

The Impressionist
(by Joey Scarfone)
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A story about a girl who grows up in an orphanage. She has empathic healing skills but is torn between her need to take care of herself and her ability to help others. She is bisexual and this causes problems in her relationships.

The Characters

Shelly Duval.....main character
Penny.....Shelly's mom
Naomie.....Shelly best female friend from the orphanage
Bobby.....Shelly's best male friend from the orphanage
Gabriel.....Bobby's mother
Maryanne.....Bobby's girlfriend
Marlene.....yoga teacher
Janice.....Shelly first older female lover
Rico.....Shelly's first male lover
Hans Bergstein.....orphanage director.....wife....Hilda
Maria and Pepe.....Rico's neighbours
Tommy.....bike shop owner
Valerie.....student with hip problem
Rose.....yoga student with arthritis
Dr. Michael.....Hires Shelly to help with his practice
Margo, Jenny, Richard.....Dr. Michael's patients
Daniel Horton.....Shelly husband and realtor
Wanda.....Shelly's boss at library
David Peterson.....library director
Fred.....coffee shop owner
Alisa Rockworth.....lawyer
Ernie Horton.....Danny's brother
Charlie and Judy Horton.....Danny's mom and dad
Linda and Dorothy.....volunteers at library
Yolanda Sahdu.....inter cultural society
Gerry Katougas.....owns Milos Restaurant.....surfer
Linda Harnel and Leonard Stokes.....English student volunteers for human library program
David Brumel.....stock broker, rented their condo
Michelle Kern.....Ernie's girlfriend

THE IMPRESSIONIST

Shelly Duval spent the first 15 years of her life in the Arbutus Orphanage in Victoria. Her mother, Penny, gave her up at birth because she knew she couldn't give her a good life. She was single and didn't know who the father was. It could have been one of several men since Penny was a prostitute. She had an inclination of who she thought it might be. It might be one of her regular johns but it didn't

matter.....not at this point. She had enough common sense to give the child a fighting chance at a good life by giving her up. Her decision came with a heavy price but the price would mostly be hers to pay, and partly the child's. Shelly would have her own demons to deal with but would at least have a safe upbringing with proper medical care and nutrition. With those things in place she might have a shot at a decent life. It was more than Penny had.

The orphanage was split into two dormitories, male and female. For the first 7 years of her life Shelly was reasonably happy. The nurses and social workers were very kind and loving. There were not mistreated in any way. She bonded with her caretakers and the rest of the children. She only started to sense something else was going on when her friends started leaving the orphanage to go live with other families outside the orphanage. She learned that this was called adoption. She didn't know if she wanted that because she was comfortable with the way things were.

The orphanage had a library which is where Shelly spent most of her time. She was a voracious reader. Books would take her to other worlds. By the time she was 10 she understood that family life was the norm for most children and her life in the orphanage was on the fringe of society. She knew she must have had a mother and a father but where were they and why did they let her go? Her feelings of abandonment were starting to shape her personality in negative and positive ways. She began feeling comfortable sitting by herself and learning everything she could from books. She didn't cry as much as the other children. In fact, she became the one to console them when their insecurities over took them. Naomie was her best friend. They were the same age and they slept beside each other in single beds for as long as they could remember. Naomie just wasn't as strong as Shelly. They both knew they were rejects but it bothered Naomie to a point where she would have anxiety attacks and breakdown. Shelly would crawl into her bed, lie beside her and hold her in her arms until she stopped crying. In the morning they would get up and start their day together. The nurses noticed this and allowed it without getting in the way. It would be normal for sisters to do this in a regular home and it helped Naomie. It was a constructive family dynamic in the orphanage.

Shelly spent so much time in the library that the librarian gave her a little job. She was in charge of filing the new books and putting them in alphabetical order where they belonged on the shelves. This job also earned \$5 a week for Shelly. By the time she was 13 she had saved \$500 and had her own bank account, unbeknownst to her superiors. She already had a survival instinct far beyond her chronological age and knew one thing for sure.....money was the most important survival tool in life.

Naomie's anxiety attacks didn't stop. Shelly would crawl into her bed and calm her but one night it was different. Both girls had started to have periods and their hormones were racing. On this night Naomie took the aggressive role and made love to Shelly. Shelly was overtaken with pleasure. They had read about sex in the library and now they were experiencing it. Now they were more than sisters. Now their love was physical. Naomie's anxiety attacks stopped.

Shelly had another close friend named Bobby. He was also 13 but like most boys was more immature than Shelly. Shelly played with Bobby in the playground but he slept in his dormitory so they didn't have the physical contact like her and Naomie. One day Shelly told Bobby about her and Naomie. Bobby hadn't even started masturbating so he didn't know anything about sex. Shelly showed him some books to read and helped Bobby discover sex. One night she snuck into the boys' dorm and crawled into bed with Bobby. They played with each other and gave each pleasure. When it was over Shelly snuck back to her dorm and fell asleep in her own bed. This went unnoticed by the nurses.

Shelly, Bobby and Naomie now hung out together. They spent a lot of time in the library where Shelly

now had some authority. When the librarian wasn't here they would be intimate with each other. They pulled out the books on sex and studied them. To them it wasn't perverted or incestuous. They didn't get hugs and affection from parents so they were learning to get that wherever they could. They hadn't learned jealousy either. They were three children on the outskirts of society giving and taking from each other. It was a beautiful relationship and no one could take it away from them.

By the time they were 16 they were all working part time jobs. Shelly taught them the importance of money. Bobby got a job at MacDonalds, Naomie worked as a waitress in a Chinese restaurant and Shelly was working in the municipal library. Shelly was ahead of both of them as far as saving money was concerned. She got her own bachelor apartment and moved out of the orphanage. She didn't have many possessions. What she did have fit into two small cases which she strapped to the back of her bicycle. She took one last look at the orphanage. Naomie and Bobby were on the steps waving to her. They were in tears but Shelly wasn't crying. Her adult life was just beginning.

Shelly's apartment was spartan. A piece of foam for a bed, a few pieces of cutlery, a table and a chair. With so little clutter there was enough space for her to do yoga. It was something she had just gotten into since taking the library job. There was a recreation centre beside the library and they offered classes in Yoga. Shelly found this was good physical exercise but what she liked most about it was that it quieted her mind. She was starting to get weird mental thoughts. They were like premonitions. She would be thinking of an author at work and someone would walk in and ask for that same author. It was happening too often to be coincidence. She would set her mat up at the back of the yoga class, not wanting to be in front of anyone. If another student was having difficulty with a pose she would intuitively know that the person had arthritis or some other ailment that restricted their movement. When the teacher would assist the student they would reveal their ailment. It was always what Shelly suspected. It was eerie. Shelly didn't know what to make of it so she just kept it to herself.....for now.

Shelly's teacher approached her one day and surprised her with a question.

Shelly, you are the most advanced student in my class. You seem to have a natural affinity for this. Why do you always set up in the back of the class?

Shelly was intimidated by this. She was secure in herself but definitely not in a crowd of any sort. She thought of giving a vague answer but decided to be honest.

I am insecure in crowds, she said.

The teacher's name was Marlene and she was sincere in everything she did in the class.

I was just like you Shelly. I dreaded people looking at my body while I did my yoga. Then, as I got more into it, I realized I could help people by teaching this. So that's what I did. I studied it, took the teacher's training course and here I am with my own class.

This was the nicest anyone had been to Shelly since she left the orphanage.

I'm not trying to push you in any direction, Marlene said, but why don't you move up a row in the next class and see how it feels?

I'll give it a try Shelly said.....namaste (the divine in me salutes the divine in you).

Shelly tried moving her mat closer to the front of the class and eventually felt comfortable being right up front. She had overcome a fear but the strange feelings continued. She had discovered another word which described what she was experiencing.....she was empathic.....she felt other people's pain.

Shelly was 20 years old and gaining all sorts of confidence through yoga. She was taking the teacher's training course and soon would have her teacher's diploma. Marlene had taken her under her wing and she now assisted with the classes. Shelly would help students with their poses and intuitively knew their limits. One student was named Janice. She was 10 years older than Shelly and had been doing yoga for less than a year. Shelly was attracted to her. They would go for coffee after class and it wasn't long before they became lovers. Janice had a normal upbringing. A nice mother and father, a sister and a brother. She knew she was gay from an early age and didn't have a problem with it. Shelly envied this. She had come to realize that she was bisexual but other than her experiences in the orphanage she had no sex life. But Janice was more than a lover. She was like a mother figure. Shelly felt attracted on several levels. Janice was excited by their age difference and the two found themselves in a passionate relationship. It was Shelly's first real relationship. They went to the Lesbian bars and danced. They went to movies and held hands. They kissed goodbye and kissed hello but Shelly still felt an uneasy feeling. Janice became very possessive and would say things in public to humiliate Shelly. It was a control mechanism Shelly had never experienced this before and she didn't know how to react except to be submissive. She didn't want to jeopardize this relationship but felt out of character as Janice's little trophy. She tried to talk about it but Janice got even more verbally abusive. It was affecting Shelly's yoga. Her body was stiffening up and she started developing pain where there never used to be any. It was Janice's birthday and they had planned to go out.... but Shelly had a different present for Janice...

I am leaving you she said. I can't live under your personality. I have a feeling why you are the way you are but that doesn't change things. You can find someone else to try and dominate. We're through.

Janice had never seen this strong side of Shelly and was shocked. She tried to talk Shelly out of it but Shelly just slammed the door in her face. She jumped on her bicycle and drove off.

Shelly was alone again. How she wished she had a family to fall back on. She called Marlene in desperation. Marlene was understanding.

Why don't you come with me to a yoga retreat this weekend Shelly? It will be good for you.

That sounds good Marlene. I'll talk to you more before class tomorrow.

Shelly went to sleep thinking about Naomie and Bobby. They were everything to her in the orphanage. It had been years since they saw each other but Shelly needed them now. She would get in touch with them tomorrow.

Naomie was still working at the Chinese restaurant so Shelly went there for supper the next day. When Naomie saw her come in she rushed to her and gave her a hug. It's so good to see you Shelly. How are doing?

Shelly told Naomie about her brief affair with an older woman. Naomie understood. She had a few short term affairs herself. It seemed like that was normal for kids of the orphanage. Long term relationships were rare.

Have you seen Bobby? Shelly asked.

Ya. He's doing well. He's cooking at a high class restaurant. He has his own apartment but no girlfriend. Why don't we get together soon? We have a lot of catching up to do.

Sounds great Shelly said. I'm going to a retreat this weekend so how about in a couple weeks?

Ok, Naomie said. I'll set it up. Bobby has become quite a good cook so I'll see if he wants to have us over to his place.

Shelly and Naomie embraced and said goodbye. They were still the only family they had.

Marlene picked Shelly up at her apartment and they headed up island to Qualicum beach. It was a beautiful drive along the east coast of Vancouver island. Shelly began to feel calm. When they arrived at the retreat lodge several others yoga students were checking into their cabins. Marlene and Shelly shared theirs. After they unpacked they met with everyone in the dining room at the main lodge. Marlene knew most of the people there and introduced Shelly. One of the students was named Rico. He was from Costa Rica. His skin was dark brown and he was quite handsome. He and Shelly ended up sitting beside each other at the table. They started talking about their yoga practice and what they did for a living. Rico worked in an art store and was a painter. His hope was to make a living from his art but in the meantime he enjoyed being surrounded by art supplies and talking to other artists. He especially loved the impressionist artists.

Shelly talked about her job in the library and how she was going to be a yoga instructor one day. She felt comfortable talking to Rico. She was feeling all sorts of vibes from him.

Did you injure your ankle recently? She asked.

Rico was quite surprised by her question. Yes I did, he said. How did you know that?

I felt it Shelly said. It's almost all healed right now but it still isn't 100%.

Rico felt a cold chill run through his body. Shelly was scaring him.

You were playing soccer and your ankle got hit when someone tackled you.....

That's right, Rico said. Do you have this talent with everyone?

It seems to happen more and more these days especially since I have been getting deeper into Yoga. I didn't mean to startle you but I get impressions of people. It's not like I can read minds or predict things it's just a feeling I can't explain but I know it's real.

Are you an empath? Rico asked.

I think so Rico. When I start teaching yoga I will use this to help people. Right now I just acknowledge that the power is there and I chose to act on it rather than keep it inside.

Marlene stood up and announced that the first class was about to begin. Rico and Shelly set up their mats beside each other. Some of the poses required people to partner up so they did. Shelly helped Rico who was obviously favouring his ankle. Rico could see that Shelly was way more flexible than him. They made a good pair he thought. The last pose of the class was simply lying down and letting the body return to a relaxed position. Rico turned his head to look at Shelly. She had her eyes closed but felt him looking. She turned and looked back at him. They didn't smile but their eyes met very softly and sincerely. They were turning each other on.

After supper Shelly returned to her cabin with Marlene and told her of her meeting Rico.

I have a strong feeling about him Marlene. I think we could be lovers.

Marlene just realized that Shelly was bisexual. Then you probably will Shelly.

The next morning everyone took a walk through the woods on a pathway. It eventually led to the ocean where everyone sat on logs and just did beach things. The nature and wildlife were beautiful. Shelly was coming down from her relationship with Janice. She was glad it was over. She wouldn't let herself be treated like that again, she had more self respect than that. Rico came and sat beside Shelly.

It's beautiful here isn't it?

Yes it is....nothing like the city. It's calming.

I was wondering if we could get together when we are back in Victoria. I'd like to get to know you.

That would be nice Rico. I'd like to learn more about you and your art.

The group got up and walked back to the lodge. Everyone went to their cabins and rested before the afternoon yoga class.

Shelly and Rico set up their mats beside each other again. The instructor announced they were going to give some students who were taking the teaching course an opportunity to lead the class. She called Shelly up to start. She rolled up her mat and went to the front of the class feeling proud. She was gaining confidence.

Shelly was pretending to organize the books in the art section of library but she was really studying the impressionist painters.....Monet, Renoir, Degas.....and contrary to popular belief Van Gogh who was not an impressionist but rather a post impressionist. It was a term used to describe the reaction in the 1880's against impressionism. Art was a new thing for Shelly. She thought for a moment....this is how she got her feelings about people.....she got the impression of who they were. It was deeper than how they looked or talked. At that moment her cell phone chimed, it was Rico. She had to whisper.....hy Rico. I'll step outside and call you back.

Shelly put the books back on the shelf and headed outside the building for her coffee break and to talk

to Rico.

Hy Rico. I couldn't talk in the library. How are you?

I'm doing well. I'm on a coffee break myself. I was wondering if you would like to get together for supper?

I would like that but I have a supper engagement this Sunday with some old friends, could we do it on Friday or Saturday?

Saturday would work for me. I like cooking so we can have it at my place around 6 or so.

OK. I'll see you then.

Shelly went back to organizing books and brushing up on her art history. It fascinated her. It was a purely visual thing and yet it captivated her. She thought she would like to give it a try but had no idea where to start. This would be something her and Rico could have in common.

When she arrived at Rico's place she felt like she was being taken back to a bohemian time. His place was one big room in a warehouse with brick walls. Paintings hung everywhere. There were oil paintings, watercolours, charcoal nude drawings and small sculptures. It was like he lived in an art gallery. His bed was in one corner and the kitchen and dining area was in another.

Wow Shelly said, your place is incredible. It's so big.

Thanks Shelly. I lucked out when a friend left town. He was an artist as well. I'm preparing some burritos so why don't you put some music on and I'll just keep going with supper.

Shelly walked over to the stereo and put on a CD that she didn't know anything about. It was a south American band. Music was another thing she was eager to absorb. It seemed like all sorts of new possibilities were being presented to her.

Tell me about yourself Shelly, did you grow up in Victoria?

The question caught her a bit off guard. She knew she would eventually tell Rico everything but she wasn't expecting to right this moment.

Well, yes I did. I grew up in an orphanage. I left when I was 16 and started supporting myself. I don't really have a family but I have a few close friends who I'll be reuniting with tomorrow. They grew up there as well. What about you Rico?

Rico wasn't phased by Shelly's story. He knew she was honest and that was one thing that attracted him to her.

I was born in Costa Rica. My mother and father immigrated to Canada when I was 10. They now live on the mainland. I have a sister as well. She lives with my mom and dad. We don't see eye to eye on everything so it's probably best that we live in separate cities. We get along but they are devout Roman Catholics and I don't agree with any organized religion so I just respect their beliefs rather than argue with them.

When was the last time you saw them? Shelly asked.

About three years ago. They came here for a visit. It was OK but my life style is very different from theirs. I guess you could say they respect my beliefs too but we don't really share much common ground.

I find that a bit bewildering, Shelly said. I would want nothing more than to know my mother and father and yet I fear that it might not be a good meeting. It is a giant question mark in my life and sooner or later I'll have to resolve it, but I'm not ready to do that right now.

You will know when the time is right Shelly. It's a big step for sure.

Rico brought the food to the table. It looked incredible.

This looks so good I don't want to eat it, Shelly said. If you're trying to impress me it's working.

Rico just laughed. I like cooking and it's so much easier to cook for two people than just for one.

Shelly took a few bites. It tasted as good as it looked. It's delicious Rico....it really is.

They finished their meal and Rico put the dishes in the sink. Shelly found a comfortable spot on the couch and Rico joined her.

Is all this your art? Shelly asked.

Most of it is. I pick up things I like and just decorate the place with them but I like to see my own stuff. I envision it in a gallery one day.

What about the charcoal sketches of the nudes.

Those are mine. I take figure drawing from time to time and some of my friends are happy to pose for me if I give them a copy or two.

Shelly looked around the room and then stared at Rico.....would you draw me Rico?

I would love to Shelly. Are you comfortable taking off your clothes?

Shelly didn't answer but started unbuttoning her blouse and then her jeans and finally her panties fell to the floor. She wanted it to be erotic. She wanted to make love with Rico.

Rico spread his yoga mat on the floor and covered it with a white bed sheet. Shelly sat in a yoga pose and Rico started drawing. He asked if she could move her hair over her shoulder and Shelly complied. He completed four sketches very quickly and then spent more time on a fifth. He was capturing Shelly's beauty while Shelly was capturing him. He completed the sketch and showed it to her. It was incredible. Rico really did have an artists talent. She held up the other sketches and asked if she could have one. Rico obliged and said you can pick anyone you like and keep it. Shelly was still naked while Rico had his clothes on. She picked her favourite and said....may I have this one? Rico said....for sure. Shelly then said... may I have you?and came close to Rico. He put his arms around her and they

kissed passionately. Rico took his clothes off, grabbed her hand and walked her to his bed. They embraced and fell into each other's passion. The love making lasted a long time until both collapsed. It was like nothing Shelly had ever experienced. She sensed Rico had been here before with other lovers but now she was his lover and that's all that mattered. She wanted to be closer to him. She wanted to tell him about her sexuality but that would be another time. Right now the world was perfect.

Shelly stayed the night with Rico. She left the next morning with her sketch. She would frame it and put it on her wall. It was the first piece of art she owned. When she met Naomie and Bobby that night for supper she was glowing. They were happy for her. Bobby had prepared an East Indian supper for all of them. It was also delicious. Shelly said.....I'm going to get fat eating all this great food. Bobby had worked his way up to head chef at his restaurant. The pay was good and he was happy.....not as happy as Shelly but he was cooking for his family and that felt good.

Have either of you thought about finding your parents? He asked.

I have, Shelly said, but I'm not ready for it yet.

Naomie had thought about it but didn't know how it would go. It could be terrible. What if they didn't want anything to do with her? What if they thought she was just after money?

Bobby had also thought a lot about it. I am thinking of giving it a shot he said. It just haunts me everyday and I need to find out who they are even if it's just for closure on my part. I know there are websites where you can put your name and situation in and then if the parents are curious they can match up with you. First I'm going back to the orphanage to see what information I can get then I'll take it from there.

That sounds like a good approach, Shelly said. I would be interested to know how you make out.

After supper the three of them embraced and said their goodbyes. It was a great reunion. Shelly had never felt so good in her life. Things were starting to make sense and go her way. She peddled her bike back home and stared at Rico's sketch until she fell asleep.

Three months passed and Shelly life started moving faster. She got her yoga teacher's certificate and started teaching her own classes in the rec centre. Her and Rico were still going out and this brought a sense of belonging to Shelly that she never experienced before. He was a good man and treated her as an equal not the way Janice treated her. She was also making more money teaching. Her savings were upwards of \$3,000.00. Not bad for a 21 year old with no university education.

She kept in touch with Bobby and Naomie. Bobby tried to find his parents but could only find his mother. She was happy to meet him and they were able to start a mother son relationship. She had no idea where his father was or even if he was alive. They had a one night stand and she never saw him again. This gave Bobby the closure he was looking for. Naomie was still not ready to go that route, nor was Shelly. Life was stable for both of them and they didn't want to take the risk of losing what they had over someone who probably didn't care about them. Shelly introduced Rico to Bobby and Naomie. They hung out occasionally and the boys would have cooking contests, to the complete enjoyment of the girls.

One day while Shelly and Rico were walking down the street they bumped into Janice. Shelly was apprehensive about introducing Rico but couldn't avoid it. After a short and somewhat unpleasant introduction they carried on their own way.

Who was that? Rico asked.

Shelly knew this was the time to tell Rico about her sexuality.

That was Janice. We were in a yoga class together.....and we had a short love affair.

Rico was shocked.

So are you gay?

No.....I'm bisexual. She wanted to tell of her first sexual experiences with Bobby and Naomie but hesitated.....then she just blurted it all out. We had no other form of human contact so we became intimate at a very young age. We love each other and are like brother and sisters but that was how we all discovered sex.....and it was beautiful. It wasn't perverted. It bonded us forever. You honestly don't have to worry about me running off with a woman. I promise you I would never deceive you and I can't live my life trying to keep something like that from you. It's better if it's out in the open. I think it is partially why I am empathic. I feel for everyone. When I look at your figure drawings I see beauty in men and women and I am attracted to both. You must believe me when I tell you I get everything I need from you. I don't want anyone else..... so now you know.

