Brian truly was a Dionysian. His appetites were Bacchanalian — he did not know the meaning of the word 'moderation'. Knowing that he would eventually have to curb his excesses scared him. Brian had many similar fears. He was a beautiful man who was confused and alarmed that men both beautiful and ugly fantasized about him and wanted his body.

And Brian hated labels. He rightly felt that he was larger than any trite restrictive labels or 'identities'. He lashed out at all those whom he felt were trying to restrict him. He lashed out one too many times and now he has finally paid the consequences.

Charlie Drake tapped Walter Stirling on the shoulder. Walter shook his head angrily but resisted leaving the room Frances and Susan observed Peter Gallon, Rebecca Anderson, and Rebecca's boyfriend restraining each other.

Dora stopped in her tracks, stared intently at the photograph of herself and Brian positioned almost directly across the room from her speaking position, and then continued.

I had to get away from Brian. Yes, alcohol and drugs were involved. Yes, he

frequently hit me – when he was conscious of what he was doing and when he was not conscious and accountable for his actions. But the main reason I had to get away from him was because I knew that he would soon kill himself. When we were both lying on the bed and neither of us had yet fallen asleep, I could hear Brian command himself to take his life. I could also hear him command himself when he was in the shower, or in the washroom. Sometimes he would realize that I had heard him wish aloud that he might die soon and then immediately shift faces—pretend that nothing had happen. Sometimes I thought that these were indeed just passing incidences and nothing to be alarmed about. Sometimes I told him that he had to get help and get it fast. I didn't know what to do.

I blame myself for Brian's premature demise. I couldn't decide whether his impulses were just impulses or whether he had a serious suicidal urge that sooner or later he would act upon. Obviously, I was wrong. The technical details of Brian's death are irrelevant—he wished to be transported to some other plane and now his wish has finally been granted.

It was as if Brian would suddenly remember certain encounters or incidents. He would have a block and find himself remembering rather than thinking forward. He would experience jabs where he would remember what an asshole he may have been in relation to a particular situation or person. When his artistic inspiration dried up; it was inevitable that memory would take over and that Brian would wish to nullify his life.

She was temporally distracted by the sound of the front door creaking open. A tall, almost black-haired man attempted to slip in as inconspicuously as possible. This man was beautifully incapable of being inconspicuous.

George observed Walter and Charlie examining this stranger with their peculiar combination of curiosity and lust. George couldn't remember the man's name; but he certainly did remember the man. He was positive that he had enjoyed great sex with the new arrival on a particular late evening, perhaps a year ago.

I know that there will be people—there already are people including probably some individuals right in this room at this moment who in their hearts believe that Brian Convery killed Alex Middleton and that he was unable to live with the overwhelming guilt resulting from his acquittal. Let me state emphatically that I don't believe that Brian murdered Alex. I may have believed so at first but I believe that justice was carried through as Eric Cosgrove was the real murderer. I feel that anybody who still considers Brian to be guilty of Alex's murder is completely full of shit.

Dora paused to take an extended sip from her glass of wine. Charlie observed Peter Gallon suddenly walking toward Ian Richards and whispering something to him. Ian took a second to decipher what Peter had said to him; and then unexpectedly shook the young man's hand. Peter appeared both relieved and publicly embarrassed.

The handsome stranger casually walked over to the smoking area and lit a cigarette. The man did this without acknowledging any of the other guests. George was positive that he had briefly been intimate with this man

It is probably trite to claim that Brian Convery was destined to die an early death; but this claim is not entirely untrue. Brian was a believer in excess;

and a adversary of all that was neat and easily contained or categorized. Boundaries existed only to be transgressed; although he was not one of those whose art was dependent upon maintaining conservative boundaries so that they could be transgressed or transcended. Brian Convery, God bless him, was simply too big both artistically and personally, for small minds and self-appointed arbiters of standards or taste.

Brian was both a radical and a reactionary. He was an unabashed romantic in a cynical era that scorned originality and everything intuitive. He believed in his aesthetic and he literally died defending him. Today we are remembering the man—his collages and paintings are not on the walls. But how can we separate the man from his art? With Brian, that separation did not exist. Thank you.

Dora sipped from a glass of water before again sipping from her glass of wine. There was a moment's deadly silence during which nobody even moved let alone poured a drink or lit a smoke.

Then Ian Richards announced that anybody in the audience who had any personal remembrances of Brian Convery was welcome to speak. Charlie watched Ian's eyes circling the room, clearly hoping that there would be no further orators. Charlie could also see that Ian's wish was about to be denied.

The dark-haired stranger introduced himself as Jack Stanton and announced that he wished to speak. Charlie watched Dora find a seat by herself, away from all of the other guests but still able to observe the stranger closely. He also noticed that Dora was smoking in a non-smoking area; but of course she was co-owner of the house.

Jack Stanton scanned the room and then began speaking.

I was Brian Convery's lover for a period from a month after his acquittal to shortly before his death. We met at a bathhouse and talked at length after our initial sexual encounter and agreed to see each other again.

It took a while for me to learn Brian's true 'identity'. At first he used a pseudonym—he called himself Bruce Carson and I had no reason to doubt that was his name. But, one night over dinner I probably asked some personal questions with too much intensity and Brian confided in me.

I am not a very good actor. How could I not reveal to him that I was thunderstruck? I had no doubt that Brian was innocent of Alex Middleton's murder; yet it didn't take long to realize how mercurial his temper could be. Also, I'm afraid I could never really pretend to be that enthusiastic about Brian's art.

This became a major issue between us. When and how to resume his artistic career was as much a conundrum to Brian as was dealing with his queerness. Brian loathed the idea of exploiting his notoriety resulting from the trial; and he couldn't see any way in which he could avoid being tainted by the scandal.