Rico looked at Shelly and gave her a huge kiss. I love you Shelly the way you are. Please don't think you need to change a thing for me.

Shelly embraced Rico as if she was falling off a cliff but in fact, they were falling deeper in love.

One more thing, Shelly said.....I'm thinking of looking for my parents. I don't think I was strong enough on my own but with your support I think I can do it....no matter what the outcome is.

I am there for you 100% Shelly.....no matter what.

On her 22nd birthday Shelly phoned the orphanage and made an appointment to see Hans Bergestein. He was the director of the orphanage. He was a kind and compassionate man. He lost his family to the holocaust and was orphaned in Poland. By a series of United Nations placements he ended up in Canada. He grew up in an orphanage in Toronto and after his schooling he took the administrative job at the Arbutus orphanage in Victoria. He was 82 years old and had seen hundreds of children go through the orphanage. He was dedicated to his work and had no plans of retiring.

Shelly peddled her bike to the orphanage. She stared at the front entrance. She had mixed feelings about the place but it was her home. Hans walked down the pathway to meet her.

Hello Shelly. It is so very nice to see you again.

Hello Hans. It's good to see you too.

The two of them walked into his office. It was familiar and hadn't changed one bit. Pictures of children

lined the walls. Shelly thought she should send one to him of her and Rico but kept that thought to herself.

How have you been doing Shelly?

I've been doing well Hans. I have the same job in the library and I teach yoga at the rec centre. I also have a nice boyfriend. We have been going out for a couple years now and I feel very grounded with him. I've been thinking a lot about my parents. I'd like to connect with them if possible. Can you help me get started with that?

Hans had seen this a hundred times before. It was natural for the children to want to know who their parents were but it didn't always work out well.

I can help you Shelly. I figured this is why you came today so I pulled your file. I have to tell you to be strong. It could be a pleasant experience but it can also be upsetting so before I get you started on this road I would ask if your boyfriend is supportive concerning your parents. It makes a difference you know.

Yes, I know Hans. I knew I wasn't strong enough in my teens but now, with Rico's support, I think I am.

Very well then. Here's the information I have. Your mother's name is Penny Caldmen. She was a prostitute and didn't think she could give you a proper upbringing so she gave you up for adoption at birth. She doesn't know for sure who your father was but she has an idea who it might be. The only way to find that out would be to do DNA tests on you and him. She was living in Vancouver at the time of your birth and we have the phone number she used at that time. I've copied this information for you.

Hans passed the piece of paper to Shelly.

Shelly took it and stared blankly at the information.

Do you have a picture of her?

No we don't Shelly but there is a website where parents and children can reconnect. I can help you with that if you want.

Yes, I know about that website. I'll try phoning first and take it from their. Thanks Hans. You've been very helpful.

It's my pleasure Shelly. I hope it all goes well for you and don't hesitate to call me if I can help you with anything.

The two stood up. Shelly walked over to Hans and gave him a hug, turned and walked out of the orphanage. She jumped on her bike and peddled off.

Shelly was sitting in her apartment staring at the phone. She was scared. Questions were racing through her head.....what if she doesn't want to meet me? what if she is dead?.....what if this phone number isn't active any more? What if what if what if? Finally she summoned up enough courage to make the call. The phone rang three times and then a woman answered.....

Hello.

Shelly froze.....Hello, is this Penny Caldmen?

Yes it is.

Shelly froze again.....Hello Penny this is Shelly.....I think.....I think I am your daughter.

There was quite at the other end. Shelly new it was her mother.

Hello Shelly. I've been waiting a long time for this call. Thank you for having the courage to make it.

Mama is it really you?

Yes Shelly, it's really me.

Both women started to cry so much they couldn't talk. Penny finally spoke a few words.....

Are you OK Shelly?

Yes I am mama. I am Ok.

Do you have a secure life Shelly?

Yes I do mama.

Shelly wanted to say mama over and over. She had never said that word before and it felt so good.

I'm so glad Shelly. Tell me about your life.

Shelly told her about her job and her yoga and of course her boyfriend but not her empathy. That would have to wait until they met in person. And then came the big question.....can I meet you mama?

I would really love that Shelly. Would you like to come to me or would you like me to come to you?

Shelly hadn't thought that far ahead. She paused a minute and said.....I'll come to you mama....with Rico.

One more thing mama. Do you know my father?

I have an idea who it might be but I'm not sure. I guess you know I was a prostitute. I have a name but that's all....and I'm not 100% sure. I'm sorry I can't give you more to go on Shelly

Shelly immediately called Rico.

Rico I found my mother and I'm going to meet her.

That's terrific Shelly. Where does she live?

She lives in Vancouver. I'm going to meet her there.....and I was wondering if you would come with me.

Of course I will Shelly. Just let me know when you set it up and I'll arrange to take time off work if I need to.

Thank you so much Rico. Your support means everything to me. I'm going to call Bobby and Naomie and let them know.

Naomie and Bobby were happy for Shelly. Naomie still hadn't tried to contact her parents and still didn't have the confidence to do so. She would just wait for now and see how things went for Shelly.

Shelly felt like a new person. She was energized. She was getting deeper into her yoga and more people were signing up for her classes. Her empathic skills were helping her help others. People would come to class with physical blockages and she would help them get over their problems. Her intuition was getting stronger all the time. She often thought of doing nothing but yoga but couldn't give up her job. It was her rock of security. It gave her stability, paid vacation time, a health plan and above all...a steady income. Her savings had grown to \$10,000.00. She had no plans of buying a car or anything extravagant like that. She was happy in her little apartment. Everything she needed was close at hand. Her walls were now lined with art work, mostly Rico's, and some of her first paintings and sketches. She was also getting deeper into the impressionists. She borrowed books from the library and studied their lives. It was a different time they lived in. The 19th century had none of today's conveniences and tech toys. Their minimalist life styles were something Shelly chose to copy. She had worn out her first bicycle and purchased a ten speed with two cases over the back wheel to carry everything from groceries to clothing to art supplies. When she wasn't working she would spend her time painting. Rico was giving her instruction on paints and techniques. She liked the short, simple brush strokes of the impressionists.....building up layers of colour to produce concise light fields. Rico was her main figure study. She would draw an image of him and then paint the same image. Some of her work now hung in his place. His space was much larger and his walls still had room left on them. As she painted she planned her trip to Vancouver to meet her mother.....she would take her picture and paint it.

Shelly planned the trip to Vancouver to coincide with thanksgiving. She would take her mom and Rico out for supper. It would be perfect or at least the plan would be perfect. She left room for the possibility of things going wrong. She booked a hotel room close to where her mom lived. When they were settled in the room she called Penny.....

Hello mama it's me. We are settled in the hotel. Can we come to meet you?

Yes Shelly, I'll be waiting for you.

Shelly was filled with a million emotions. They left the hotel and walked to her mom's place. It was a small three story walk up apartment building that looked very old. They rang Penny's intercom.

Please come in, Penny said, it's 301.

The buzzer sounded and they walked in. The stairs made a creaking sound and the hallways were

poorly lit. It was a bit scary. They arrived at the door and knocked. Penny opened the door and looked at her daughter. Shelly said the only word that came to her mouth....mama? The two hugged for an eternity. They were too emotional to talk.

Mama...this is my boyfriend Rico.

Hello Rico. It's very nice to meet you. Please come in, I've prepared some coffee, if you don't drink coffee I have tea.

Coffee's fine mama.

Shelly studied her mom's appearance. They looked alike but Penny had rough lines on her face that made her look older than her years. Penny started talking.

I want to tell you why I gave you up Shelly. I was 20 years old and working the streets to make a living. I didn't want to bring you into that world. After your birth I sunk even deeper into that lifestyle. I became a heroin addict. I hated myself and everything I had done. My childhood was not pleasant. I had an abusive upbringing and was living on the street when I was a teenager. I felt so much guilt for letting you go but I honestly believed you would have a better life without me....and it looks like you do. I finally hit rock bottom in my 30's. My pimp beat the crap out of me and I landed in intensive care. I made a pack with god. If you get me out of this I will clean up. I thought of you every minute in the hospital. I thought.....the only thing I can give to you, or the world for that matter, would be my sobriety. I recovered from the beating and joined NA, that's narcotics anonymous. My life turned around. Welfare found a room for me in a woman's shelter and I started a clean life. I went to school and got a degree in social work. Now I work with other women who are trying to build a life for themselves. Staying clean is a work in progress. I go to regular meetings and just keep to myself. I don't have a boyfriend. That just complicates things. Maybe someday I can have a normal relationship but so far I haven't been lucky enough to know what that looks like. I have been waiting for this since the day I gave you up and I am so happy to see you have it together, much more together than I do.

Shelly was absorbing every word her mom was saying. It made perfect sense to her. In a strange way her mom had her best interest at heart. She didn't feel hate or anger towards her mom. She could see that life just dealt her some real bad cards. The miracle is that she survived at all.

Shelly, I must ask you one thing....I ask you to forgive me.

You don't need my forgiveness Mama.

Yes I do Shelly. A child needs a mother and a father and I wasn't there. So if you can find it in your heart....please forgive me.

OK mama, I forgive you.

A quiet calm came over the room as if a storm had just passed over. Shelly and Penny could be family.

Penny got up and took an envelope from her desk. She handed it to Shelly.

The card said, to my beautiful daughter. Inside was the name of the man who might be her father.

All I have is the man's name Shelly. Good luck with this.

Shelly gave her mom a big hug and said.....I'm taking us all out for thanks giving dinner, but first I want to get some pictures. Rico took several pictures of the two of them, and then some of just Penny. Then Penny took some of Shelly and Rico amidst laughter as they tried to figure out how many possible combinations of pictures there were.....including a selfie of the three of them

When Shelly got back home the first thing she did was have her pictures developed. She made 4 copies of everything.....one for herself, one for Penny, one for Rico and one for Hans. She delivered the ones for Hans in person. He was very happy for her and immediately put them on his wall.

Now that you've met your mother, do you have plans for your father? Hans asked.

I'm not sure yet Hans. I am leaning towards just forgetting about him, at least for the near future. He doesn't know I exist and I don't feel it would do either of us any good. It went well with mom and right now that's good enough for me. I think it will take a lot of work just building the relationship with mom. She is very fragile and I get the feeling she could slip back into her addiction at any time. I don't want to see that and I don't want to get hurt either.

That's a wise approach Shelly. Protect yourself. You have a wonderful life ahead of you and you don't need anyone screwing it up.

Shelly said goodbye to her friend and rode away on her 10 speed.

Friday night meant the work week was over for Shelly and Rico. She would go to his place for supper and stay the weekend. She now had her own easel set up beside his. Together they would paint. Shelly started doing portraits of her mother, Rico and her friends. Rico started doing paintings of Shelly doing her paintings. It was a fun thing to do. Shelly put a picture of Penny beside her easel and worked from that. Her mother must of been pretty when she was younger but the years of drug abuse and street life took their toll on her looks. At first Shelly tried to make her mother look prettier. She softened the deep facial lines and brightened her eyes. Rico commented that it didn't look like Penny, it looked like what Shelly wanted her to look like. Shelly knew that and decided to make the painting real. She deepened the lines on her face, showed the bags under her eyes and darkened her hair. It wasn't as happy a face but it was her face. Shelly would stare at her work for hours and wonder what it would have been like growing up with her mother. She wondered if she she would have become a prostitute as well. A mother daughter team. It sickened Shelly to think like this. She put her paint brush down and walked over to Rico. He knew she needed a hug.

Rico....I'd like to have a Christmas dinner, invite my mom and my friends. It would be a family thing. If you want to invite your family that's fine too.

Rico thought about it.

I don't know if I want my family here for Christmas. If you want to meet them we can arrange to go there another time but I think it would ruin the day if they come here. Don't forget, Christmas is the biggest day of the year for their religion. They'll be all weirded out on Jesus.

Ok but I would like to celebrate Christmas with mom. Can we have it here at your place?

Sure we can. Let's do a real turkey supper and have lots of presents.

That sounds good Rico. Christmas in the orphanage was always a sad time and I want something happy to look forward to. I'll tell my mom she can stay at my place and I'll stay with you while she is visiting.

Shelly went home and started emailing Bobby, Naomie and her mom. This was going to be the first Christmas dinner with her new family. She thought back to the Christmas events in the orphanage. At first they were a joyous event but when she found out that Santa Claus wasn't real it just became another sad ritual. This would be different. She would decorate Rico's place and when everyone arrived they would exchange presents. There would be a Christmas tree with lights and the room would be filled with the smell of roasting turkey. It was almost too good to be true. Shelly hoped nothing would go wrong. For the first time in her life she was going to have a normal family Christmas.

The emails started coming in. Bobby now had a girlfriend and even more amazing, he had met his mother. He asked if he could invite them both and of course Shelly said yes. She couldn't wait to get all the news. Naomie was also coming but by herself and Penny would come from Vancouver by herself as well. Rico decided to invite his neighbours, Maria and Pepe, who were musicians. It was starting to shape up as quite the party. So far it was going to be a table for nine.

The next four weeks went by quickly. With her job, teaching yoga and preparing the Christmas dinner party she had no spare time. She was most excited to hear how Bobby met his mother. And he now had a girlfriend to boot. She was concerned about Naomie. She remembered her anxiety attacks. She might start feeling them again. Shelly and Bobby were making big progress with their mothers but Naomie hadn't started to go down that road yet.

Shelly met her mother at the bus station Christmas eve. They hopped a cab to Shelly's place and had supper together. Penny was easy to please and appreciated a warm, comfortable place to stay. She would have taken a hotel if she needed to but this saved her a lot of money. They talked for hours. Shelly put her hand on Penny's chest and said.....mama.....you have weak lungs.

Penny was surprised because her doctor had told her the years of drug abuse and smoking had damaged them.....but how did Shelly know this?

Shelly told her of her empathic traits and explained how it developed over the years to a point where it helped her with her yoga teaching. Students had heard of her skill and enrolled in her classes because of it.

I know I have damaged my body Shelly. I lead a clean life now but I can't erase my past. I accept the things I can not change. It's part of the serenity prayer we say at the end of every meeting.

Shelly gave her mom a hug and headed over to Rico's place. He had already finished decorating the tree and had put up a few tables for tomorrow's dinner. Shelly gave him a kiss, said goodnight and went to bed. She was beat. Whenever she tapped into other people's energy it drained some of her own. She would have to be careful with her mother.

Shelly woke up long before Rico on Christmas morning. Rico's place looked like the home department of the Bay centre. She immediately turned the Christmas tree lights on. Next, get the coffee going. They would go through several pots today. Her presents were her paintings and she didn't bother wrapping them. Instead she made a personalized card for each one and taped it to the canvas. The commotion and the smell of coffee woke Rico up. He rubbed his eyes and headed for the shower. Shelly handed him a coffee on his way.

The phone rang, it was Penny.

Hy mama, did you sleep alright?

Yes I did honey. How about you?

I did, but I got up early....too excited. Why don't you come over for breakfast?

Ok, I'll see you soon.

It was a half hour walk to Rico's place. Penny strolled slowly and savoured the moment. It was Christmas morning and this would be her first Christmas with her daughter. The streets were barren. It reminded her of the days when she lived on the street. It was one of many flashbacks she had to deal with. They never went away totally. Sometimes they were more frequent and sometimes not. She had learned to just watch them pass through her mind. They were just images now. When they were real it was more intense, so intense she needed drugs to deal with them. The store windows were filled with stuffed Santas, elves and reindeer. She would have hated them in the past. They were ornaments of a happy life she could never experience but now it was different. She was clean and sober and feeling the joy of Christmas. It seemed so simple. Why did it take her whole life to find this? She looked up to the sky and said thank you.

When Penny arrived at Rico's place he was busy preparing a pancake mix. Shelly greeted her mom with a hug and a kiss and handed her a coffee. She gave her a tour of the place and they landed in front of Penny's portrait.

I painted this for you mama, Shelly said.

Penny was impressed.

It's beautiful honey. It's really, really beautiful. You have so many talents.

Well, Rico has been helping me with the painting. I'm learning as I go.

Breakfast is ready, Rico said.

The three of them sat down to pancakes and eggs.

As soon as breakfast was over Rico started preparing supper. He basted the turkey with butter and olive oil and put it in a roast pan with a bit of water to keep it moist. Penny offered to help but Rico made it clear he had everything under control. Shelly and Penny sat on the couch and watched Rico do his thing.

You have a real good man Shelly, her mom said. You're lucky.

I know mama. He is good to me and he loves cooking. I'm afraid I'm going to get fat!

Not if you keep doing yoga and riding your bike. How is the yoga coming?

It's great mama. I love teaching and helping people.

There was a knock at the door. Shelly got up to answer it. It was Rico's neighbours, Pepe and Maria. They had brought their guitars. Shelly got them both a coffee while Rico made another pot. Penny introduced herself and commented on their instruments.

Do you play guitar? Pepe asked.

No, I don't play any instruments but I like to sing.

Pepe and Maria broke into a Bob Dylan song. This struck a chord with Penny because she loved Dylan. Penny joined them on the chorus.....the answer my friend is blowing in the wind. Shelly watched as a happy smile came over her mom's face. If she learned guitar her and her mom could sing together. She sat beside Penny and sang along with her. When the song was over Rico applauded from the kitchen....the Christmas spirit had arrived.

Bobby, his girlfriend Maryanne and his mother Gabrielle were the next to arrive. Shelly assumed the role of host and greeter introducing everyone. Gabrielle was even younger than Penny. She had Bobby when she was 17. She got pregnant the first time she had sex with her high school sweet heart. She had to drop out of school and her boyfriend didn't want anything to do with the child so she gave him up. She eventually went back to school and got a fairly decent job in a lawyers office as a secretary. Like Penny she carried a heavy guilt with her all her life. She didn't get into drugs and kept working the same job so she had a more stable life than Penny and didn't have the hard lines on her face. When Penny and Gabrielle shook hands there was a strange vibe between them. It was as if the guilt they carried reared it's ugly head and shamed them both at the same time. They didn't know what to make of each other. They were victims of circumstance. The awkward feeling passed as quickly as it came. They expressed their pleasantries and tried not to judge each other.....or themselves.

Bobby wandered into the kitchen to ask if he could help.

Sure, Rico said. You can peel the potatoes.

Bobby dutifully grabbed a small knife and started his given chore.

Thanks for hosting this dinner Rico. It is a first for us and I appreciate your hospitality. We have never had Christmas with our family so it's very special.

No problem Bobby. I know how much it means to Shelly and everyone really. I'm glad to oblige. By the way, how would you do the potatoes?

Well, I would boil them until they are almost cooked. Then I would put them in the same roast pan as the turkey and bast them so they have a nice brown glaze.

Ok. You're in charge of the potatoes.

Naomie was the last to arrive. Shelly grabbed her hand and escorted her to meet Penny. Naomie was a bit shy. Amidst everyone's happiness she came alone. She still hadn't taken the steps Bobby and Shelly had. She was too scared. Shelly sensed this and stayed close by her side to comfort her, just as she had when they were children. They were standing in front of a painting of Naomie and Shelly said.....I made this for you Naomie. It was a good likeness.

Oh Shelly.....thank you. It's lovely.

Bobby came out of the kitchen and noticed this.

And Bobby, I made this one for you.

Bobby was blown away. He was lost for words. Naomie piped in.....

Can we get a picture of the three of us in front of the portraits?

Rico took out his cell phone and started snapping pictures, which of course triggered a photo op frenzy. Everyone was taking pictures of everyone else. It became riotous. All the apprehension left the room. Shelly was laughing hysterically. Wait, wait she said, let's get a group selfie. Everyone came into a tight group with their arms over each other's shoulders and clicked their phones. It was mayhem. Maria and Pepe started playing Felize Navidad. They were the only ones beside Rico who knew the Spanish lyrics but it didn't matter.

The afternoon was spent drinking coffee and sampling the pastries Bobby had brought to the party. Then came the supper. Rico pulled the turkey out of the oven with the golden brown potatoes sitting in the pan. He put it on a cutting board and started carving it. Bobby put the potatoes and vegetables on separate trays and placed them on the table. Everyone was called to have a seat. Shelly got one final picture of everyone and the food in front of them, then sat down.

I want to thank you all for coming here today and making this the best Christmas ever. Please dig in.

Supper was a success. It was everything Shelly hoped it would be. After everyone had more of the desert that Bobby had brought they began to say their goodbyes and leave. Naomie was the last one still hanging out. Rico was busy cleaning the dishes so Shelly escorted her down the to the street.

Are you ok Naomie? Shelly asked.

No I'm not Shelly. I'm afraid. I thought this day would make me want to meet my parents but how can it ever be as perfect as this?

She put her arms around Shelly and kissed her. I need you Shelly.

Shelly put her head on Naomie's shoulder and started talking.

I can't be with you like we were Naomie. I understand where you're at but I'm in deep with Rico and I can't jeopardize that. You understand don't you?

Does he know about us Shelly?

Yes he does. He knows about me and Bobby too. I told him everything. That's why I can't risk it. I'll never find another man like him.

Naomie did understand on one level but there was the emotional level that she was wrapped in right now.

She kissed Shelly again but Shelly backed away.

I can't Naomie....I just can't.

Naomie turned and walked away in tears. She just looked back at Shelly as if she was pleading.

Shelly went back into the building to be with Rico. She was torn. Why did the day have to end like this?

Rico was busy cleaning the kitchen and looked at Shelly.....

Is Naomie OK Shelly?

No, she isn't, she's a long ways from OK.

Shelly hugged Rico for a long time.

It was a perfect Christmas Rico. Thank you for everything. I'm a lucky girl.

Shelly peddled her 10 speed from Rico's place back to her own apartment. Yesterday was the best day in Shelly's life but even the best days are flawed. She thought of a Leonard Cohen song....there is a crack in everything....that's how the light gets in. She was worried about Naomie. If Rico wasn't in her life she wouldn't hesitate. She would sleep with Naomie again. She thought of what Hans had told her.....protect yourself. She had to make a choice...Rico or Naomie. She chose Rico. She would put distance between her and Naomie....not total alienation but she wouldn't call her for a while. Ultimately Naomie would have to figure things out for herself.

It was boxing day and still a holiday for most people. Traffic was heavy and Shelly was glad to get back to her place. Her mom was having a coffee and admiring the painting Shelly had done for her. Shelly wanted to talk about Naomie but was inhibited. Then she thought about all the sexual experiences Penny must have had and thought her own wouldn't really surprise her mom. She was right. Shelly started telling her about the books in the library, comforting and then making love with Naomie, and her relationship with Bobby. Penny wasn't fazed at all.

Thank you for confiding in me Shelly. I totally understand where you're coming from and I agree with what you are doing. It doesn't mean you don't love Naomie but you have to set boundaries. You can only do so much for someone before you become co-dependant. I see this all the time in my work. It's called detaching with love. Some of the women I deal with are more needy than Naomie is. I have to be careful I don't get drawn into their situations. Many of them have come on to me but I always keep my

distance. I must tell you though, I have had female lovers. In fact, since my pimp beat me up, I just don't trust men anymore. For me it's a survival thing. When I was using I had no boundaries. I would do anything for a fix. Now I think before I jump into bed with anyone.

Shelly felt better for having this talk. Now she was confident that she was making the right decision.

Shelly had a week off between Christmas and New Years. She spent her time doing yoga, hanging out with Rico and bringing her ten speed to the bike shop for repair. Tommy's bike shop was the place she would go whenever she needed repairs. The gears weren't working right so it was time for a pit stop. Tommy was an amiable fellow. He worked hard and always did a good job so his customers could get back on the road. On this particular day Shelly got a strong vibe from Tommy. It was happening all week whenever she encountered people. She could feel that Tommy was favouring his right leg. As soon as they said hello she asked him....

How's your knee doing Tommy?

Tommy was surprised.

How did you know my knee was sore Shelly?

I get these impressions from people. I'm guessing that so many years of kneeling down on hard floors to do your work are starting to take a toll on your body. You should really start elevating the bikes and work from a chair rather than the floor. There are some yoga stretches that would be helpful to you as well. I could show you if you want.

Tommy was impressed and took Shelly's advice. It helped ease the pain. Three weeks later he enrolled in her class.

Shelly was happy to see him taking care of himself. Her class had grown from 6 students to 20 and was full. Word of her empathic skills were spreading in town and she was becoming a popular teacher. As her reputation grew she started to get concerned about this power that was growing inside her. Sometimes it scared her. One of her students, Valerie, had chronic pain in her hips. Shelly's sense was that it came from abnormally rough sexual activity. She didn't know if she should say anything to her student so she kept quiet.....until the student approached her. It wasn't something Shelly wanted to talk about in front of the class so she made a private appointment with Valerie.

Valerie came by Shelly's apartment for her first meeting. There were now two comfortable chairs to sit in.

Shelly started talking. So here's what I do Valerie. I tell you the impressions I get from you. They may be right or they may be wrong. I am not a psychologist and aside from my yoga teachers certificate I don't have any formal education. If what I am saying resonates with you that's fine. If I'm way off base just tell me so.

Ok, Valerie said. What do you get from me?

At that instant Shelly felt like she could see Valerie's soul.

The pain in your hips is caused by rough sex. It hurts but at the same time you like it. You have

masochistic tendencies. You are gay and allow other women to dominate you, physically and emotionally. As much as you would like to have a balanced relationship with a woman you are afraid they will desert you so you subordinate yourself to them. The thing is that it seems normal for you because it has been going on for so long. If you don't change your mind set, all the yoga in the world is not going to help you. Stuff like this usually starts at a young age before puberty and then manifests itself in sexual behaviour in your later years. This is what I get from you.

Valerie could hardly speak and she was too tough to let herself cry.

You have hit every nerve I have Shelly. I know I'm a subordinate personality but I don't know how to change. I grew up in a physically abusive family. We were always getting hit by our parents. I started having sex when I was 16. First the boys I was with would be rough so I thought I would just be with women but they turned out to be even worse. Lesbians are a strange lot you know. When I realized I was gay I accepted it but I have yet to enjoy a normal, gentle relationship. I don't know what to do.

Shelly understood everything Valerie was saying. She remembered what it was like being with Janice and she was glad she got out of that relationship.

If I was a psychologist I probably wouldn't tell you what to do but I'm not so at this point I will give you advice. Stop having sex with anyone for a while. Get your body to a place where you have no pain. Think of your body having a peaceful relationship with your mind. If you can get to that point you will have room in your life for a lover but for now....just take super care of yourself.

Valerie seemed lighter. She was at a crossroads in her life and Shelly hoped she would chose the right direction.

How much do I owe you for this session? Valerie asked.

Shelly hadn't even thought about a fee but knew how much psychologists charge so she said....\$100.00

Valerie opened her purse and pulled out two 50 dollar bills.

Thank you Shelly. I'll probably do this again but I'll see you in yoga class for sure.

After Valerie left Shelly laid down. It drained her. She just watched her thoughts race by her mind as she drifted off into a nap. She woke up refreshed and \$100 richer. Now she had three jobs. Her savings were growing nicely. She had \$20,000.00 in the bank, no debt and began to think of owning a condo. She phoned Rico and offered to take him out for supper.

Rico met Shelly at Futaba, their favourite Japanese restaurant. Shelly was excited to tell him about her new part time job. Rico was impressed that someone would pay \$100 for an hour of Shelly's time. It was worth it. Shelly really did have a unique skill and it helped people in their own growth process.

If this continues do you think you'll quit your job at the library? He asked.

I don't know Shelly replied. This is just one client so far and I like working in the library. Ever since I was young I enjoyed being surrounded by books. I guess it's like a security blanket. It was where I

started to discover a world outside of the orphanage. I don't know. I like teaching yoga too so I guess I'll keep doing what I'm doing and save as much money as possible.

You actually have money saved? Rico asked.

Ya. I've had a bank account all my life and I just keep putting money in it whenever I can. It would be nice to own a condo one day.

Wow! Rico replied. I can't save anything on my wage. I'm lucky to get an employee's discount on my art supplies but even then I have nothing left over at the end of the month.

Well, that's why I'm buying supper tonight, Shelly joked.

They ordered their favourite dishes and basked in the glow of Shelly's success. The bill came to \$75 with the tip. Shelly scooped it off the table and paid with cash. It felt good to treat Rico.

It was yoga night and Shelly was instructing her class. Valerie was there and she had brought a friend, Rose. Shelly could tell Rose was having difficulty with the poses. She stood beside her and felt her problem.....she was struggling with a stiffness that might be observed as arthritis but Shelly felt it was something different.....she was unhappy in her work and her life. At the end of the class Valerie introduced Rose to Shelly.

This is my friend Shelly. I think she could use your help.

Hello Shelly. It's nice to meet you. I was wondering if I could make an appointment with you.

Sure Rose. How does Thursday evening after supper work for you?

That would be fine, I'll come to your place.

Rose arrived at Shelly's place and was impressed with it's simplicity. She sat down and Shelly looked at her.

I'll tell you the same thing I told Valerie Rose. I get impressions of people and I will tell you what I feel. I might be wrong. If you want me to stop at any time let me know. I get the feeling that you are very stiff in your joints. The doctors might have told you that you have arthritis but I feel it is something else. I think you are stifled in your work and your life. This is making your body unhappy. What kind of work do you do?

I do secretarial work in a lawyer's office. It is super serious and although I'm good at it but I don't like it. I don't like the people I work with and I'd like to leave but I'm afraid to leave without a plan B.

Do you have enough money to just take some time off and look for another direction? Shelly asked.

I could live for about three months on my savings but that's it.

So you're scared to jump into the unknown?

Yes....that's it exactly.

I'm not going to tell you that you should. Financial stress could make your life worse. However, staying in a toxic environment will never make you better. If you take a chance it could change everything for the better. Assess your skills and see if they are transferable to another kind of office work.....maybe something that isn't so intense, or maybe something completely different. Continue doing yoga. You will feel a change in your body as your life changes.....for better or worse.

Rose was just quiet. She knew Shelly was right. It was up to her to make some changes in her life and it wouldn't be easy. She wanted to meet new people and that wasn't going to happen in the lawyer's office.

Shelly let Rose be quiet with her thoughts and just observed and absorbed the vibes coming from Rose.

I like music Rose said. I would love to work in a music store.

So apply to every music store and see what happens. Keep your job for a while and look around for something you like doing and can get work at.....and keep coming to yoga classes.

That sounds like a plan B to me Shelly.

Rose pulled \$100 out of her purse and paid Shelly.

It was spring and a new yoga class had started and it was predictably full. Shelly began her class with the usual speech.....

Hello everyone and welcome to my yoga class. For those of you who don't know me I try to help people stay healthy and I can think of no better way than doing yoga. You may have heard that I get impressions from people. This is true. It is not however some magic trick or power. I simply feel things. I would never try to force anything on anyone. If you need extra help with a problem you can ask me and if I can help I will. I am not a miracle worker. I am just who I am and no different than any of you. Shall we begin then? Mountain pose.

Shelly was getting all sorts of vibes from her class. As she walked among them she just observed and absorbed everything. Towards the end of the class one of the male students asked if he could talk to her after the class was over, his name was Michael. After the class ended and people started leaving he approached Shelly.

Thank you for staying after class to talk to me Shelly. My name is Michael and I'm a doctor. I have heard of your intuitive skill and was wondering if you could help me with some of my patients. You see, I am trained in western medicine but I know it has its limits. Some of my patients are not responding to medication or treatments. I can only do what I know how to do so I am asking for your help.

This was something new for Shelly. She had never been approached by anyone in the medical profession before. It made her feel important.

I would be happy to assist you any way I can Michael. I guess you know I charge for my service and

my time.

Yes, I do. That is fine. I have a clinic with other doctors who have the same dilemma as I do. We would pay you from our collective resources. We feel your presence could be of great assistance to us and you could work from an office in our clinic. There would no overhead cost to you.

Ok Michael. Let me know when you need me. It would have to be on weekends or after my regular job hours at the library.

That's fine Shelly. I'll contact you in the next few days and set up an appointment with one of my patients.

Shelly was having her lunch break when her cell phone rang, it was Dr. Michael.

Hello Michael.

Hello Shelly. I was wondering if you could meet with a patient of mine. She is a young woman in her twenties and she is having back pains. Medication is not helping very much and she has a hard time sitting all day at her computer job. I think something else is going on with her but I haven't been able to help her beyond prescribing more painkillers.

I understand Shelly replied. I can meet her this Saturday in the morning if you like. Let's say 10am at your clinic?

That sounds great Shelly. Her name is Margo. I'll set up the appointment. Perhaps you can come in a little earlier and we can go over her case as well as discuss payment.

Ok Michael. I'll see you then.

Shelly arrived an hour early at Dr. Michael's clinic. He showed Shelly the room she would be working out of. It wasn't like a doctor's office. It had two comfortable cushion chairs, a small table with a note pad and clock and enough space for two people to do yoga or for a physio therapist to treat a patient.

This will be your space to work from Shelly. There are other practitioners who share this room. They also do body work with patients. As far as payment goes, I understand you charge \$100 an hour. This is fine and I will pay you personally. My patient can't afford this so I am covering her bill. The nature of the therapy you provide isn't recognized by the medical system so we can't rely on them to help in this situation. If you were a certified physio therapist or something of that nature it would be different. I believe in what you do so I'm willing to offer my patients your help.

Shelly took it all in before responding. I can see that you have a genuine concern for the health of your patients Michael. Some doctors might not be so caring. I get the sense that you yourself have experienced the power of empathy.

Yes I have Shelly. I wish I had that power but I don't. You see, my mother was like you. She helped many people when traditional medicine fell short. I think you can help Margo. I simply can't improve her situation with all my medical training and experience.

Ok Michael I'll just sit here and wait for Margo.

Shelly sat in the sparse room. She began to feel important again, like when she started teaching yoga. She wondered if she should become a certified medical practitioner. It would certainly open doors for her but she wasn't crazy about going to school, spending all her savings and ending up with a student loan. At that moment there was knock at the door. Come in Shelly said.

Margo quietly opened the door and walked in.

Hello Margo, my name is Shelly, please have a seat.

Margo had a noticeable slump in her posture. She didn't say a word. She just sat there with her hands together and looked down at her lap.

Michael has asked me to meet you. I must tell you that I am not a doctor. I simply get feelings from people. I also teach yoga.

When she mentioned the word yoga Margo perked up.

Shelly was getting strong feelings from Margo. Her guess was that she was sexually abused.

Can you tell me something about yourself?

Margo started talking about her job. I am a computer operator and handle billings for a large telephone company. I live alone and don't go out much because I have chronic back pain. Dr. Michael suggested I talk to you so here I am. I want to get better.

That's the first step Margo. If you want to be well you should be able to. I want to ask about your childhood.

I grew up in a very religious family. It was a bit fanatical and when I started living on my own I dropped out of the church.

Shelly was getting the picture. Margo I am getting a strong impression that some bad things happened to you in your church. If I'm right, just nod your head.

Margo turned red and just stared at Shelly....then she nodded as if to say yes.

This was a huge leap for Margo. She had never talked to anyone about this.

Shelly started to talk...I know how hard this is for you so I'm just going to say things and if I am on the right track you can just nod. If I'm not, just nod as if to say no.

Margo nodded Ok.

I am feeling that you were sexually abused by the pastor of your church. Am I getting the correct feeling?

Margo froze for a minute and then nodded.....yes.

I also feel that you haven't been able to talk about this to anyone.

Again, Margo nodded....yes.

These are huge steps for you Margo. If you want to talk about it with me you can. There are also support groups for survivors of sexual abuse. I am going to be quiet now. Take your time and you can say anything you want to.

Margo waited for a minute and then poured out all her fears and anger. The pastor had abused her and other children then told them not to tell anyone or they would go to hell. Her parents didn't know this. They trusted the pastor. After five minutes of unloading her story Margo collapsed in the chair. She had waited years to talk about this stuff and a huge burden was lifted off her shoulders. She felt lighter.

Shelly sat quiet and then started to talk. You were traumatized Margo. Physically, mentally and spiritually. This is why you have so much pain. I think it would be good to learn some yoga poses to help you get stronger physically. The mental and spiritual strength will follow. If you like I can show you a couple basic poses.

Margo nodded yes.

Shelly proceeded to show Margo some easy, tension releasing poses. Margo tried them and was able to get some release. She smiled at Shelly and said...thank you Shelly. I have never felt this safe with anyone. I would like to continue our sessions if you would be into helping me.

Of course I will Margo. Just set it up with Doctor Michael. We can do this again next Saturday if you like. Shelly stood by the door. Margo came up to her and gave her a big hug and started to cry. I'll see you next week Shelly.

After the session Shelly debriefed with Michael. Margo has had a major break through Michael. She was sexually abused and traumatized as a child. She wants to keep meeting with me so I'm willing to do so. If she works on herself I think she can get off painkillers.

Thank you Shelly. I thought it might be something like that but I wasn't able to reach her the way you did. I think we can help Margo have a better life. My secretary will cut you a check.

Michael, Shelly asked, you are paying me out of your own pocket. Why?

Michael looked sincerely at Shelly and said....I have been lucky in life. I had a good family, good childhood and now I make good money as a doctor. I have also inherited money from my parents who passed away. They were proud of me becoming a doctor and told me to keep helping people. This is one way I help others. I can see a bright career ahead of you if you stay on this path. You can also help others, but I think you know that.

Yes I do Michael. I think it would be a waste if I just ignored this skill I have. And who knows....this power just might not be there all my life so I will make good use of it while it is. I'm going to meet with Margo again next Saturday. We'll just go from there and see how she does.

Shelly was exhausted when she got home. She laid down and crashed for two hours. When she woke the cell phone was ringing, it was Rico.

Hy Rico. I'm a little groggy because I'm just waking up from a nap. The session this morning drained me.

Hy Shelly. Would you like to come over and hang out with me?

Sure. I'll pick up something for supper.

No need to Shelly. I have plenty of food for us.

Ok. I'll see you soon.

When Shelly arrived Rico was painting.

Do you want to paint with me?

No. Not right now. I want to make love with you.

Rico put his brush down and embraced Shelly.

I need you Rico. Every time I have a session like this morning it takes a lot out of me. Make love to me so I can be myself again.

Rico picked Shelly up in his arms and carried her to the bed. He slowly took her clothes off, caressing her as he moved over her body. Shelly was slipping into her their love. Lovemaking was beautiful with Rico. He wasn't a selfish lover. He made sure she had as much pleasure as he did. They both lost sense of time. Shelly left her mind behind and got totally into her body.....and Rico's as well. When it was over an hour had passed. Both were happily exhausted. They lay on the bed staring at the ceiling.

Shelly was back into her usual work routine. Library, yoga and now empathic healing. She was gaining more confidence all the time. This wasn't the case with Naomie. She still hadn't looked for her parents and although she had a steady job waitressing her emotions got the best of her. One evening she just showed up at Shelly's place and asked if they could talk. Shelly could feel all the pain Naomie was in. She gave her a hug and Naomie hugged her back, even stronger.

I need you Shelly. I can't open up to anyone else but you and I'm so lonely.

Shelly stared at Naomie. You know how much I love Rico she said. I just can't start having affairs. It would destroy what I have with Rico.

As she said that Naomie kissed her on the lips.

Shelly felt those same old feelings she had for Naomie when they were younger. She didn't want to cheat on Rico but this was also a part of her makeup. In that moment she wanted Naomie. She returned her kiss with more passion. The two women fell into each other's arms. Shelly thought she would feel guilty but she didn't. She was making love to one of her dearest friends just like they used to in the orphanage. Naomie screamed as she reached her orgasm and rolled away from Shelly. Shelly still had

an effect on Naomi that no one else had ever had. It made her feel very good. It was erotic healing.

Shelly lay back and wondered if she should or even could tell Rico. Now the guilt came over her. She had just come to a crossroad in her life. Naomi stayed the night but neither her nor Shelly talked a lot. They were a long way from describing this experience with words. They were two women getting what they needed and wanted from each other. It was simple really. It didn't need a narrative.

I have to go to work now Shelly said.

Naomi looked at Shelly and said....thankyou Shelly.

There were no plans to do it again or any small talk. Naomi picked up her things and left as quietly as she arrived. It was like a dream for both of them. Did that really happen?

Shelly returned to her busy work schedule. She couldn't get Naomi out of her mind and it was becoming harder to think of Rico. Confusion began to replace her clarity. She knew she couldn't keep this from Rico. He deserved honesty. She decided to call him on her lunch break.

Hi Rico, it's Shelly.

Hi Shelly, how are you.

I'm ok.

Just ok?

Well, I need to talk to you about something. Can I come over after work?

Sure. I'll prepare supper for us.

Ok. See you then.

Shelly spent the rest of the day thinking how she would break the news to Rico. She honestly loved him and he was a good man. He treated her so well. She didn't know if she could love two people at once.

When Shelly arrived at Rico's place she could smell supper cooking. She rang his door bell and he greeted her. He put his arms around her and gave her a big kiss, as he usually did. Shelly responded and felt the same feeling she did when she kissed Naomi. She wanted Rico now as well.

Supper's almost ready so why don't you sit down and have a coffee. Shelly sat at the table and looked around Rico's place. Her artwork hung beside his. His drawings of her hung beside the bed. It started to make her intensely sad. Tears started to come to her eyes. When Rico placed the plate of food in front of Shelly she lost it. The emotion and confusion were too much.

What's the matter Shelly? Rico asked.

I have something I have to tell you Rico. Last night Naomi came by my place and we.....we made

love.

Rico was shocked. He knew Shelly was bisexual but he thought their relationship was monogamous. He stared at his plate of food and started to pick at it. He had lost his appetite. Shelly started to eat her supper but she wasn't hungry either. She had ruined the wonderful meal that Rico had prepared and worse....she had ruined the bond they had.

I don't know what to say Shelly. I'm going to need some time to think about this. I never asked you to change anything about yourself and I never would but I have a hard time thinking of you in someone else's arms.

They slowly finished their supper. Shelly got up and just left without saying a word. She knew it would hurt Rico and it did. She felt like she was being drawn down a dangerous road. It was certainly uncharted territory. She was being pulled between her love for Rico and her love for Naomie. In that moment she realized she would have to choose one. It would be too much stress trying to juggle the two of them and that would not be healthy. The next day her decision was made for her. Rico phoned her and told her he was breaking off their relationship. He wasn't condemning Shelly because he understood her bisexuality. He simply was being honest with his own feelings. He wanted a monogamous relationship and would always be wondering what she was doing with another lover.

Shelly didn't know how she felt. She started feeling sorry for herself and wished she was heterosexual. This would solve the sex problem. At the same time she knew she was a good person so why should she feel guilty for anything? She was doing well in the life she was building. She was also helping other people stay healthy. It was simply going to be a rough time sorting things out. Now it was Shelly who needed Naomie.

At yoga class the next evening Shelly could feel chest pains that had never been there before. She knew they were coming from her inner turmoil. She was also less empathic towards her students. Her body and soul were going through a storm. She cut the class short that night saying that she wasn't feeling well. The students were understanding. On her way home she thought about calling Naomie but decided against it. She would be better off by herself.....at least for tonight.