We talked about relocating —perhaps to Montreal or to Paris. Brian had only been in Paris very briefly during his art student days and had expressed a desire to return some day. I would have been unable to join him — at least,



immediately. I have to make my living here as a freelance graphic artist.

In many ways, the best move Brian could have made would have been to savour our affair as the first occasion in which he could relate to a man emotionally as well as sexually; and then relocate to some place where nobody knew him or would not connect him with 'Brian Convery'. I would have missed him deeply; yet such a decision might well have saved Brian's life.

George heard a rustle that distracted him from Jack Stanton. Peter Gallon and Becky Anderson were helping themselves to fresh drinks and muttering among themselves. George also observed Frances Bryant glaring angrily at the two impaired artists.

I too, throughout my life, have shied away from emotional involvement. I, like so many others, have been hurt by love. When I found myself becoming emotionally involved with Brian; I knew that I would have to live with his serious mood swings. I could see and gear Brian suddenly retreating into the past tense. Something in his personal history, maybe something crucial or, more likely, some unresolved little incident involving some relatively insignificant acquaintance, would be recalled.

Sometimes, when Brian's memory would cut him off and take over; he would talk out loud to himself. He would command himself to die. 'Brian, take your fucking life'.

I didn't dare confront him at those moments. Later on, I would attempt to prod him into talking about these impulses but he would clam up. It was not as if he was unaware of them - it was not at all like the blackouts he had formerly experienced. I was never present for any of his blackouts; although he may well have been subconscious when he was baited into the altercation that finally cost him his life.

Dora gasped. Nobody's gaze turned toward her as Jack Stanton continued.

We could all have a field day post-analyzing Brian's brief but meteoric career and his troubled childhood and his emotional immaturity and everything else about Brian that forced him to stand out like a sore thumb no matter where he went or no matter what he did. Brian was not a great manipulator. He was actually too workaholic to be that obsessed with his mythology and he did not pander to gossip columnists and star-fuckers.

Yes, Brian was homophobic. He was so violently homophobic you didn't have to be a rocket scientist to guess that he was homosexual or at least bisexual with a taste for anonymous same-sex. Brian couldn't relate to men emotionally except as drinking or drugging buddies. There are a lot of men who can't relate emotionally to men and some of them are queer and some are absolutely heterosexual.

In today's post-identity queer discourse; individuals so straight that there must be something queer about them are often celebrated. Repressed individuals supposedly put the lie to false liberations that have degenerated into communities linked by mindless consumerism. When one of these such individuals is revealed to actually practice queer sex; the queerer-than-thou obsession with 'the closet' collapses. The closet can certainly be hell; but so can labels. And the closet can be a defense mechanism against restrictive labels. It can also be a support system, perversely unliberated as that might sound.

George couldn't overhear what Charlie and Walter were whispering to each other. He couldn't tell if Jack Stanton was an academic or a person who affected academic language as a weapon against fools. Jack definitely sounded as if he attended queer conferences and read all of the trendy pundits whom Charlie disdained but voraciously read anyway. He thought that sooner or later Brian and Jack might have mutually realized that they were mismatched but that it was unfortunate that Brian had suddenly ran away from a smart, intelligent, and handsome gentleman.

Ian Richards and Dora King were shaking their heads. Ian was informing Dora that cutting the speaker off would be very bad form indeed. Peter Gallon abruptly walked out the front door, followed by Rebecca Anderson and her boyfriend.

Self-loathing might even work for particular individuals. It certainly didn't work for Brian - it was what killed the man as much as anything else. When accused by another drunk of being a queer; Brian was still incapable of looking the fool in the eye and declaring 'Yes, I am queer. And nickels to dimes so are you.'. A bar room fight is such a pathetic way for somebody to die - a drunken argument between two individuals incapable of resolving their argument. I loved Brian when I was with him; and I love him now that we can never be together again. Thank you for your time and your patience.

When Ian realized that Jack Stanton had definitely concluded his speech; he dutifully informed people that there were still available refreshments and that everybody should mingle. Everybody should acknowledge that, in their own ways, they all shared Brian Convery among each other and that Brian was why they had all been present on this occasion.

George decided that he did not need anything further to drink. He watched as Jack finished his glass of water and then walked toward him.

I know you.

I know you, too. Let's go somewhere else and have a drink.

Ian nervously observed Dora; who sat by herself in a corner far away from all of the guests. For a moment he was concerned that she would wish to speak again - to counter Jack Stanton's testimonial.

But Dora now caught Ian's eye. She had decided to discreetly excuse herself and leave Ian to exchange platitudes with the guests.

There was not one single person there whom she felt at all like speaking to. She hoped that she could fall asleep for a good ten or twelve hours. She knew that Ian would later reprimand her for her social incompetence; but she no longer gave a damn. As she watched Charlie and his friends watching George leaving with Jack Stanton; she slipped into the master bedroom and immediately fell into a deep and dream-free sleep.

Charlie, Frances, Walter, and Susan realized that Dora was excusing herself from the memorial. They looked at each other and then crossed the floor in order to thank Ian for his hospitality. Frances hoped that Dora and Ian would not argue too vehemently the next day. She thought that Dora had acted magnificently and that she had communicated all that had been wonderful about Brian while acknowledging his weaknesses.

Ian confirmed that a Saturday afternoon during a two-week break between

*exhibitions would be the proper day to hold a public memorial with Brian's collages and paintings up on the gallery walls. Before walking away from the house in opposite directions; Charlie and Frances agreed to meet the next day and collaborate on the press release.*

*They wanted everything to be apparent in that press release, discouraging all possible speculations and rumours. They realized, more than ever, than attempting to control the uncontrollable was a stupid waste of time indeed.*

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