When Shelly got home she called her mother and told her what had happened. Penny was supportive and non-judgmental. She could tell it was tearing her daughter apart. Her listening skills came in handy and for the first time in her life she felt she had something to give as a mother. She listened and gave herself. Shelly couldn't hold back her tears. She felt she had sabotaged her life.

Not your life Shelly, but certainly your relationship with Rico. In time you might still have a friendship but right now Rico is hurt.

I don't know what to do mamma. Tell me what I should do.

You should take care of yourself Shelly. Do your yoga and focus on yourself. You're a busy girl. Maybe you should lighten your work load. I will come over to see you if you want me to.

I would like that mamma. I will make a small bed for you and you can stay with me. It will be cheaper that way.

Ok Shelly. I'll be over in a couple days. I just have to finish my work week. I love you Shelly.

I love you mama.

Shelly felt some relief knowing her mother was coming to console her. It made her think of her father again. A normal child would have both parents to fall back on. At least she had her mom and that was something. She didn't know what to do with Naomie. Should she pursue a relationship with her or should she break it off before she got in too deep. All these questions and no answers. For now she would take her mom's advice and take care of herself. Things would work themselves out. Shelly spread her yoga mat out on the floor and started her routine. She could feel her body had tightened considerably. It would take some practice getting out of this tightness and back to her usual self. After ten minutes of practice the phone rang. It was Dr. Michael.

Hello Michael.

Hello Shelly. One of my patients is having a hard time with her health and I was wondering if you could see her this Saturday?

Shelly wasn't looking forward to solving other people's problems but she agreed to the appointment. She would have to force herself back into her usual busy routine.

OK Michael, she said. I am having some problems of my own so I don't know how effective I will be....but I'll try.

Thanks Shelly. My medicine doesn't seem to be working with this patient. Her name is Jenny and she is an older lady.

OK, I'll meet her on Saturday at 11am.

Thanks Shelly. Is there anything I can do to help you with your problem?

I don't know Michael. I just might book an appointment with you. I don't have a family doctor so if you want to take me on I guess I would appreciate it.

That's fine Shelly. Phone my secretary and book an appointment. I'll tell her you're calling.

Thanks Michael.

Shelly met her mother at the bus depot. As soon as she stepped off the bus Shelly ran to embrace her. It was like the first time they met. They couldn't let go of each other. After a good cry mother and daughter started laughing. That moment had brought them closer. Shelly took her mom's suitcase and they started walking. Her suite wasn't far away.

So, Penny said, you're having a hard time.

Yes I am mama. Everything was so perfect before I slept with Naomie but now Rico and I have split up and I'm afraid to get any closer to Naomie. I don't know what to do.

Are you still busy with your jobs?

Yes I am. As a matter of fact I'm going to see one of Dr. Michael's patients tomorrow morning. It will only take an hour so we will have plenty of time together. My job at the library is secure and I'm still teaching yoga. I think I have to give something up though. I find myself just wanting more peace and quiet. I like the yoga but it takes a lot of time and doesn't pay as well as the counselling I do for Dr. Michael. I think I might let that go.

Don't make any rash decisions right now Shelly. Give everything more time. You are young and strong. Things will work out and you don't have to rush anything.

The women arrived at Shelly's suite. Shelly put a pot of coffee on and Penny took a shower. She felt so proud of her daughter and she also felt proud to be her mother. Her presence was all Shelly needed. When she got out of the shower a cup of coffee was waiting for her. Just a little milk and sugar. Shelly had remembered how she liked it.

Thank you sweetie. They sat down at the small table and stared out the window.

I love coming over to Victoria Penny said. It's such a nice change from Vancouver.

How is your work going mama?

It's fine. Pretty much the same thing over and over with different clients. I've learned to detach with love. Some of my clients get their life together as I did but some just don't have the strength and fall even further down. I can't save everyone and I have managed to make a simple but pleasant life for myself.

Do you have any lovers mama?

No. I still prefer to be on my own. It's easier that way. I haven't been able to figure relationships out and I don't want to get into something that could ruin what I have. I feel that since I met you it has filled a void in my life and I'm grateful for that. I guess you could say you are my main squeeze.

Shelly laughed. Oh mama! That's so sweet.

Shelly looked down at her coffee. I am so confused about my sexuality mama. I'll never find another man like Rico. He treated me so well and we had so much fun together. And yet, I still have deep feelings for Naomie. We were so close in the orphanage. I just don't know anything right now.

Maybe you should try being alone for a while, Penny said. You don't have to do anything really. You have your work and that's plenty. Be gentle with yourself and watch yourself grow. You have given a lot to Naomie, Rico, your students and clients. Maybe it's time to give to yourself. Just see how it feels.

I like that mama. I'll give myself a break. I've made reservations at the restaurant where Bobby works. It's too far to walk so we can take a cab. It will be good to see him again.

The restaurant where Bobby worked was close to the inner harbour. Shelly had reserved a table with a clear view of the boats, planes and all the things that went on in the harbour. It was beautiful. The table had a clean white cloth covering it. Shelly knew the menu was pricey but she didn't care. She wanted the best for her mom. The waiter came over and asked if they would like to start with some drinks. They decided to have some white wine. The menu had seafood specials so they both decided to try a different plate. Shelly had the halibut and Penny had the salmon. They sipped their wine and enjoyed the scenery. When the food came Bobby was carrying one of the plates.

Who's having the salmon, he asked.

I am Penny said. It's nice to see you again Bobby.

Nice to see you too Penny. Are you here for a while?

Just a couple days. I'm staying with Shelly at her place.

How have you been Shelly? he asked.

I've had a rough week Bobby. Mom has come to keep me company.

I'm sorry Shelly. Maybe we can get together if you like. You have my number.

Thanks Bobby. I'll take you up on that.

Enjoy your meal, I cooked these dishes myself.

The first bites were incredible. This was fine dining at its finest.

Penny was enjoying every minute of her meal with Shelly. The guilt she used to feel about being a mother was being replaced with pride. Her Shelly was a smart young woman and she knew she would get over this crisis in her life. How lucky she was Penny thought. Her own youth was much different and filled with traumas of all kinds.

The waiter brought the bill and Shelly quickly grabbed it. This is on me mama. I know you would never be able to afford this kind of dining and I am doing OK with money.

Thank you Shelly. I thoroughly enjoyed this. It was more than just a meal.

We should go back to my place now mama. I have another appointment tomorrow morning and should get some sleep.

Shelly called another cab and the two women rode in luxury back to Shelly's suite. Shelly pulled out a single foamy mattress and neatly made a bed for her mom.

Here you go mama. It should be comfortable and if you need anything else help yourself. There are more blankets in the closet.

Thank you Shelly. This is perfect.

The two women hugged and gave each other a big goodnight kiss. Shelly went to bed feeling loved. Tomorrow would be another day and her mom would still be around to comfort her.

Shelly arrived at Dr. Michael's office early to get a heads up on her new client.

He's a young man in his early thirties Shelly. He is a jogger and has had trouble with his legs. All the tests we have done show nothing wrong and I don't want to prescribe pain killers at this point. His name is Richard. Here's his file.

Shelly took the file and went into her room to read it over. Thomas was a new case in many ways. She was already getting a sense that some psychological block was a factor. Physically he was in good shape.

Thomas arrived on time and entered Shelly's office.

Hello Richard, my name is Shelly.

Hello Shelly, you can call me Rick, most people do.

OK Rick. I have been looking over your file and I see you are having problems with your legs.

Yes. I was supposed to do a 10k marathon last week but on the day of the race I was having so much pain I dropped out of the competition.

Shelly was getting strong impressions from Rick.

How were your dreams the night before the race Rick?

Rick looked quite surprised at her question. He remembered his dreams vividly and even wrote them down.

I had a dream that I was winning the race but when I came to the finish line I simply froze and couldn't cross it.

Shelly saw his dream in her head. Her sense told her someone was watching him. Someone who Rick had a problem with.

Do you remember who was in your dream?

My father was watching me but wasn't really cheering me on. He just looked vacantly at me.

How is your relationship with your father?

Rick looked down at the floor. We haven't talked in years.

Why is that Rick.

We had a big argument five years ago. He left my mother for a younger woman. My sister and I were grown up but it affected my mother more and she hasn't recovered since. She has a hard time with things.

If your father was here and you could say anything to him, what would you say?

Rick's face began to flush with anger.

I would tell him what an ungrateful ass hole he was. We were never good enough for him....like he was some super being and we were just peasants. He was always into big business until he went bankrupt. Always playing the big shot. Never spending time with his family. You stupid piece of shit. You had a beautiful wife and family. Why couldn't you just be happy with that?

Rick was holding back the tears.

It's OK Rick. Let the tears out. It will cleanse your soul.

Rick broke down. He couldn't hold his anger in any longer.

Shelly let Rick take his time and get his anger out. She felt a rush of confidence knowing that she still had her empathic power. With her own turmoil she didn't know if she could help anyone. Now she knew she could. Rick slowly looked up at her without saying a word.

Do you have a psychologist? Naomie asked.

No I don't.

I think you should find one you like and start getting some help with your father issues. I'm pretty sure once you get a grip on that you will be able to run again. I am not a trained counsellor so I think it's better for you to find a professional.

I think so too, Rick said. I knew I had issues with my father but I didn't realize until now how deep they went.

Then you've taken a step in the right direction Rick. If you feel you need to see me again contact Dr. Michael's office and I would be happy to help you if I can.

Thanks Shelly. I'll see how it goes.

Rick left and Shelly just sat back in her chair. It was exhausting. When she got back home Penny was waiting for her.

Mama I have to have a nap. These sessions really take it out of me.

OK sweetie. Maybe I'll head down to the inner harbour for a while.

Penny enjoyed walking in downtown Victoria. She never got tired of the iconic landmarks. She used to fantasize about taking a sail boat around the world. It was an adventure that never even came close to happening. Like so many of her fantasies. Having Shelly in her life made up for all those lost adventures though. She was blessed with a smart and beautiful daughter. She knew Shelly would be successful in her life. Her concern was that she found a comfortable zone for her sexuality.

It was mid afternoon and Penny arrived back at Shelly's suite. She could smell coffee from outside her door.

Hy mama. Would you like a coffee?

Yes, thank you sweetie.

How was your walk?

It was great. I love this city.

Just as Shelly was about to suggest they go see a movie the phone rang. It was Bobby.

Hy Shelly. If you and your mom haven't already made plans for your evening I was wondering if you would like to come over for supper. I know your mom probably won't be staying too long in Victoria so I thought it would be nice to spend some time with both of you.

Oh that's nice Bobby. I was thinking of a movie but we haven't made any plans. I'll ask mom. Mom.....Bobby has invited us for supper, would you like to go there?

Sounds great Shelly. I would like that.

OK Bobby, you're on. Can we bring anything?

No Shelly, it's my treat. I'm going to surprise you. Come over around 6:30.

OK Bobby, see you then.

Shelly and Penny took a cab to Bobby's place. It was on the other side of town. Shelly could see her mom was enjoying the ride and the visit. She knew her mom had no savings and a simple thing like a cab ride was a luxury. They sat quietly in the back seat staring out the window.....and at each other. They had bonded and were enjoying the comfortable silence that doesn't need conversation.

Bobby lived in a tall apartment building. When they arrived they called him on the intercom.

Hy guys. Come on in.

The women entered the building and took the elevator to 401. Bobby was standing outside his door waiting for them. He gave them both a big hug. You remember Maryanne my girlfriend.

Everyone exchanged greetings and Bobby invited them to sit in the living room while he prepared supper.

Can I get you a drink? Maryanne asked.

I'll have a glass of wine Penny said.

Me too, Shelly added.

Bobby piped in. We're having a chicken, pasta dish so can I recommend red wine?

Sounds great Shelly said.

Maryanne brought the drinks and joined the women.

What is your line of work Maryanne? Shelly asked.

I'm a nurse. I work at the Royal Jubilee hospital.

That must be demanding. Penny said.

It is but I enjoy it. I'm pretty much on one general ward and it's not as intense as some other parts of the hospital. The people I take care of have just come out of surgery so they are pretty sedated. I monitor their vital signs and help them slowly get mobile again.

At that moment Bobby came in with a tray of heur deuvres. Here's something to start with. Devilled eggs, crackers with cream cheese and shrimp and some olives. Dig in girls.

The taste was fantastic.

Do you eat like this all the time Maryanne? Shelly asked.

I'm afraid so. Bobby even makes my lunches and the rest of the staff is quite jealous. Most of them just get the cafeteria food so it's nothing like this. I must admit it's easy to get used to. When I feel I'm starting to lose energy at work I just go into my lunch pail and there's something nutritious to pick me up. Plus the thought of him making it for me helps me get through the day.

Bobby stooped over and gave her a kiss.

Supper is almost ready so why don't you have a seat and I'll serve.

The main dish is penne with a chicken/alfredo/mushroom sauce. These are your salads and here's some warm bread and butter. We're not religious so I will just say it's great to have you in our home. Please start.

The first bites were incredible. Penny looked at Shelly and rolled her eyes with enjoyment. Wow Bobby. Unbelievable. Is this one of your dishes from your restaurant?

As a matter of fact it is. I created all the dishes actually. They have given me full control of the kitchen and the menu. I have done a lot of line cooking but this is special. It's much more satisfying.

Have you thought of your own restaurant? Penny asked.

I have thought of it but it's way too risky at this point. I like the security of a steady check and I couldn't find another boss that treats me this good. Maybe some day but right now I just save as much money as I can and enjoy my life. Plus, Maryanne and I are thinking of getting married and having a family. That is more appealing to me than owning my own business.

Shelly was looking at Bobby then at Maryanne then back to Bobby. They were really in love and both wanted the same thing. I'm so happy for both of you, Shelly said as she kept devouring her meal.

Bobby tells me you have empathic skills Maryanne said.

Yes. I do. I just saw a client today and that's why I am so hungry. I like the work and I like helping people but it is quite draining. I usually have to nap after a session.

I'm very interested in what you do Shelly, said Maryanne. I know you either have that power or you don'tand I don't....but I often get the sense with my patients that they could use your kind of help.

Well, I get all my referrals from a medical doctor so it kind of protects me. I think I would run into problems with the health care system because there simply isn't any certification for what I do. It's not like yoga. I studied the teachers' training and passed their test so I am officially certified. That makes a difference. The last thing I want is a hassle with the health bureaucracy. It seems like a lot sometimes. I'm busy with three jobs. It's OK though. I am saving money maybe I'll buy myself a condo one day. Who knows?

Bobby stared at Penny. He had met his own mother and that was going well. Would you like more wine Penny?

No thanks Bobby. I'm fine for now.

A comfortable quiet came over the table and everyone finished their food.

I've got desert if anyone wants it now, or we can wait a bit.

Shelly was still hungry so she said...I'll have mine now please.

Anyone else?

The other women nodded their head to say no. Maybe later Penny quipped.

Bobby took the dishes and put them in the sink. He returned with a large piece of blueberry pie and butterscotch ripple ice cream. Shelly attacked it. Now I'm full she said.

You really were hungry, Bobby said. Let's sit in the living room and I'll make some cappuccinos.

The women sat down on the sofa and love seat. Bobby had a one bedroom apartment and spent some money on making it comfortable. Shelly began to think of getting a bigger place to live. She had been in the same bachelor suite for nine years and thought it might be time to buy a condo. She had \$60,000.00 saved and that would be more than enough for the down payment.

Bobby brought cappuccinos for everyone and blueberry pie for all but Shelly.

This has been such a fantastic supper, Penny said. I am starting to feel spoiled.

Well, Bobby replied, it's what I do best and it's a nice way to entertain. My mother and I have been getting together fairly often and it's cheaper to make a nice meal than to go out for supper.

What does you mother do Bobby?

She's a writer. She does commercial copy for magazines and has published three books. They don't make a lot of money but her other writing makes enough to survive and she's been working in a lawyers office for a long time. She lives alone like you Penny. In fact, I think I'm the only one in my immediate circle of friends who actually has a partner I live with. I don't know why that is but it must have something to do with the fact that we grew up in the orphanage. Until I met Maryanne I thought I would be on my own forever and was starting to get used to it. But we are happy and if things go well we'll have kids of our own. What about you Shelly? Do you want kids?

Shelly hadn't even given that topic any thought until now.

I don't know Bobby. I didn't even think about it when I was with Rico and now that I'm on my own I don't see how I could. I guess it would be nice but I have a lot of things I would like to do first.....like get my head together for starters.

Everyone broke into laughter. Shelly didn't mean it to be funny but it came out that way.

Maryanne piped in. You have so many things on the go Shelly. I don't think I could handle as many responsibilities. When I come home from work I just want to relax. I can't imagine going out to teach a yoga class or doing your empath work. It would just wear me out.

It's not too bad so far and it helps me save money. I make \$100 an hour with the empath work and I could never make anything near that with my other jobs. Plus I want to keep doing it while I have the power. It could just not be there one day.

Penny looked at her watch. I think we should be moving along Shelly. I want to catch an early ferry tomorrow.

Ya. It's getting late mama.

I'll give you a ride home Maryanne said. I know it's a long ways.

Thanks Maryanne. That's kind of you.

Everyone exchanged hugs and said they would get together again. Bobby had really made a wonderful evening for everyone.

When they arrived home Shelly made their beds. They were close together on the floor. It was almost like they were sleeping in the same bed. They lied down and couldn't stop talking. It was the same warm feeling Shelly would get when she slept with Naomie and Bobby in the orphanage.

Mama, Shelly asked, will you hold me.

Come her sweetie. Lie in mama's arms.

Shelly snuggled up to her mother for the first time. It was so intimate it was almost scary. Mother and daughter uniting and strengthening their bond. They stopped talking and Shelly fell asleep in Penny's arms.

Shelly woke up to the sound of the shower running and the smell of coffee. Penny had got an early start on the day. Shelly rolled up her mom's bed and stashed it in the closet then scrambled some eggs, made toast and put some fruit on the table. The two women had a quick breakfast and Penny caught a cab to the bus station. It had been a perfect weekend. Shelly went to her job at the library feeling refreshed. She decided that morning she would buy a condo. That would be her focus in life for now, no boyfriends....no girlfriends....just herself.

Real estate wasn't cheap in Victoria. Shelly used the library computer to check out prices. She wanted to find something close to work so that meant she would have to pay a little more for a place downtown. She had lived in her bachelor suite for nine years. It served her well but now it was time to move on. She wanted a place that faced south and west so she would see the sun all day long. A one bedroom would give her space to continue her painting. This made her think of Rico. Just focus on your condo she told herself. Thinking of her lovers would only confuse her. On her lunch break she phoned a realty company and asked to speak to an agent.

Daniel Horton had been selling real estate for two years. He was new to the profession but sounded very courteous, not pushy. After introducing themselves they agreed it would be best to meet and go over Shelly's plan in person. After work they met for a coffee at the Java Joint near the library.

Shelly was impressed to see Daniel waiting for her. They shook hands and Shelly sat down. She immediately got a strong vibe from him. It was a positive impression. She would keep these feelings to herself for now but she also felt attracted to him. Just keep it business she thought.

After explaining what she wanted Daniel said he would put a list together of places that were on the market and she could chose which ones she wanted to look at. He told her it might be hard to get everything she wanted in her budget but he would try. Shelly was becoming more attracted to him. He was well dressed, well mannered and intelligent. They had a second cup of coffee and started to talk about other things. He was a wind surfer. That explained the tanned skin. He was a couple years older than Shelly and seemed to be very committed to his profession. Shelly told him about her yoga classes and library work but not her empathic work. She didn't want to scare him off. The two finished their coffees, shook hands again and went their own way. Shelly felt good about Daniel.

Later that night Shelly's phone rang. She thought it would be Daniel but it was Naomie.

Hy Shelly.

Hy Naomie, how are you.

Not too bad, she said in a quiet tone. I was wondering if we could get together?

This was Shelly's test. She immediately said....no Naomie, we can't. I love you and I don't want to hurt you but I'm dealing with my own stuff right now. I need to be by myself and focus on my own life with no distractions. Rico and I have split up. He couldn't handle my bi-sexuality and I understand that. It's still a big loss though. My mom came over last weekend and stayed with me. That was comforting.

But I don't have anyone else in my life but you Shelly. I'm not as smart as you and I'm just stuck in this waitressing job going nowhere.

Please don't try to make me feel guilty Naomie. You are smart and you can do anything you want. Take some courses and upgrade your skills. I'm not strong enough to carry you.

There was quiet. Then Naomie started to cry. It wrenched Shelly's heart. It brought her back to the days in the orphanage when she would hold Naomie in her arms until she fell asleep. Shelly knew she had to be strong for her own survival. Naomie just wasn't strong enough to be on her own. Shelly had to cut the chord.

I have to go now Naomie. Maybe it's time you tried to find your parents. That could help you.

Naomie just hung up. She was out of words and overcome with sadness. Shelly stared out her window and tried not to cry but couldn't hold back the tears. She was alone again like she had been all her life. At least she had security and confidence, more than Naomie she thought. She went back to her plan to stay busy and focus on her new condo. It was getting late but she decided to go for a ride on her bike. That always cleared her mind and made her feel good. She headed down to Dallas road. The mountains were starting to light up from the setting sun. The ocean became darker as the stars began to poke out of their hiding place. Another day was coming to an end. She pedalled harder on her way back home so she would be tired. When she got home she had a quick shower and collapsed. She slept through the night and woke up to the alarm clock.

It was turning into a very busy week. When Shelly arrived at work her boss, Wanda, called her into her office.

Sit down Shelly. Don't be alarmed everything is OK in fact we like your work. We would like to see you doing more public relations with the community and start some new children's programs.

Shelly was pleasantly surprised.

You have been working on the front desk for ten years now. A position is coming up that would get you into your own office and also it would involve a little more responsibility.....and your salary would increase by 15%. That would bring your yearly income up to \$60,000.00.

Wow! Shelly said. I wasn't expecting anything like this.

You can think about it if you want. We don't need an answer until the end of the week.

I can give you my answer now Wanda. It's YES. I am looking to buy a condo and this promotion

couldn't come at a better time. When can I start?

You could officially start next week but there will be a lot of meetings with the board of directors. You will probably have to brush up on some computer skills but we can set you up with an instructor for that. Your office is vacant now so I can show it to you if you like.

Wanda led Shelly to the back of the library to a small room with one window looking onto the courtyard. It had a work station with a computer, a land phone and several empty shelves. It was about 150 square feet. It was much nicer than a cubical. Not bad Shelly thought. My own office! She began thinking of putting her paintings on the walls. This would be her little corner of the world.

It's perfect Shelly said as she walked around. Wanda just looked at her absorbing her new digs.

What we have in mind is for you to get some programs going for children, especially those who live in the orphanage. We know that was where you grew up and thought you would have a special connection to those children.

I do Wanda. I would love to show them the world of books and the importance of reading. It was my biggest pass time when I lived there. It was an escape of sorts but it was also good for the imagination. I still love books.

OK then, I'll let the board know you have accepted the job and we will start our meetings as soon as possible. You can settle in here and get familiar with the computer. Good luck.

Thanks Wanda, thank you very much.

Shelly immediately sat down to the computer and started transferring her email contacts from her phone. When she came to Daniel's name she paused. He would be the first person she let know about her promotion. The email read.....got a promotion and an office. How's the search going on your end? Within minutes Daniel replied with three condos he thought would be suitable for her. They were all close to the library so she would only have a short bike ride or walk to work. Shelly replied and picked one that was about \$350,000.00. It had south and west exposure. Daniel set up a viewing for just after she finished work and met her at the location.

It's a newer building so the rooms are smaller Shelly. The older condos are larger but there are a lot of problems with rain leaks and some need remediation. Let's go up and take a look.

It was on the seventh floor of a ten story high rise. Lucky number Shelly thought. The entrance was bright and the elevator had glass walls so you could see the mechanisms. That would take some getting used to she thought. Daniel opened the door and let Shelly walk in first. She immediately went to the window. The view of the mountains was fabulous. She turned around and walked into the bedroom. She could put a queen size bed in and still have ample walking room. The closet was larger than she needed but that was OK. She would utilize every square inch. The kitchen opened up to the living room with no wall between the rooms. Just as well she thought, doors just get in the way. She turned to Daniel and said.....I like it. Put in an offer and let's see what they say.

OK Daniel said. I'll offer 310 and we could probably get it for 335. I'll do my best. It is vacant so you could take possession as soon as we get the paper work done.

Shelly went home, had a quick bite to eat and headed out for her yoga class. She was feeling energized. Her students were mulling around the room when she arrived.

Good evening everyone. It's nice to see you. We'll start with mountain pose. If anyone has any physical problems let me know and I'll help you.

The class began and Shelly went from librarian mode to yoga teacher mode. She enjoyed yoga more than anything. Her tightness had gone. She was back to normal. As the students got into their poses she walked among them, correcting here, balancing there and reminding everyone not to hold their breath but to breath.....the most important thing. The class came to an end and everyone slowly left the room. Shelly stood by herself feeling she had accomplished something wonderful. It was in her nature to help people and that what she was doing. She took her time going home savouring the smell of the ocean and the crisp autumn air.

When she arrived home she did her end of the day ritual, light snack, shower and off to her cot. She would buy a captain's bed for her new place. It was hard to believe that she had spent ten years in this suite. All things considered, it was a good chapter in her life. She stared at her artwork and the drawing that Rico did of her. It was still difficult to get him out of her head. She realized she couldn't have it both ways. It was going to have to be a man or a woman lover. Right now she had neither so it didn't matter.

Daniel called soon after Shelly woke up. Good news Shelly, they accepted the offer. I thought they would counter offer but they are in a hurry to sell. I'll put the paper work together and get the lawyer to finalize everything. Congratulations....you are a home owner.

That's terrific Daniel. I'm heading off to work soon so just contact me when everything is finalized and you need my signature.

Shelly sat in her new office. She looked at the painting she did as it hung on the wall. It was her attempt at impressionism. She liked how the soft pastel colours blended together. She thought about doing another painting in her new condo but didn't have a concept in mind. That's OK she thought. I'll just wait until I'm inspired. There was a knock at her door.

Come in, she said.

It was Wanda.

There's a meeting with the director of the library in 10 minutes Shelly. It's in the conference room.

OK. I'll be there.

David Peterson was the top dog at the library. He initiated new programs and handled the application process for government funding.

Welcome everyone. My first order of business is to congratulate Shelly Duval on her promotion.

Everyone gave her a polite round of applause.

Have you had any ideas for new programs Shelly.

As a matter of fact I have David. I think it would be good to start reading stories to the children of the orphanage. We could make it a field trip event for them and bring them down here so they can see what a big library looks like.

I like that idea Shelly. Will you put a proposal together and a list of things that need to be done to make that happen?

I will get on it today David.

Good then. Now onto more business.

David continued to get into the business side of the library.....budgets, changes and other things that were quite boring to listen to but Shelly paid attention. Some day she could be doing David's job. It would be good to learn all she could from him. An hour passed and the meeting was over. Shelly needed a coffee. Her and Wanda stepped out for a quick coffee from Fred's. A small shop near the library. They were both regulars so Fred knew what they wanted.

Two usuals girls?

Yes. Thanks Fred.

They sat down at the small table in the back of the shop.

So what did you think of your first meeting Shelly?

It wasn't too bad. I think David is all business but that's OK. Someone has to do that stuff. It must get tedious for him. I'm glad he gave me a green light to get some programs going. I'm going to contact the head of the orphanage today and see what I can do.

What did you have in mind Shelly?

Well, I would like to get some readings going for the kids. I'm thinking of one for every season....find some appropriate stories and have an older, grandmother kind of personality do the reading. Then video record it and put it in their library so it can be accessed all year round.

Wow. That's brilliant Shelly.

Thanks Wanda. Christmas isn't far away so that will be the first one.....then Easter and spring etc.

The coffees came and the women savoured the few minutes they had before going back to work.

When Shelly got back to the office she immediately called Hans.

Hello Hans it's Shelly Duval.

Hello Shelly, how are you?

I'm doing very well.....in fact I just got a promotion. I am in charge of initiating some new programs for the library, which is why I am calling. I have also bought a condo but it isn't finalized yet.

Shelly proceeded to tell Hans of her plans for the kids' programs.

It sounds terrific Shelly. The children would love that.

I need to find an older woman to do the reading. Can you help me with that?

I think I might be able to Shelly. I'll ask my wife. I'm sure she will say yes but let me get back to you.

OK Hans.

I am very happy for you Shelly and I am also very proud of you. It seems like you have a good life.

Yes I do Hans. Thank you for all you have done for me. I'll wait for you to call me back.

Shelly knew Hans would be obliging. He was always such an easy man to talk to. If she needed a father figure he was her first choice.

Daniel called just as Shelly was leaving work.

Hi Shelly. I've got everything lined up at the lawyers office. If you can meet me there we can sign all the papers. It's not far from the library.

OK Daniel. I'll see you there in twenty minutes.

She got on her bike and sped over to the lawyers office. Daniel was there waiting.

Hi Shelly. This is Alisa Rockworth. She handles all my deals.

Hello Shelly. You must be very excited I understand this is your first home purchase.

Shelly got a strong vibe from Alisa when they shook hands. She could tell something was wrong with her but kept focused on the business at hand.

Yes I am Alisa. It will be nice to have more space.

We've prepared all the papers, just sign where the Xs are.

It seemed all too easy. In a minute the papers were signed and Shelly was officially a home owner.

Here's the keys Shelly. You can start moving in whenever you like. There is an underground parking spot but I know you don't have a car.

Right now I don't but you never know. I think I'll just lock my bike up there for now.

Everyone shook hands and Shelly. Shelly went home, picked up the coffee machine and some kitchen things and headed to her condo. When she arrived she looked at all the space she had. Her painting easel would go right by the window so she could work with natural light. She would order her bed tomorrow and get a carpet for the living room. A couple more small tables for her lap top and some comfortable chairs would work nicely. She decided to get a fold out couch so when her mother came to visit she would have a comfortable bed. She stepped out on to the small balcony and looked at the mountains. Well done Shelly Duval, she said to herself, well done.

It would take several weeks to get settled after she gave her notice at the apartment. Every day she brought a few more things to the condo and started having her supper there. She looked forward to having supper parties. Bobby and Maryanne were first on her list. The new bed and furniture arrived and in four weeks Shelly was living in her new place. It was everything she had hoped for. She spent a little more on furniture than planned but after all the dust settled she still had \$17,000.00 in the bank. With her new raise she figured she could save \$500.00 a month. Her bank account would continue to grow. Daniel crossed her mind several times. She didn't know if she wanted to get into a relationship with him but she certainly gave it a lot of thought. They had seen each other a couple times since the condo deal closed. He was a kite surfer. That was exciting. She had bought a small video camera and went down to the ocean to take some footage of him. He literally flew over the waves. Video was a new hobby for Shelly. She would put the footage on the computer and edit it with some music in the background. This would be good for yoga she thought. She began to build a web site with her art work, yoga demonstrations and videos. One evening while doing some editing Alisa called her.

Hello Shelly. It's Alisa.

Hello Alisa, how are you.

Well....I've been better. I'm having some problems with my back. I heard from a friend who takes your yoga class that you have certain empathic skills. I see a physio therapist but it doesn't seem to be helping me much. I was wondering if I could book an appointment with you and see what you think about my situation.

Certainly Alisa. I felt a strong vibe from you the first time we met but I didn't think it was appropriate to say anything. We can meet at my condo if you like.

That would be fine. How about Thursday after supper?

OK. I'll see you then Alisa.

That Thursday Alisa arrived at Shelly's condo. Shelly had already made a pot of tea and invited Alisa to sit in one of the comfortable sofa chairs.

So tell me about your back pain Alisa.

Well, I spend too much time at the computer....I know that but I try to exercise regularly to compensate. It doesn't seem to be working though.

Shelly was reading Alisa as she spoke.

Do you live alone or do you have a partner?

I have a partner....a lesbian partner.

Tell me about her Alisa.

Well.....she is kind of a sloth to be honest. She works part time here and there but never makes enough money to contribute to the household costs. I make good money so we aren't hurting but I feel like I am carrying her in every other way as well. She smokes and drinks. Whenever we talk about that it ends up in an argument. I feel like the relationship has come to an end but I'm not strong enough to end it.

And you're not strong enough to keep going on like this either Alisa. Your back is telling you that.

Alisa started to weep. I don't know what to do Shelly. I don't want to kick her out but I can't keep going like this. What should I do.

At this point Shelly gave her usual little speech.

I'm not a clinical councillor Alisa so I don't like to give advice. I will give you the impression I get from your situation. Something has to change. Your partner doesn't seem like she is planning on changing her life style. You will continue to have pain as long as you keep carrying more than your personality can handle. Normal exercise should compensate for the time you spend on the computer but there is no joy in your life so you have all this pain. The decision is yours and it's not an easy one.

You're a pretty straight shooter Shelly. I have had all these thoughts already but having you vocalize them makes me more aware of it. I've been squashing them.....until now.

Would you like some more tea Alisa?

Yes, thank you.

I don't usually tell my story to clients but in this case I think it will help you. I am bisexual and have recently broken up with my boy friend, because I chose to sleep with a woman. I was torn on many different fronts. Now I am on my own and trying to get my life on track without a relationship. I think it's working. The fear of loneliness is big in my life. I was raised in an orphanage and only in the last year have I found my mother. I am not even going to try and find my father. My mother and I are building a nice relationship and that is enough for me. I don't know where my empathic skills come from but I've learned to listen to them. Does what I say make sense?

Yes it does Shelly. I'm going to have to kick my girlfriend out. I know that. It won't be easy but I know I have to do it.

One thing I have learned Alisa is that putting my own well being at the top of my priority list is not selfish. It is a survival instinct. Sometimes the line between love and dependence gets blurred. I am certainly not a relationship councillor but these are the impressions I get from you. If you need me again you have my number.

Thanks Shelly. By the way, it's a beautiful condo. You've decorated it nicely. It is a comfortable environment.

Alisa paid Shelly and was on her way. As usual Shelly was exhausted. She went to bed early and slept right through to the next morning.

On her way to work the next morning Shelly couldn't stop thinking about Daniel. He was a handsome man and she was attracted to him. She decided to come onto him.....tactfully. She would ask if she could take him out for supper. When she arrived at her office she called him.

Hello Daniel it's Shelly. I was wondering if you would like to go out for supper....my treat. It's my way of thanking you for your work on the condo deal.

That would be very nice Shelly.

You can chose any restaurant you like.

OK. How about the Keg?

That's fine. Does Friday evening work for you?

Friday is fine Shelly.

OK. I'll make reservations. Do you want to pick me up at my place around 7:00?

Sounds good Shelly, I'll see you then.

Shelly was excited for the rest of the week. She wanted someone to love. She didn't know if she would tell him about her sexuality or not. Right now she just wanted a man and Daniel was her choice.

Daniel arrived on time and driving his 1968 mustang. Shelly didn't know anything about vintage cars but this one sure looked sporty.

Nice car, Shelly said.

Thanks Shelly. My father gave it to me when I passed my real estate exams. He said it would be good for my image. I love old cars but I couldn't afford one like this right now. I'm doing OK with real estate but I am trying to save my money to buy a condo like you. I think you're a little ahead of me in the finance department.

Well, I've been working and saving since I was sixteen. I work a couple jobs and don't own a car so that saves a lot of money.

They had the windows all rolled down and the sweet salt air was blowing Shelly's hair all over the place. It felt good. Shelly was enjoying the ride. Daniel had a good stereo and Hotel California was playing. They smiled at each other and Shelly felt like she knew him for a long time. When they arrived at the Keg they rolled the windows up and got out of the car. Daniel held the entrance door open for

Shelly. He's a gentleman she thought. A waitress met them at the door and escorted them to their table.

Would you like some drinks to start? She asked.

Shelly wasn't much of a drinker but tonight she would have some wine. Daniel suggested they get a half litre and split it. He was driving so he wouldn't have much.

So tell me about yourself Shelly. Other than your work I really don't know much about you.

Shelly felt a bit of anxiety having to talk about her childhood. She knew Daniel probably had a normal upbringing. She took a deep breath and told her story about the orphanage and how she only recently met her mother. She talked about her love of books and how that led to her job at the library. She didn't plan to make yoga a career but she was happy she did. She liked it very much and the extra money helped her buy her condo. She held back the part about her being empathic. That could come later.

The waitress came and took their order. Shelly had the halibut and Daniel had the steak. High protein Shelly thought. He would need that if he was a kite surfer.

So what was your life like up until now Daniel?

Well, I have an older brother who has been working in Fort MacMurray for a long time. He makes real good money. My mom and dad are both government workers and are getting close to retiring. They were sports enthusiasts so my brother Ernie and I were always going on hiking trips and playing sports.

Shelly got a feeling from Daniel at this point. He had a sports injury and had to quit playing hockey.

I loved hockey but I got injured so I had to pick a gentler sport. I cycle a lot and of course I kite surf. I feel so good doing that sport. It is not a contact sport and as long as you're in shape you won't get injured.

But neither of those are competitive are they? Shelly asked.

No. I don't care to be better than anyone at anything. I just do it for my own pleasure. I guess you could say it's like your yoga.

Ya. I get that. I was never into competing myself. I understand other people doing it but it's not for me.

The waitress brought their dinners.

Looks great, Daniel said. He raised his glass and they toasted to good times.

Shelly loved eating in restaurants. She remembered all the meals at the orphanage. It was a time when she felt some sadness knowing normal families would be sitting around their tables doing what normal families do. Restaurants always had different people sitting around her and she felt comfortable in the presence of strangers. It took her away from that little sadness.

This is great Daniel said. How is your halibut?

It's great too Daniel. I am enjoying everything.

Daniel looked at her and for the first time he felt an attraction.

You enjoy life don't you Shelly?

Yes I do. I made a decision to do that when I was younger. Some of my friends in the orphanage had a hard time accepting their childhood and it was difficult for them to live with the stigma of not having a family. That's understandable but I chose to fill my life with things I like doing....reading, cycling, yoga and other stuff that just kept me physically active.

Have you ever thought of kite surfing?

I don't think I'm strong enough for that, plus, I don't know how to swim. But I would love to take a video of you surfing.

That would be fun. I've never seen myself surf.

Shelly finished the last bites of her meal. They decided to have some cheese cake for desert. It was a perfect meal. The waitress brought the bill and Shelly quickly grabbed it.

This is my treat.

They left the restaurant and Daniel asked if Shelly would like to go for a ride. He drove down Dallas road and showed her where he kite surfed.

The wind has to be strong he said. When it is there is no greater feeling of being connected to nature. I'm just pulled over the waves. It's easy to get lost in the moment.

Shelly observed a peaceful feeling come over Daniel. She was more attracted to him every minute. As they were driving she put her hand on his shoulder and smiled. Daniel returned the smile and put his hand in hers. They drove for half an hour and ended up back at Shelly's condo.

Would you like to come in for a coffee Daniel?

Sure he said. When they got into the kitchen Shelly started to make coffee. Daniel put his arms around her from behind.

I don't really want a coffee Shelly.....I want you.

Shelly turned around and kissed him passionately on the lips.

Let's take a shower together Daniel.

They took their clothes off and walked to the bathroom. Shelly ran the shower and Daniel jumped in beside her. It was more silly fun than romantic. Both embraced under the stream of hot water. Shelly lathered Daniel down and enjoyed feeling his body. He was in very good shape. Daniel took the soap and rubbed it over Shelly's body. The more they played the more they got turned on. They rinsed all the soap off their bodies and stepped out of the shower. Daniel took a towel and dried Shelly then she did the same. They walked to the new bed Shelly had made. Shelly took out some oil from a drawer and

started to massage Daniel. He just laid still and let Shelly apply the oil wherever she liked. He was hard as a rock by now. Shelly took a condom from her drawer and put it on Daniel's penis. By now Daniel couldn't lay back any more. He rolled on top of Shelly and inserted his penis. Shelly groaned with pleasure. They were now in the trance of love making. Daniel was a strong lover. He did everything slowly and gradually built up to a point where Shelly had an orgasm. He let her enjoy it. Then Shelly rolled on top of Daniel and made him come. She collapsed beside him and they just stared at the ceiling.

Wow, Daniel said. That was great.

It sure was Daniel. You are a good lover.

You're not bad yourself Shelly.

They laughed like lovers laugh and started to fondle each other. The sex had dehydrated them both so Shelly got up and brought some water into the bedroom. She laid down beside Daniel and fell asleep in his arms. Once again, she was in love.

It was Saturday morning. Shelly got up and put a pot of coffee on. She took out some eggs and prepared breakfast for her and Daniel. He came to the table with a towel wrapped around him. Shelly was wearing a short sleeve shirt.

I'm going surfing today Shelly. Do you want to come and watch?

I'd love to Danny. I'll take my video camera.

In that moment she realized she had shortened his name.

Is that OK? Can I call you Danny?

Sure, lots of people do.

OK. I will then. It's more personal than Daniel.

Danny inhaled his breakfast. The sex and good sleep had given him an appetite. When they finished breakfast they took another shower. Shelly decided that she wouldn't jeopardize this relationship by sleeping with a woman but she would have to tell Daniel about that part of herself.....at some point.

It was a good day for surfing. The wind was strong. Daniel and Shelly went back to his place to pick up his surf board and then they headed down to Dallas road. Shelly could see the excitement coming over Danny. She helped untie the board from the car rack and Danny lifted it effortlessly off the car. He slipped into his wet suit and carried the board to the water front. Shelly had brought her video camera and started filming him. He unfurled the kite and let the wind fill it up, stepped into the footrests and prepared to take off.

I'll be out for about a half hour Shelly.

OK Danny. I'll be here.

Shelly turned her camera on and started filming. A gust of wind pulled Danny from the shore and he was off. He literally flew over the waves. Other surfers were also playing in the wind and the waves. It was exciting to watch. Shelly had her own sports show in front of her. She felt a new kind of happiness. She had a new home and now a new boyfriend. Danny kept impressing her with his manoeuvres on the surf board. She was getting some good footage. This new hobby fit quite well with her life plan. She started to think about travelling with Danny. She had never been out of Canada and maybe it was time to see some of the world. Danny was almost a half mile off the shore and was heading in very fast. He jumped off one wave and must have went ten feet in the air. Shelly just laughed to herself. She thought about Rico only now it wasn't with sadness. It was a good experience while it lasted and it was honest. She would have to be honest with Daniel as well. That might not be so easy.

Daniel had arrived on shore. He was physically spent and could use a good meal.

That was amazing Danny, Shelly said. I am quite impressed.

Daniel just smiled and picked up his board. He loaded in onto the car and they headed to his place. When they got there he said, I am going to take a shower. There's bacon and eggs in the fridge and some pancake mix in the cupboard. Do you want to make a lunch for us while I clean all this salt off me?

Sure Danny. How do you like your eggs?

Over easy if you can do it and if not, scrambled is fine.

Shelly was good at cooking and over easy wasn't a problem. She also put on a pot of coffee and made toast. When Daniel came to the table there eggs, bacon, toast, pancakes and coffee waiting for him.

Looks great Shelly. He dug in like a hungry animal while Shelly slowly picked at her meal. His appetite was much bigger than hers. After lunch they did the dishes.

How do you feel about a nap? Shelly asked.

Ya, that would be nice. I could keep going but it's Saturday and I could use a rest.

They took their clothes off and went to bed. The sea air had made Shelly tired and they both fell asleep for about an hour. When Shelly woke up she could feel Danny had gotten hard. She turned to face him and grabbed his penis. Without a word she went down on him. Danny was enjoying it and so was Shelly.

Do you have a condom Danny? She asked.

I should but it's been a while since I had sex so I'm not sure.

He looked in the side table. No condoms.

Ah....I don't Shelly.

Shelly wanted him badly.

You don't have any STDs do you Danny?

No I don't Shelly. Do you?

No I don't.

Do you like sixtynineing? Shelly?

I like everything Danny, especially with you.

With that they started giving each other oral sex. Danny came first but kept going until Shelly had an orgasm too. They collapsed from the pleasure and lay in each other's arms. They didn't even think about going out that night. They just stayed at Danny's place and watched a movie.

What do you want to do tomorrow Danny?

I have two showings so I'm going to be busy all day preparing. What are you going to do?

I think I'll paint. If I can get a picture of you I would like to start a portrait.

That's so cool Shelly.

I haven't done any painting for a while so tomorrow will be a good day for that. Next week is going to be busy at work. I'm setting up some programs for kids. That will take a lot of organizing.

Danny found a picture of himself and gave it to Shelly. It was recent so Shelly wouldn't have to make him look older than the picture.

Can you give me a ride home Danny?

Sure Shelly. It's great being with you.

I feel the same way Danny. Let's keep doing this.

Danny drove Shelly home and gave her a kiss. He felt like telling her he was falling love but hesitated. He knew it was too early for that.

When Shelly got home she taped Danny picture to a blank canvas and stared at it. My Danny boy she thought. What will become of us? The next day she started painting his portrait. She began with a blue sky background and put some small clouds in the background. Danny was of the sea and the wind. Time was slipping by and before she knew it it was supper time. She hadn't even thought about lunch. She wasn't sure if she was falling in love or had already fallen for Danny.

Monday morning was hectic. As soon as Shelly arrived at work there were six messages on her answering machine and she had to attend another meeting with her boss. The meeting was boring and

had very little to do with the tasks that were ahead of her today. Nonetheless she sat attentively and took notes. When the meeting was over she went back to her office and started answering the messages. The first was from Hans Bergestein. His wife Hilda was into doing the kids reading. Shelly immediately called Hans.

Hello Hans. I am so glad your wife is into doing this.

Yes Shelly, she is excited about it.

I will set it up on my end and we can start with Christmas stories. We will have a tree set up in the library and lots of decorations.

That sounds good Shelly. Let me know when you want us there and I will get the children down to you in a bus.

That's so great Hans. I'm really excited about this.

Shelly hung up the phone and sat back in her chair. All her memories from the orphanage were coming back to her. Now she had a chance to make life a little better for those children.

She answered the other messages and left the one from Bobby 'till the last.

Hello Bobby. How are you doing?

I'm fine Shelly but I have some bad news.

Oh? What is it?

There's no way to gently say this Shelly.....Naomie has committed suicide.

Shelly felt like she had been hit by a truck. She couldn't talk. Bobby let her be silent for a while and knew she would be absorbing the shock. Shelly finally caught her breath.

What happened Bobby?

I got a call from her boss. She didn't show up for work and he thought something was wrong. She never missed work and was always on time. When she didn't answer her phone he went to her place. The building manager let him into her apartment and found her dead in her bedroom. She took a bunch of pills.

Did she leave a note Bobby?

Yes she did. I can read it to you if you want or we can meet after work.

Shelly didn't know what to say. All of a sudden her mind had gone numb.

I think it would be best if we met Bobby. I need time to let this sink in. Why don't you come to my condo and I'll make supper for you. It will give me something to do and keep me busy.

Ok Shelly. I'll see you around 6pm.

Shelly sat back in her chair and stared out the window. At first she felt a huge wave of guilt. She could have saved Naomie. But then she knew in her heart that Naomie just wasn't strong enough. She didn't have the survival skills that her and Bobby had. It sounded like a distant noise but it was only Wanda knocking at her office door.

Come in, Shelly said.

Hy Shelly. Are you alright? I knocked several times.

No Wanda. I'm not alright. I just got news that a close friend has committed suicide.

Oh that's terrible Shelly. I just had some paper work for you to go over so I'll leave it on your desk. Can I help you or do you want to be alone?

I'd prefer to be alone Wanda. I need to just let this sink in.

Ok Shelly. Call me if you need to talk or anything.

Shelly went back to staring out the window, She had another hour to go before work was over. Then she heard another knock at her door. It was David Peterson the library director.

Come in.

Hy Shelly. Wanda just told me of your news. Why don't you go home early today and see how you feel tomorrow. If you need some time off that's ok.

Thank you David. I think I will go home. I'm a bit shell shocked.

Shelly got home, buried her head in her pillow and began to cry. The sadness was overwhelming. Her emotions were tearing her apart. She new she couldn't save Naomie but still she felt guilty. She loved Naomie but she didn't want another relationship with a woman. She wanted a man. Now she would have to tell Danny everything. What if he couldn't take it like Rico? The tears kept pouring. The intercom rang and it was Bobby.

Come in Bobby.

When Bobby arrived at her floor Shelly was there to meet him at the elevator. She fell into his arms. He caught her with a warm hug. They were both too sad to talk. Shelly took his hand and led him to her suite.

Sit down and have a coffee Bobby. I'm going to keep getting supper ready because I don't want to sit still.

I understand, Bobby said. So what's for supper?

It was a funny question to be asking amidst all the emotions and it made Shelly laugh.

Oh Bobby! It's good to see you.

Do you want to read Naomie's note yourself or would you like me to read it for you?

Read it for me Bobby, I can't focus.

The letter

I'm so sad and depressed. I have no one to turn to and no one to love. I don't want to know who my mother or father were. They can go to hell because that's what life has been for me. I only have two close friends, Bobby and Shelly. They have their own lives and I can't lean on them. They met their mothers and I will never meet mine. I love you Shelly and I love you Bobby. I wish my life could have turned out like yours.

That's it? Shelly asked.

Bobby passed the piece of paper over to Shelly. She looked at it. It wasn't a long letter but it summed up Naomie's life pretty well.

Bobby I'd like to photocopy this and keep a copy for my self.

Why don't you just keep that one Shelly. I really don't want that hanging around in some drawer for the rest of my life. I know we were all Naomie had and I want to move forward with my life, have a family and all that. If I ever have a need to see that again I will ask you.

Ok Bobby. I understand. Right now it does mean something to me. It will help me get through this.

Shelly had made pasta and chicken with a salad on the side. She put it in front of Bobby and gave him a kiss as she did.

Thank you Shelly. I couldn't have done better myself.

So how is your job coming along Bobby?

It's going real well. Being head chef has a few perks as well as better pay. I am experimenting with creating new dishes. It's a lot of fun.

Do you think of having your own restaurant?

I have thought about it but it is such a large risk I prefer the security of a full time job. Maryanne is working steady day shifts at the hospital now so we have a little more time together. Our schedules conflict that way but it is what it is and we work around it. We're starting to save some money and maybe we will have the down payment for a condo like yours some day. This is very nice by the way. I see you're painting a new boyfriend.

Ya. His name is Daniel but I call him Danny.

So it's serious then?

Well.....it's been a joy ride so far but neither of us has used the “L” word yet. And now I'll have to tell him about me and you and Naomie. It was too much for Rico and I'm hoping Danny will be more understanding. We'll see.

The hospital has some morbid things they're wondering about, Bobby said. They wanted to know if there will be a funeral or will they cremate the body. I told them I would talk to you about it.

I think I would like the ashes Bobby. Maybe when the time is right we can spread them down at the ocean.

Ok Shelly. I'll let them know. I don't feel good with the ashes being in my apartment. Do you want to hold onto them?

Ya, I do. I'll put her note with them. I'll let you know when I feel the time is right to spread them and we can have a small ceremony or something.

Bobby finished the last of his salad.

This is a delicious meal Shelly. It's my turn to cook for you.

Ok Bobby. I can go for that.

Shelly and Bobby finished their supper and took their coffee to the living room. They sat close to each other on the couch. Their bodies touched. Bobby couldn't hold in the emotions any more and cried in Shelly's arms. She held him close the way she used to when she showed him what sex was in the orphanage. He didn't lift his head as he said.....you were always the strongest one Shelly. I was not quite as strong as you and Naomie wasn't strong enough either. Shelly knew he was right but said nothing back. She just kept holding Bobby. Yes she was stronger but she had weaknesses too. What they didn't realize was that she took strength from them as well. Intimacy with them gave her confidence. Her confidence was in place at an early age.

Bobby went to the bathroom to clean his face. He came back and finished the last bit of coffee.

I'm going to head out now Shelly. Keep in touch.

They hugged and kissed each other and then Bobby left. Shelly started cleaning the dishes. After that she did some gentle yoga poses before going to bed. That night she dreamed of Naomie. She was floating on a cloud with a white satin dress. There were hundreds of people watching her. She waved to Shelly but was so wrapped up in her parade she just passed by as Shelly watched. The next day Shelly wrote the dream down so she wouldn't forget it and placed it with Naomie's suicide note.

Monday mornings were always busy at the library. This Monday was no exception. Shelly attended the first meeting of the week and presented her plan for the kids Christmas story readings.

I'm thinking we should set up a corner of the library with a Christmas tree and chairs for the kids. Hans' wife Hilda is volunteering to do the reading and I will video tape the event. We will need to do two separate readings to accommodate all the children. The orphanage will provide the transportation and I

thought it would be nice if we could give every child a book as a present.

That sounds good David said. Looks like you've got everything under control there. He looked directly at Shelly knowing she was going through a rough time.

If you need help with anything let me know. We have volunteers that can help you.

Thanks David. I will need help with the decorations. I'm also thinking of another program.

Ok. Let's hear it.

Immigrants who are learning English are not using the library to their full potential. I thought it would be helpful to set up specific classes to help them learn to navigate all the resources we have to offer.

David once again looked directly at Shelly. What a brilliant idea he thought. No one had ever come up with such a creative plan.

Ok Shelly.....make it happen.

The rest of the meeting was the usual boring stuff. When it was over Wanda approached Shelly.

C'mon girl. I'm buying you a coffee.

They walked up the block to Fred's coffee bar.

Hy girls....the usual?

Yes please Fred.....I'm buying.

You are amazing Shelly. David is very impressed with your performance on your new job. How are you holding up?

It's better to stay busy Wanda. Naomie and I were like sisters but even more.

Wanda looked inquisitively at Shelly.

We were lovers from a young age. I know I can talk to you about this without it being spread around the library. I loved Naomie but I couldn't have a relationship with her. I want to just be with men. It simply can't work both ways.

Shelly was getting strong vibes from Wanda.

Something else you should know about me.....I get impressions from people and can feel their pain. Not that I take it on but I can feel it.

Wanda's mood changed and it showed on her face.

What do you feel from me Shelly?

I'm feeling a sadness and a frustration. I think it's because you and your husband have been trying to have a child but are not having any luck.

Wanda sat back in her chair and a small tear came to her eye.

That's pretty heavy Shelly.....and you are 100% right on.

I don't mean to upset you Wanda. I just get these vibes from people and I'm usually right. I help out a doctor with his patients from time to time and that along with my yoga teaching is how I saved enough money to buy my condo. I can tell you right off the bat that there are hundreds of children in this city that need the love you and your husband have to offer.

We thought about that Shelly. We thought of adopting but haven't committed to the process and the paper work. I don't know what to do and the more I think about it the more I get stressed. My husband is a good man and we could give a child a good home but it just hasn't happened.

I would probably suggest you stop trying. Let the love making happen whenever it does. Don't wait until your fertile time. Just enjoy each other and that's it. Nature will take care of the rest.

I owe you another coffee Shelly.

No you don't Wanda. We're just two friends talking... that's all.

Shelly returned to her office. There were five messages on her machine. One was from Danny. Shelly knew she would have to come clean with him and was afraid what the outcome might be. She picked up the phone and called him.

Hy Danny it's me.

Hy Shelly, how are you.

I'm having a tough time Danny. A friend passed away and she was close to me. It's hard to talk about it in the phone so can we meet?

Sure Shelly. Do you want to go for supper?

Not really Danny. I'd like you to come to my place and I'll cook a meal for us.

Does tonight work?

Yes, tonight will be fine. Come over about 6:30 and we can talk.

Ok. See you then.

Shelly stopped by the grocery store and picked up some chicken and vegetables. As soon as she got home she started cooking. It helped her pass time and kept her busy. Her head was chaotic with crazy thoughts. The intercom rang. It was Danny. By the time he got up to her condo supper was almost ready. Shelly opened the door and gave him a big hug and a small kiss.

Come in and have a seat Danny, supper is almost ready.

Wow. That was good timing.

Danny could sense something was up.

Is everything OK Shelly?

Not really Danny. A close friend of mine that I grew up with in the orphanage has just committed suicide.

Oh that's terrible Shelly.

Danny.....there's more to it. We have only been together for a short while and I have enjoyed every minute but I have to tell you more about myself.

Shelly put Danny's supper in front of him and brought him a coffee. As they started to eat Shelly told him about her intimacy with both Naomie and Bobby. She went on to talk about her bisexuality and her empathic instincts. Danny listened and slowly ate his supper. She also told him about Rico and how he couldn't accept her sexual relationship with Naomie. Danny knew it was his turn to talk but was stuck for words. Eventually they came.

Wow Shelly. First let me say how sorry I am for your loss. Uhmhm I don't know Shelly.....what are these empathic skills like? Do you have some supernatural powers.

Shelly laughed a small laugh.

No, I'm not superwoman and I can't explain how I get these feelings....I just do. I felt you had a hockey injury before you told me but I didn't want to say anything. I didn't want to scare you off. I work with a doctor who has patients he feels are blocked and I help them with their health problem. I don't know if this power will stay with me but I can't deny that they have been there for as long as I can remember.....What do you think of my sexuality?

I have been wanting to tell you something Shelly but I have hesitated. Things have gone pretty fast for us and I have enjoyed every minute as well. I want to tell you..... I love you.

Shelly's heart skipped a beat.

I don't have a problem with your sexuality but I don't think I could handle you sleeping with anyone else, male or female. Honestly, your empathic skills scare me more than your sexuality. I feel like you can read my mind.

No, it's not like that Danny. It's more of an impression than mind reading. I decided after losing Rico to just be with men. I want a stable relationship like everyone else and I know I can't have it both ways. It isn't easy Danny. I try to be honest with people and honest with myself as well. It would be much easier to just be gay or straight but this is what I am. Naomie and I were so close but she wasn't strong enough to deal with the fact that we were both orphans. I was lucky to meet my mother but Naomie wasn't. And one more thing Danny.....I love you too.

Daniel stood up from the table and went over to Shelly. He bent over and hugged her while she sat. She didn't hug him back but absorbed his arms and his feeling.

I'm here for you Shelly. I'm not going anywhere. Let's just keep this relationship going and enjoy the journey. I really do love you.

Thank you Danny. You don't know how much you mean to me. I like what you're into. I like filming you when you are surfing. It is exciting. Maybe one day you can teach me to swim.

I can do that. It is so much fun being on the water. We can go canoeing or kayaking or any number of fun things that aren't as demanding as surfing.

I would really like that Danny.

Do you want me to stay with you tonight or would you like to be alone.

I want to be alone for a few days. I have a yoga class this week and I want to work on your painting.

Danny looked at it. It really did look like him.

I'm quite impressed with this Shelly. You have so many talents.

Danny took his dish to the kitchen sink.

I'll clean the dishes Danny. I enjoy mindless tasks when I'm emotional like this.

She got up and hugged Danny for a long time. I love you Danny. I'll call you when I crawl out of my funk.

OK Shelly. You know what?

No. What?

We just got closer.

Shelly gave him another hug and a kiss. Danny left and went back to his world feeling very good but it wasn't just his world anymore, it was his and Shelly's world. Shelly sat down in front of her easel and carried on with her painting. She was OK now. Her fear of losing Danny was gone. Her sadness about Naomie would be with her for a long time but that would also pass or at least diminish. Her focus was now her jobs and enjoying life as much as possible with Danny.

It was another hectic week. Her projects at the library were demanding. She recruited the help of two volunteers, Linda and Dorothy, to help with the Christmas decorations and setting up the room for the children. Then she contacted the Intercultural Society to start the immigrant reading programs. Yolanda Sahdu was the contact person there. She agreed to come by the library and discuss the program. Shelly's yoga class was full as usual. She was enjoying teaching. Her own aches and pains were gone and she was back to her regular physical self. It was Thursday evening and Shelly felt ready to come

out of her isolation. She called Danny.

Hi Danny. It's me.

Hi Shelly. How are you doing? I didn't call you because I wanted to give you all the time you needed.

Thanks Danny. I'm doing much better. I've been immersed in work and that kept my mind off of Naomie.....somewhat. How about getting together Friday night?

Sure. Do you feel like going to a concert?

Oh ya, that would be fun. Who's playing?

There's an Abba tribute band at the Royal Theatre. I think it would be fun.

OK. Do you want to have supper before or after?

Let's go out for supper after the concert. Maybe even dancing.

Dancing? We haven't been dancing yet.

Well, put on your dancing shoes 'cause we're going dancing.

Friday came and Danny picked Shelly up at her condo. They walked to the Royal Theatre and took there seats in the middle of the theatre. The lights went down and the curtain went up. There were the Abba impersonators. The music started and it was just as if Abba was on stage. It was hilarious and entertaining. One hit song after the other played by musicians who dreamed they were some one else. Shelly hadn't laughed this much in a long long time. She held Danny's hand through the entire concert. What a great idea this was. When the concert was over they walked to the supper club. The band was already playing and the place was hopping. They sat down, ordered some food and jumped up onto the dance floor while they waited for their supper. Danny twirled Shelly around like a top. She loved it. He was good dancer. Their food arrived and they were both starved. They devoured their meals and danced some more. Danny payed the bill and they left the club. When they arrived at Shelly's condo they showered. They were dripping with sweat from dancing. They lathered each other with soap and rinsed off. They were turning each other on. The love making was passionate and lasted a long time. Shelly thought how sexually compatible they were. This was enough for her. She didn't need a woman. She could be happy with Danny.....maybe for the rest of her life. They fell asleep in each other's arms. Shelly had another dream about Naomie. This time she was sitting beside a river. She looked at Shelly, smiled at her and turned her attention back to the waves that were shimmering in the sun. Shelly took this to mean Naomie was at peace. The next morning she wrote the dream down, told it to Danny and put it with the other dream and Naomie's suicide note. When she got her ashes she would have a ceremony.

Shelly got up before Danny and showered again. She dried off, put on a loose house dress and went to the kitchen. Coffee was the first order of the morning. Then she got some breakfast going. Danny woke up to the smell of coffee, put on his undershorts and sat down at the kitchen table. Shelly put a cup of coffee in front of him and gave him a kiss on the cheek. He smiled.

I feel like a king Shelly. You treat me so good. Last night was a gas wasn't it?

Ya. It sure was Danny. That Abba band was great.....mama mia here we go again....my my!!!!

Danny laughed a hearty laugh.

They really got me in the mood for dancing.

Ya. And you're a pretty good dancer Danny!

Shelly brought a plate of eggs and hash browns, put a plate for herself on the table and dug in.

How's your real estate looking Danny?

Well, not as great as I would like. I showed two houses last week end. One couple is a maybe and the other couple is a definite no. Not enough space for them. So I keep checking the new listings every day and phone other realtors to see what their clients are looking for. Something will happen, it always does.

Can you teach me to swim Danny? Maybe we could go to the rec centre and wade around in the shallow pool or something.

Sure we can Shelly. I would help you as much as I can but it's probably better to take some formal lessons. They will give you tips I don't know. I learned from my parents and I can show you what I know. If you want, we can go after breakfast.

That would be nice Danny.

It was Shelly's first time in a swimming pool. She had a bathing suit but she only wore it once before when she was sun bathing. Water was a scary element for her. She left the woman's change room and slowly walked into the pool area. Daniel was waiting for her at the foot of the short stairway leading into the pool. He could tell she was scared.

Here Shelly. Put this life belt on. It will help you float.

Shelly strapped the life belt on and held her arms together as if she was praying. She was definitely out of her comfort zone.

Danny took her hand. Let's just walk in the water until you feel more comfortable.

For the first time Shelly felt like Danny was her father. He was protective and encouraging. It made her think of her father. This is what it would have been like if she had a father when she was young. She would have learned to swim. All of a sudden she felt a wave of self pity come over her. I won't let this take over me she thought. I'm going to learn to swim and Danny will teach me.

How does it feel Shelly?

It's wet and cold, she laughed.

OK. Let's walk a little faster.

Shelly felt safe holding Danny's hand and wouldn't let go.

OK. Let's just kneel down now. It's not over your head.

Danny knelt down and held both hands out for Shelly to hold onto. She slowly went onto one knee and then the next.

Good Shelly. Now just move your arms like this and get a feel for the water.

Shelly did as she was told. It started to feel good and some of her fear was going away.

Now I'm going to hold your arms and pull you through the water.

Shelly held her hands out and flopped into Danny's hands.

Good Shelly. Now start kicking your feet. The life belt will keep you float.

Shelly started to feel the anti gravity effect water has on a body. She had never felt that before. Danny was pulling her by the hands and she was floating. It was glorious. She began to laugh. It was a whole new element for her.

Go faster Danny.

Danny started to increase his speed. He thought it would be just like this if he was teaching his own kid how to swim. It made him think about having a child. What better person to do that with than Shelly he thought.

Faster Danny, faster.

Danny went faster until he fell backwards and Shelly fell into his arms. They laughed like children.

This is so much fun Danny.

OK. Now I want to show you something else. I'm going to hold my breathe and go under water, then I'm going to come up real quick. You'll have to take the life belt off for this. Let's walk to where it's a little deeper.

Shelly took the life belt off and followed Danny until they were up to her shoulders in the water.

Just watch me Shelly.

Danny took a deep breath, squatted until his head went below the surface and rose up.

Can you try this Shelly?

I think so.

Shelly closed her eyes, took a deep breath, quickly ducked her head below the surface and just as quickly surfaced.

Very good Shelly. You're doing great.

Now I'm going to do something different. I want you to lay on my arms and kick your feet.

Shelly totally trusted Danny by now. She lay on his arms and started to kick her feet. Danny started moving her body through the water. She was swimming, with his help.

So this is what it's like Shelly. Eventually you will be able to do this without my help.

Shelly felt so safe and secure in Danny's arms she didn't know if she wanted to swim on her own.

Will you pull me through the water again Danny?

Danny grabbed her arms and dragged her around the pool.

Kick your feet Shelly. Kick hard.

Shelly was pounding the water with her legs and feet and splashing water high in the air.

I think that's good for today Danny. I can feel that in my legs. I'll have to develop those muscles. Danny and Shelly went to their respective change rooms, showered and met outside at Danny's car.

How about some fish and chips for lunch Shelly? Fisherman's Wharf has this funky restaurant that serves great sea food.

Sounds good Danny. I'm hungry after that swim lesson.

They drove through town and parked at Fisherman's Wharf. It was a cool place. Lots of house boats and fishing boats. The walkway to the wharf was on pontoons so the footing was shaky. They ordered their food and sat at a table watching the boats come and go. Shelly was starting to like the water.

It would be nice to get out on the ocean she said.

It is nice. There isn't another feeling that comes close to that. The cheapest way is on a kite board but there are paddle boards, kayaks, canoes and all sorts of different sized vessels.

I would like to try canoeing with you Danny. I would feel safer in a canoe until I learn how to swim. I'm going to take your advice and start taking lessons. I think I'm going to cut out my empathic work for a while. It pays better than anything I do but it really drains my energy.

That's quite a gift you've been given Shelly.

Yes it is but I can tell you honestly that I prefer teaching yoga. It's more in the body than the mind. That mental stuff is so exhausting. I can afford to go a little easier and besides.....I'd like to spend more time with you Danny.

After they finished their meal Danny drove down to the canoe club on the Gorge.

We don't have to do it today but we can rent canoes here and it would be as nice as anywhere.

Daniel's phone rang. It was one of his clients.

Hy Daniel, I know it's short notice but my wife and I would like to take another look at that house?

OK. I can meet you there in an hour.

OK. See you then.

I have to go to work Shelly. I'll bring you back to your place. Shall we do supper?

Sure Danny. I'll make some pasta.

Danny hadn't sold a house in a couple months so he really needed to make a deal. He sped to Shelly's place and just as quickly headed across town to meet his clients. Shelly sat down to her painting when she got home. It was almost finished. What if she could sell her paintings she thought. That could pick up the slack if she quit her empathic work. She would call Dr. Michael on Monday and let him know she needed to take a break. Her mind drifted to Naomie. She still had flashbacks to the orphanage and the many nights they slept together. Naomie just wasn't strong enough to endure the emotional hardships that life threw at them. Shelly put her paint brush down. Her portrait of Danny was finished. Shelly's phone rang. It was Bobby.

Hy Shelly. I just got Naomie's ashes and I was wondering if I could bring them to you. I don't feel comfortable with them in my place.

Sure Bobby. I'm home all afternoon so bring them by.

OK. See you soon.

Shelly pulled out her yoga mat and did some exercise. She always came back to yoga. It was the centre of her life. Bobby arrived an hour later and Shelly buzzed him up. As usual, she waited with her door open and when he got off the elevator they gave each other a big hug.

Come in and have a coffee Bobby.

Thanks, I'd like that.

Shelly put on a pot of coffee and Bobby placed the urn of ashes on the kitchen counter.

Thanks for doing this Shelly. I'm still feeling very sad about everything.

Ya. I am too Bobby. I've had a couple dreams about Naomie. The last one was a happy dream. I think she is finally in a good place.....if that's possible.

The intercom buzzer rang again. It was Danny.

Hy Danny. Come on up. Bobby is here.

Shelly introduced them and they shook hands.

Nice to meet you Bobby. Shelly has told me a lot about you.....and Naomie.

We were very close when we were in the orphanage. Now all that's left is her ashes and our memory of her. She didn't have any valuable possessions. What she did have went to the thrift store.

I'm going to have a small ceremony when I feel it's time to spread her ashes.

Call me when you do Shelly. I should be going now. Nice to meet you Danny.

Danny walked over to the portrait.

This is looking really good Shelly. You have so many talents.

It's finished Danny. The paint will take a few days to dry but I want to give it to you.

Thanks Shelly. I love it. Can I leave it here?

Sure. How did your showing go?

It went well. I put their offer in and we'll see how it plays out. I could use a sale. I'll know soon.

I'm going to start making supper Danny. You can turn on the TV if you want.

No. I like the quiet. Can I help with supper?

No thanks. You know I like cooking.

Danny stayed the night and Sunday as well. Monday morning saw them both back into their own work schedule. Shelly had a busy day ahead of her and Danny had to close the real estate deal.

Shelly called Hans to get the Christmas readings going and also discuss the ceremony for Naomie.

Hello Hans. I have a couple things to talk about. First of all the Christmas readings. Let's do two separate age groups. I'll get the actual books to Hilda and she can familiarize herself with the stories. I don't know if you heard or not but Naomie has taken her own life.

Yes. Bobby called me. It's very sad Shelly. I know the three of you were very close. It isn't easy for anyone.

You're right Hans. I have her ashes and suicide note and I've written down two dreams I had about her. I'm planning a small ceremony to spread her ashes and when I think it's time I'll let you know.

OK Shelly. How are you doing aside from this?

I'm good Hans. I have a condo and a new boyfriend. He treats me good. I love him very much. His name is Daniel but I call him Danny. You'll meet him one day.

Sounds good Shelly. Keep in touch.

It was late autumn and cold in Victoria. Shelly decided to get the volunteers to put the Christmas decorations up early in the library. Yolanda Sahdu had already got the program for immigrants going and they were becoming very popular. It had become a weekly event and the new immigrants were getting to know how to use the library. Shelly's work was paying off and making the library look like the vital community resource it should be. David Peterson, the director, was pleased. Shelly decided to have the story of Pinocchio read to the younger kids from the orphanage and the story of Ebenezer Scrooge read to the older children.

It was mid November and the library was ready to do the first Christmas reading. Hans' wife Hilda was seated in front of the Christmas tree and the children were sitting patiently waiting to be entertained. Shelly watched from the back of the room as Hilda started reading. She was proud of her work and felt good about giving something more to the children than she had at their age. It brought her back to the early years in the orphanage. How she longed to have a real mother and father and family. Bobby and Naomie filled that gap though. As she felt herself sinking into a bad memory Wanda came up beside her and put her arm around Shelly.

This is beautiful Shelly. You've done a good job.

Thanks Wanda. She leaned into Wanda to show her affection. I'm glad I can give something to these kids. You can't imagine how hard Christmas is for kids with no family. They will remember this when they go back to the orphanage.

Hilda had a captivated audience. When the story was over Shelly gave the children a tour of the library.

This is the music department where you can take a CD and listen to it on the headphones. This is the computer department where you can do research. And this is my office where you can come and visit me any time you like. My name is Shelly and I look forward to seeing you again.

The children filed out to the bus that was waiting for them. Hilda and the library staff waved to the children as they drove off. It was a perfect event for Christmas time and a great success. Shelly went back to her office and called Hans and Bobby. It was time to spread Naomie's ashes.

Shelly organized a small event with Bobby, Maryanne, Danny and Hans. It would be on the next Sunday at Clover point by Dallas road. It turned out to be a very cold and windy day. Rain had started to fall and then stopped and started again. It was a typical winter's day in Victoria. Shelly had the urn with Naomie's ashes in her hand. I want to read the dreams I have had before I spread the ashes, she said. As she proceeded to do so a huge gust of wind came up and almost blew Shelly off her feet. Bobby came to her side to hold her down.

I think Naomie is watching us, she said. If you are there Naomie then know that we love you. After she

read the dreams she opened the urn and let the wind carry the ashes. They dispersed quickly. That's all I have to say. If anyone else has anything they would like to add , now is the time to do so. No one did. That was the end of the ceremony. No more words were spoken. Bobby and Maryanne walked away. Hans gave Shelly a hug and he also left. Danny took Shelly's hand and walked along the edge of the cliff. The wind was getting stronger.

I think we're in for a storm, Daniel said. The waves are starting to crash right over Dallas road. Let's go home. They went back to Shelly's place, made some hot chocolate and just sat beside the window looking at the storm that was blowing in. Danny looked at the painting Shelly had done of him and looked at her. Such a deep soul he thought. Shelly just sat quietly staring out the window as if Naomi was staring back at her. Maybe she was.

Christmas was coming soon and the spirit was definitely in the library. The readings for the children had gone well and many of them were popping into Shelly's office whenever they came to pick up books. Shelly was pleased to see them take an interest in books and the services the library offered. She began to think about having children of her own but had mixed thoughts about it. The one bedroom condo wouldn't be big enough for a family. She would want the child to have his own room and that would mean a house or larger condo. And what if Danny didn't want a child? Would that ruin what they already had? Life is good now. Don't blow it she thought. Last Christmas was fun at Rico's place. What would this Christmas look like? She would definitely want her mother to be included and it would be nice to meet Danny's parents. Should she start planning or just let it work itself out? She decided to talk to Danny and see what his thoughts were.

November was cold and rainy with high winds. The cold and rain didn't stop Danny from wind surfing, in fact, he embraced the high winds and rough sea. Shelly sat on the shore with her video camera taking footage of him flying over the waves. She had taken more swimming lessons and could swim on her own but decided that wind surfing was not for her. She liked just watching Danny and dreaming about their life together. She had compiled enough footage to make a video of him surfing. This day was especially rough on the ocean. Danny was spending more time in the air than on the surface. He was coming into shore very fast when he collided with a log. Shelly was shocked. The log hit him square on his chest. He went down. His kite drifted off into the ocean. Shelly immediately ran into the water and swam towards him. He was floating because he had a life jacket but was motionless. Shelly arrived by his side. She pulled him onto his board and sat there with him on her lap. When he came to he was a bit delirious.

Shelly.....what happened?

You hit a log.

A large wave came and almost washed them off the board. Shelly didn't know what to do except stay there and keep them both on the board. Another surfer had seen the accident and come to their aid. He slowed down and came up beside them.

Hold on to my board.

Shelly crawled on her belly and grabbed the other surfers board. The surfer slowly pointed his board toward the shore. It was awkward but it was working. In a few minutes they were close enough to the shore. The water was shallow and Shelly could walk in the water up to her waist. She pulled Danny's board with him lying on it on to the shore. He was winded but awake. Shelly just looked at him and started crying, then started screaming at him.

You scared the hell out of me Danny! You scared the bloody hell out me!!

Danny didn't know what to say. He was shocked. The other surfer was standing by their side.

I think we should get him to the hospital. A doctor should look at him. Shelly agreed. They carried Danny to the car. The other surfer went back to the shore, picked up Danny's surf board and loaded it onto the car.

I think I can take it from here, Shelly said. What is your name?

Gerry, the surfer said. Here's my card. Phone me when you get the doctor's word on your boyfriend.

I will, Shelly said. And thank you very, very much.

By the time Shelly got to the hospital Danny was a little more alert. Hey walked into the emergency room and Shelly explained what had happened. The doctor examined Danny.

He seems to be OK. He had the wind knocked out of him. He should be alright. He just needs a warm shower and a hot bowl of soup.

I can do that Shelly said. She thanked the doctor and got Danny back to her place. He took a shower on his own and Shelly made some soup. Danny came out of the shower and put on some clothes. When he sat down at the kitchen table Shelly put a bowl of soup in front of him. He looked up sheepishly at Shelly.

You saved my life Shelly. Thank you.

Shelly gave him a hug and and let him eat his soup. She stared at him as he ate. She did save his life. This is a sign she thought. I am meant to be beside Danny. He would have drowned if it wasn't for me. She didn't know if she caught it on her camera but it would certainly be good footage.

I think I've had enough of wind surfing, Danny said. Maybe it's time to take up canoeing.

Shelly laughed. That's a little extreme isn't it?

No it's not. This is extreme..... Will you marry me?

Shelly's jaw dropped to the floor. She couldn't believe how calmly she replied.

Yes Danny, I'll marry you.

Danny finished his soup and went to lie down. Shelly took out her camera and looked at the footage. She caught the log smashing into Danny. It would make a good movie. Surf's up, she thought.

Shelly sat in her office wondering how they would get married. She thought of her Danny. If they were going to get married she wanted to have kids, or at least one kid. She sensed that Danny would be into it as well but they would have to talk about it. A family she thought. I would have my own family. It was a bit overwhelming and she tried to get focused on the work she had to do. New ideas were running through her head. What if you could borrow a person from the library? What if there was a pool of people who didn't mind sharing their life story with a stranger? It would be a valuable character study for writers and also offer an activity for older people. She would have to discuss this with David, the library director. Then she realized she should call Gerry, the surfer, and let him know Danny was fine. She looked at his card.....Gerry Katougas, Milos Greek restaurant. She picked up the phone and called him.

Milos restaurant, may I help you?

May I speak to Gerry please?

This is Gerry speaking.

Hello Gerry this is Shelly. I'm calling to tell you Danny is fine. The doctor said he had the wind knocked out of him but he's OK.

That's good news Shelly. I was wondering how he was. It was quite a freaky accident.

Yes it was. I was really scared. But there's more news too. Danny has asked me to marry him and I accepted.

Wow. That's terrific Shelly. Have you set a date?

Not yet. I don't even know where or when we will tie the knot.

Well, if it's not too big a wedding, why don't you do it in my restaurant? I can handle about 25 people or so.

That sounds like a good idea Gerry. I'll talk it over with Danny and get back to you.

OK Shelly. I'll wait to hear from you.

That would be so cool Shelly thought. Better than renting a hall and having to get a catering company and it could happen before Christmas.

Shelly was always thinking of new programs for the library. Her latest was an idea that originated in Copenhagen Denmark. It was called "the human library". Instead of borrowing books you could borrow people, for 30 minutes. You would put your name on a list with the library and would make yourself available to anyone who wanted to talk to you. It was a new concept in socializing and would be a valuable reference for writers who were working on character studies. People who got involved would have to be comfortable talking to strangers. She called David, the library director, and arranged a

private meeting.

This is a very unusual concept Shelly. I like it but it needs a lot of refinement. We would have to keep phone numbers and addresses private. It would be good to have a special room and some kind of supervision. Why don't you write up a proposal and I'll take a look at it. Anything else?

Yes David. I'm getting married. I would like you and your wife to attend my wedding if you can.

That's wonderful Shelly. Let me know when the date is and my wife and I will be there.

That's great David. I'm inviting Wanda as well. I'll let you know the particulars, I'll get right on that proposal for the human library.

The Human Library Proposal

Instead of borrowing books from the library, people can borrow other people for thirty minutes. Instead of reading about someone's life people can talk about their life. Those who get involved in this program must be comfortable talking to strangers. Boundaries must be respected. There can be no criticizing of other people. If a conversation is becoming uncomfortable either party is free to quit the conversation and the meeting. The library would supply a room for people to meet. Voices must be kept at a respectable level. The content of the conversation must be kept in confidence and not posted on social media. People who want to participate in the program must submit a short autobiography. The library will screen all participants before signing them up for the program and have the authority to not allow anyone they think is a bad fit for the program.

Shelly sat back and thought about the program. It could be a valuable resource for students in many areas....sociology, writing, psychology or communications. It might be good to video record this she thought. It could turn into a talk show. As her mind was wandering the phone rang. It was Danny.

Hy Danny.

Hy Shelly. Do you want to have supper tonight?

Sure. How about Greek food? I just talked to Gerry and he suggested we have our wedding in his restaurant. Let's go there.

Sounds good. I'll pick you up around 7:00 at your place.

OK. See you then.

Gerry met Shelly and Danny as they entered the restaurant.

Hello and welcome to my restaurant. Nice to see you again. That was quite an accident you had Danny.

Ya. Lucky for me Shelly was there. I could have drowned.

Shelly grabbed Danny's arm with both her hands as if she was holding something precious.

Good thing you taught me how to swim, she said.

Gerry escorted the couple to a cozy table for two beside the gas fireplace. He helped Shelly get seated and put two menus in front of them. He smiled and said.....your waitress will be over to take your order.

The menu looked appealing. All the traditional Greek dishes were there...souvlaki, spanakopita, lamb, dolmades etc. There was a special dish for two people.

Let's try this dish for two Shelly suggested. That way we can sample more things.

Sounds good Shelly.

The waitress came over to their table?

Can I get you some drinks to start?

What do you feel like Shelly?

Let's try the Greek white wine, it seems appropriate.

OK. We'll have a half litre of your white wine and the platter for two people.

Very good the waitress said and scurried to the kitchen to place their order.

I like this place Danny. It's warm and I think it's the perfect size.

Ya. It's nice. I was thinking you should meet my mom and dad soon. I've told them I'm getting married. My brother knows too and he will be down for Christmas. I'm thinking we can have the wedding a couple days before Christmas, that way it won't conflict with Christmas day or Christmas eve.

That sounds good Danny. I'm going to have my mom as my maid of honour. I'll put her up in a hotel for a few days. She'll like that. She doesn't get to treat herself very much. I guess we should look at shacking up together soon.

Danny laughed.

Ya. I have thoughts on that. I'd like to move into your place for now. I know you spent most of your savings on the down payment so I want to give you half of that amount up front and then we can split the other costs.

Shelly wasn't expecting that kind of generosity.

You don't have to put up money like that Danny.

I think it's fair Shelly. I couldn't afford to buy a condo yet so I'm sort of buying into your investment. Besides, living together will bring our individual costs down. That way we can save up for a house at some point.

Shelly thought this would be a good time to talk about kids.

Danny. I want to talk about kids. If we are going to get married I would like to have at least one child. I want a family more than anything. We don't have to plan it immediately but it's something I really want ...with you.

I'm with you on that Shelly. I'd like to have a kid as well. The condo will be too small for a family so maybe we can think about real estate as part of our life plan. Kids are expensive too so we'll have to save for that.

Shelly grabbed his hand across the table and looked into his eyes. She was lucky she thought. Danny is a good man and will make a good father. The waitress came with their wine. Danny poured a glass for both of them and they toasted to their future. The food came on a huge platter. Typically large Greek servings. Danny dished out portions for him and Shelly. It was delicious. Gerry came by their table to check up on things.

How's the food?

Danny's mouth was full so Shelly answered.

It's really great Gerry. Danny and I were thinking we should get married a couple days before Christmas. Is it possible to book your restaurant the day before Christmas eve?

Of course it is Shelly. How many people will you be having?

No more than 25 I think. Can we have a buffet so people can sample all your dishes and maybe a head table for me, Danny, my mom and Danny's brother?

No problem Shelly. The restaurant is yours on that day. I'll even make a small space for dancing and we will have a Greek band. I'll give you a quote on the total cost before you leave tonight.

Shelly was getting more excited every minute. Danny just kept eating and enjoyed watching Shelly make the plans with Gerry.

We'll have to get the invitations out real quick Shelly said. I'll start that tomorrow.

OK Danny said. I'll give my notice at my apartment and move in with you on the first of December. It's going to be great Shelly, I just know it is. I was thinking mom and dad will want to have Christmas dinner at their place so let your mom know she's invited for that. Ernie will be here for a week or so as well. What do you want to do about a honeymoon?

I haven't given that much thought. I think I would like to just stay home with you and maybe we can look at a trip in the spring. I don't even have a passport.

That's fine with me Shelly. We can take more time to plan a holiday.

Shelly and Danny were enjoying their meal. Shelly thought the platter had too much food on it but she was learning how big an appetite Danny had. He finished the last of the potatoes and left nothing on the

platter. Their grocery bill was going to be huge she thought. Gerry came by with the bill for the meal and a quote for the wedding party.

Here's the quote for your wedding. Twenty five people at \$150 per person would be \$3,750. That includes wine on every table and if people want hard liquor they buy it privately from the bar.

That looks great Gerry. Shelly took out her check book.

You don't have to pay now Shelly.

That's OK. We might as well book the 23rd and be done with it. There will be a lot more things to take care of.

Thank you, Gerry said. I will be here personally to supervise everything. Shall we say 12 noon to start the party?

Danny and Shelly agreed that was fine.

Shelly phoned her mom that night and told her the news.

I want you to be my maid of honour mama. I'm getting a hotel room for you and we want you to have Christmas dinner with us at Danny's parents' house. I still haven't met them. Everything is going so fast.

That's super Shelly. I'm going to start looking for a new dress right away. I am very proud of you Shelly. I'm anxious to meet Danny.

It was hard for Shelly to keep her mind on work but she had to get the "Human Library" program going before Christmas. She decided to post a message on the library's website inviting people to participate. The initial response was not overwhelming but a few local authors signed up. This was a start. She contacted the head of the English department at the university and he got the word out to all the students. This brought in a much bigger response. So far there were fifteen people willing to participate. It was a start. The biggest part of the program was getting a data base put together with all the biographies. It was becoming overwhelming. Shelly found herself immersed in endless paper work and correspondence. She made an appointment with David to ask for help.

I think I have bitten off more than I can chew here David. This program is consuming all my time and I can't keep up with the rest of the work I have.

I see Shelly. How about this.....since we have so many students signed up why don't we see if they can volunteer to help but try to get their hours put toward the courses they are working on?

That's a good idea David. Can you contact the head of the English department and set that up. They will want your signature on this not mine.

OK Shelly. I'll get going on that.

What a relief Shelly thought.

David contacted the head of the English department and he was eager to get his students involved in the program. After they had contributed twenty hours to the program they would be asked to write a report and that would be considered a term paper. Linda Harnel and Leonard Stokes were the first two volunteers to show up in Shelly's office. They were third year English student and came with their laptops ready to go. Shelly's office suddenly got a lot smaller and a lot busier.

Thank you for volunteering to help with this project Shelly said. I have made a little desk for both of you and here is our data base so far.

Shelly transferred the info from her computer to a flash drive and the two students uploaded it to their laptops. She explained what she needed from them and they immediately got down to work. It was nice to see them motivated. This freed up time for Shelly to follow up on her other projects and prepare for the wedding that was fast approaching. She chose to simply call everyone instead of sending out invitations. It would be faster. The justice of the peace was booked, the restaurant was booked and all she needed to do now was buy a new dress and meet Danny's family, which was going to happen this weekend.

The weekend came around quickly. Shelly spent her week nights calling people and inviting them to the wedding. She hadn't seen Danny all week. On Saturday she went shopping for a dress. She had asked Wanda to accompany her. The two women started going from store to store with intermittent stops for coffee and lunch. Wanda had become a good friend and they enjoyed this shopping spree together. Wanda decided she needed a new dress for the occasion as well. They landed in the most expensive women's store, Paris Fashion. The prices were high but the styles were fabulous. Shelly tried on several dresses but finally picked one that was a soft yellow satin. It fit perfectly and felt so comfortable it wouldn't need alterations. It was low cut and came with a light satin shawl.

It's absolutely beautiful, Wanda said. It was made for you.

The two women spent the afternoon shopping. That evening Danny picked Shelly up to bring her to meet her mom and dad, Judy and Charlie. They were government workers and both were close to retirement. They had lived in the same house ever since they got married. It was a three bedroom rancher in Oak Bay, a part of town that had a lot of people of British heritage. When they pulled up to the curb Shelly just stared at the house. It was beautiful. The yard was well kept and the house, though not officially heritage, was built eighty years ago. Shelly dreamed of raising her children in a house like this. Judy and Charlie were sitting on the porch even though it was cold. They stood up when they saw them arrive. I guess they're anxious to see me Shelly thought. Another man, probably Danny's brother, was also on the porch. He was down from Fort MacMurray. Danny took Shelly's hand as they walked up to the house. She was nervous. Charlie was the first to start the introductions.

Hello Shelly, I'm Charlie, this is my wife Judy and this is our other son, Ernie. It is so nice to meet you.

They all shook hands but when Shelly shook Ernie's hand she got a strong impression from him. Ernie had a health issue. She could tell.

Please come inside. We have some hot apple cider on the stove.

The inside of the house was as beautiful as the outside. Antique furniture was everywhere. It wasn't modern decor at all. The living room had a fireplace and a fire was gently burning. It was warm.

So, Judy said, it's nice to finally meet you Shelly. Danny has told us a lot about you. We are so happy for the both of you.

It's nice to meet you as well, Shelly said. Your house is absolutely beautiful.

Well, Charlie likes working on it and he has kept it looking the way it does. I made the curtains and picked out the colour for everything but he did all the leg work.

Ernie was being silent and just listening. Danny piped in.

We weren't expecting you down so soon Ernie. Are you staying down until Christmas?

Ya. I thought I would take a break from Fort Mac. It's really cold up there already and their winters are brutal.

What do you do up there? Shelly asked.

I work in the oil patch. Mostly I drive big trucks and move earth around.

Shelly knew what was wrong him. He was having respiratory problems. All the dust was getting to him. That's why he's down so early she thought. He's seeing a doctor.

Judy stood up. The roast is almost ready and I should get supper on the table.

Can I help Shelly asked?

Sure you can. We've got three big men to feed.

Shelly laughed. She knew what a big appetite Danny had.

The kitchen was spacious. Charlie had torn a wall down to make it that way. Shelly was looking forward to many more suppers in this place.

You can make the salad if you like Shelly. I'll take the roast out and the vegetables are ready. Would you like some wine?

Sure Shelly replied. I'll pour a glass for the boys as well.

Judy and Shelly started putting all the food on the table and called the boys. When everyone was seated Charlie welcomed Shelly to their table and their family. It meant a lot to her to be part of a family, more than they could imagine. Judy started the table talk.....

Danny tells us you're quite a busy girl working two jobs.

Yes I am Judy. I like my work at the library and I just got a promotion. We have some new programs that I've started and it's quite exciting.

And you also teach yoga?

Yes. I like that too. If it paid enough I might do that full time but the library job is secure and that's how I qualified for the mortgage.

Shelly looked at Danny and realized he didn't tell them about her empathic work. She appreciated that. They would find out in due time and she thought she could help Ernie.

Supper was delicious and Shelly's new family was warm and welcoming to her. Shelly helped with the dishes and rather than stay longer she wanted to go home. It had been a long day. Danny drove her home and came in with her.

I really like your family Danny. They were very nice to me. I appreciate you not telling them about my empathic work. I think Ernie has some respiratory problems and I might be able to help him.

Ya. I didn't want to give them too much information. Maybe we can get together with Ernie and you can talk with him. Meanwhile, let's just focus on our life. I'll be moving in with you in a couple days and our wedding is coming up quickly.

I'm real tired Danny. Let's crash.

Sunday had become a day to get out on to the water. Shelly and Danny went down to the canoe club on the Gorge and rented a small canoe. Things change once you get on the water. Your survival instincts kick in and you become more in tune with nature. Danny sat in the back seat and stared at his wife to be as they paddled. He would never forget how she saved his life. He didn't mind trading in wind surfing for canoeing. It wasn't as exciting but it was something he and Shelly could do together. Shelly stopped paddling and took out her video camera. She turned around and started shooting Danny. They were two happy campers only they weren't camping. The Gorge waterway was in the city so they didn't have to travel or load up equipment to get there.

I'm going to get Ernie to help me move tomorrow, Danny said. He's not doing anything else and the move will go quicker.

OK, Shelly replied. I'll cook supper for the three of us and maybe I can talk to him about his lungs. I think he is going to have to find a new career that is healthier.

She put the camera away and they continued on the familiar course, up the breakwater, across the waterway and over to the east side where the beautiful houses were. Shelly thought this would be her ideal place to own a house. Without turning around she said.....I want to live on the Gorge Danny. Let's try to find a house here some day. Danny replied....well I know a good realtor so I'll talk to him. Shelly laughed. She liked his sense of humour too.

Mondays had become predictably busy for Shelly. All the programs and volunteers had to be dealt with. They were coming along fine but they needed to be monitored and Shelly had to make progress reports

for David every week. Danny spent the day moving his stuff into Shelly's apartment. It gave him time to hang out with Ernie. They were close when they grew up. There was a healthy sibling rivalry between them. They were both athletic. On this day Danny could see Ernie was having a harder time with the lifting. He would get winded after they lifted a few boxes. They sat down at the kitchen table and Danny made a coffee for them.

I want to tell you something about Shelly, Danny said. She has an empathic skill.

What's that Danny?

It's a power she has to feel other people's pain. She gets impressions from people. She does work for a local doctor helping his patients who have difficulty healing.

Is it a magic thing?

No. It's more of an intuition. I haven't told mom or dad about it because it's something Shelly keeps private. She doesn't want people thinking she's a quack.

I get it Danny. I'm actually going to see our family doctor about my lack of breath. I guess you noticed I'm not as strong as I used to be.

I did Ernie.

As the boys drank another coffee Shelly walked in.

Hi guys. How's the move going?

Well, all the boxes are here so I guess you could say I have landed.

Shelly walked over and gave Danny a kiss on the lips.

Danny has been telling me about your empathic skills Shelly. I am interested to know what you feel from me?

Shelly walked over to Ernie and put her hand on his chest.

Your lungs are weak Ernie. I think you have inhaled too much dust from your work up north. I guess you'll get some x-rays but I think you might be looking at changing careers. If you continue with that job you'll really damage your lungs. Right now your body is telling you to stop what you're doing.

Wow. You get all that?

Yes I do Ernie.

I'm going to our doctor tomorrow so I'll see what he says.

Good luck Ernie. I picked up some chicken for supper. I bet you're hungry.

The apartment was littered with boxes of Danny's stuff. His surf board took up one wall and his clothes

were piled on the bed.

Why don't you start putting things away Danny while I get supper going, Shelly said. Any place is fine as long as I can find my clothes afterwards. I cleared out a couple drawers for your socks and underwear but we'll probably need a couple more dressers and tables.

Danny started unpacking the boxes while Ernie sat back and watched the chaos. I'm really happy for you two, he said. Looks like you're off to a great start. Can I help with anything in the kitchen Shelly?

Sure Ernie. You can peel the potatoes and make a salad while I get the chicken going.

Ernie was shoulder to shoulder with Shelly in the kitchen. She could almost see his thoughts.

Don't worry Ernie. I'm not a mind reader. I don't know every thought that's going through your head. I just feel things....that's all.

OK. It is a little weird though. I've never had any psychic experiences or anything like that.

Shelly cut the chicken into small pieces and started the stir fry. Some oil, lemon juice, parsley and a bit of cilantro. It was starting to smell good. The potatoes and carrots went into the boiling water. Supper was taking shape. Shelly set the table and put on another pot of coffee. She liked Ernie and was already feeling they were part of the same family. She liked everything about her new family. It was a warm feeling knowing that some one was always there to support her if she hit hard times.

OK guys have a seat, she barked.

The boys sat down and Shelly loaded their plates with food. Her portion was smaller but so was her appetite. The boys dug in like hungry dogs. Shelly chuckled to herself. She wondered if she had a son would he have a ravenous appetite like his father. Her motherly instincts were getting stronger every day she spent with Danny. A day didn't go by that she thought of having his children. Her own family! Is that even possible she thought. She started the table talk.....

So Ernie, have you ever thought of doing another job other than the one up north?

Only in the last few hours to be honest. I make good money up there. It's hard work but I've managed to save some cash. I don't know. You really got me thinking in a different direction. We'll see what the doctor says and if he agrees with your diagnosis I think it's time for a change. This chicken is wicked by the way.

Would you like some more?

If you have more, sure.

Danny, can I get more for you.

For sure. I think I'm going to be an overweight husband in a year or so.....I might as well start now.

Shelly laughed as she loaded up their plates again.

After supper Shelly took their plates. Ernie was polite and offered to do the dishes but Shelly refused.

You can help Danny unpack things if you want, she said.

An hour passed and Ernie said it was time he split. Shelly walked over to him and gave him a big hug.

Let me know how things go with the doctor Ernie. If I can help you I will.

Thanks Shelly, I will.

Danny gave his brother a ride back their parents place and had a nice conversation with him.

You are one lucky guy Danny, Ernie said. Shelly is a wonderful woman....and.....she likes cooking.

Ya. I'm going to get fat if I don't watch out. Don't tell mom and dad about her empathic skills OK? She is protective about that stuff. Some of the people she helps are in real rough shape but she's not a certified doctor. It's a delicate topic.

I understand Danny. I'll keep it to myself. I already think I am going to have to change my life. Maybe I'll move to Victoria. The climate is much nicer here and the winters are mild. I can find something to do.

The brothers hugged and Ernie went inside. Danny drove back to his new home feeling fulfilled. Life had been kind to him. He started thinking of things his brother could do in Victoria. Something would come up.

When Danny got home Shelly had already gone to bed. Danny came beside her and kissed her gently and crawled in beside her. This was now their home and they were officially a couple. They just needed a justice of the peace to seal the deal.

It was the first week of December. The wedding was coming up fast and Shelly's work at the library was keeping her super busy. She had invited all her close friends to the wedding. It was going to be fantastic. Ernie got the news from his doctor that he did indeed have some lung problems. It wasn't fatal but a life style change was in order. He decided to move to Victoria and find something new to do. Danny was putting in long hours showing houses and condos. His real estate career was getting traction. His friendly, professional personality was paying off. Clients were confident in his skills and he was getting lots of referrals.

The human library program was going better than she planned. There were now ten people registered and Shelly had video recorded all the meetings. She then catalogued them in the video department so people could borrow them. Shelly kept her yoga classes going but hadn't taken on any more empathic work. Her plate was full to capacity. She looked forward to Danny's company every night. Their condo was their retreat from their hectic life style. Their evenings were their own. One night after supper Danny took Shelly for a ride.

I want to show you this house Shelly. It's on the Gorge. It is a three bedroom, two bathroom with a small building in the back that could be converted to a guest house. There's also a small dock that we

could put a canoe on. The yard is quite big and has a garden that has been unattended for a couple years. The people who own it are older and have moved into an old age home. The place needs a lot of work which is why it hasn't sold.

Shelly fell in love with the place before they even went inside. There was a sundeck off the kitchen and a garage.

You know we can't afford this Danny. It's out of our reach.

I know that but I have an idea. I'm thinking that Ernie might like to come in with us. He's moving down here and he has some money. He can fix up the guest house and we can still have our privacy in the big house. If he wants out of the place in a few years we can buy him out.

How would this work Danny?

It would be a three way ownership. The mortgage, taxes and upkeep cost would be divided three ways. Ernie is going to need a place to live anyway so why not try to own something?

Wow. It's a big step Danny. If it's going to take all our savings is it worth it?

I know it's a big step. I just wanted to show you. I haven't mentioned it to Ernie. I wanted to see what you thought first. If we rent out the condo we might be able to keep our equity and still make a little extra every month.

Put it on paper Danny, then let's talk to Ernie about it.

They walked around the house. Shelly envisioned which room would be their bedroom, possibly which one could be a kid's room and one would certainly be a yoga room. The kitchen was huge. Good for big gatherings she thought. She started to really want this. The Gorge was right outside the front door. If they got a big garden together their food costs would be cut in half. She could still cycle to work or catch a bus when it rained. She knew Danny could make this happen.

Ernie was living with his mom and dad now. Fort MacMurray was not a healthy place to work. He didn't own a car and chose to cycle everywhere. He had a good ten speed but everywhere he went he was seeing ebikes. Driving by a bike shop one day he saw a sign saying "help wanted". He went inside. The owner was working on a bike that was elevated off the floor. It was Tommy. This was Shelly's repair man.

I'm here to apply for the job that's available.

Tommy stopped his work and put his tools down.

Have you had any mechanical experience?

Ernie chuckled to himself. He was used to working on massive diesel engines in his last job. Most truck drivers did that out of necessity.

Well, I worked as a truck driver up north and I worked on large earth moving vehicles so I know something about mechanics. What I'm really interested in is learning about ebikes. They seem to be everywhere.

If you can fix a diesel engine you can fix a bike, Tommy said. When can you start?

How about right now?

OK. I'll show you around the shop.

It was comically small compared to the large work spaces Ernie was used to. He could pretty much figure out what the tools and machinery were for.

We have just started repairing ebikes, Tommy said. I don't have time to do all the work that's coming in so you can start doing basic stuff and I'll show you how to do the more advanced electrical work.

Sounds good Tommy.

Are you from Victoria, Tommy asked.

I just moved down from Fort Mac. I guess you could say I'm changing my life. I'm living with my folks right now and I have a brother that's into real estate. So far things are looking good here.

Ernie worked the rest of day and went home for supper. He called Danny to let him know he got a job.

Hy Danny. Good news. I got a job in a bicycle shop.

That's great Ernie. Which one?

It's called Tommy's bike shop.

Really! I think that's Shelly's repair guy.

No kidding! He seems like a good guy to work for. I'm going to learn about ebikes. I think that's a new industry that is just getting started.

Look Ernie, Shelly and I are thinking of buying a house but we aren't quite in a position to make that move. We have our eye on a big house with an out building and we wanted to talk to you about possibly going in with us. How about coming over for supper tomorrow and we can talk about it?

Ya. That sounds good Danny. I'll bring some steaks and vegetables.

OK. See you around 6.

Danny hung up the phone and told Shelly the news.

Ernie's coming over for supper tomorrow and bringing steaks. He's got a job at Tommy's.

Wow, Shelly said. That didn't take him long.

Ernie showed up at 8am for work. Tommy was already there working on a bike.

I think you know my future sister-in-law, Ernie said. Her name is Shelly Duval.

Oh ya. Shelly. She helped me out with my work posture. She's got a sixth sense about people. So she's marrying your brother? How cool is that eh?

Ya. I'm going over to their place for supper tonight.

Ernie started balancing the spokes on a ten speed bike. He began to think about new designs for bikes as he worked. For now, he would just keep his nose to the grindstone and learn as much as he could. After work he dropped by the grocery store and picked up three steaks and some vegetables. He put them in his pack sack but thought.....if I had a big box on the back of my bike it would be much more efficient. On his way to Shelly and Danny's place he came up with an idea.

Shelly and Danny were enjoying a coffee when Ernie arrived. He put the steaks on the counter and Shelly poured him a coffee.

How is work going? She asked.

I'm liking it a lot. It's very low stress compared to my last job, plus, I am getting ideas for new bike designs.

Really?

I have an idea for a three wheeled ebike. It would have a bracket on the back that would accommodate interchangeable boxes. For instance, a heavy duty box for carpenters' tools, a lighter weight box for parcel delivery, a special craft box for people who do craft fairs and so on. There are some three wheeled bikes on the market but my design would require heavier suspension and a bracket design that is strong but allows the user to change boxes easily.

Danny piped in.

That's brilliant Ernie. Can it be made in Tommy's shop?

I don't think so. It's too small. We might be able to build a prototype though. It might be a project for after hours. I'm going to pitch it to Tommy and see what he says.

Speaking of pitches, Shelly and I have one for you. There is a house on the Gorge that we are looking at. It is large and has an out building that could be converted to a livable cabin. The thing is, we can't afford it on our own. It's going for 1.2 million. We were wondering if you would want to come in on it with us. We could fix up the cabin for you and we would take the house. All the expenses would be divided by three. We need to come up with about \$120,000.00 for the down stroke and the we would need more money for the renos. Shelly and I would rent out this condo so that would cover our

mortgage here and a bring in a little extra. We have about \$40,000.00 between us so we need another 80 grand or so.

Wow. It sounds like a plan I would jump at but I don't have that much money. I only have about 50k in the bank. Damn!

Danny sat back in his chair and took a swig of his coffee.

I guess it's out of reach right now. It's such a beautiful place and we both want to live on the Gorge. Oh well. We'll just keep doing what we're doing and save as much as we can.

Shelly had started cooking the steaks and vegetables. She was a little disappointed but could accept it.

How do you guys like your steaks cooked?

They replied in unison....well done. Then looked at each other and laughed. Shelly just shook her head. They were so close in so many ways. She started setting the table and putting the salad together. The boys were waiting at the table for their food like hungry dogs. She put Danny's steak in front of him and gave him a kiss. She put Ernie's stake down and ruffled his hair. You are my boys, she said. Her mothering instincts were getting stronger....she wanted a child.

It's good to know you're with us Ernie, Shelly said. Maybe we can find another house or maybe this one will still be on the market a year from now.

The table became quiet while the boys were devouring their steaks. Shelly's mind went to the wedding that was coming up in ten days. Her mother would be coming over in five days and Shelly had booked a week off before and after Christmas for holidays. She was looking forward to seeing her mom.

The library was decorated with Christmas ornaments that people had donated. It looked fantastic but Shelly could hardly keep her mind off her upcoming wedding. People would pop into her office and what was normally a five minute meeting stretched into a half hour. She was both happy and proud of herself. She knew her work was appreciated by her superiors and she also knew that Danny loved her. Her mother had come over from Vancouver and they would be going out for supper tonight. They chose Bobby's restaurant. Danny picked Shelly up after work and went to Penny's hotel. They parked the car and walked up to her room. The girls embraced and so did Danny and Penny.

This room is fabulous Shelly. Thank you so much.

Your welcome mama. I asked them to give you a room with the view of the harbour.

Would you like a drink?

No thanks mama. Danny's parents are meeting us at the restaurant so we should get going.

They left the hotel and drove the short distance to Bobby's restaurant. Danny's parents were waiting outside and after the introductions they went in. Bobby had left instructions to give them the best table. They sat down and the waiter came to take their order. Danny immediately said.....can you put this all

on one bill and give it to me?

I'm sorry, said the waiter. Bobby has beaten you to it.

At that moment Bobby came out from the kitchen to meet everyone. This is my present to the bride and groom, he said. Have anything you like.

Thank you, replied Shelly.

May I recommend the veal? I ordered it fresh from the butcher today.

Bobby went back into the kitchen and the waitress appeared to take their order. Shelly asked if everyone was fine with wine and they agreed to make things easy for the waitress.

How about a bottle of white and a bottle of red?

Again everyone agreed. The waitress left them to go over the menu. Bobby had certainly created some beautiful dishes. The menu was elaborate with pictures of the dishes. Shelly flashed back to the orphanage. She pictured her and Bobby and Naomie sitting together at the supper table. It was both sad and happy to think about it. As much as she missed Naomie, Bobby and her had made good lives for themselves and all things being equal, they should continue to have good lives. The waitress came with the wine and poured a glass for everyone. Penny proposed a toast to the bride and groom. Danny looked at Shelly and bathed in the sunshine of their love. Shelly held his hand and smiled.

Everyone ordered their supper. The veal certainly was delicious. Shelly thought that the bill would easily be \$300 for a meal like this. Charlie, Judy and Penny were getting to know each other. Danny had told his parents of Penny's history but they weren't judging her. Ernie began to feel a little like a loner at the table. He wondered if he would be so lucky as his brother to find a nice wife. He and Penny had gotten into a long conversation about his life changes and his new job. She was also feeling like she was becoming part of a functional family. Her and Shelly would occasionally look at each other across the table and smile. Their lives had both been challenging, Penny's more so than Shelly's. But that was then and this was now. Life was good.

It took an hour to finish supper and Bobby came out to join everyone for a quick drink before they left. He felt good being able to give this kind of a present to Shelly. It was the best thing he could imagine. He gave her a memory.

Everyone hugged everyone else before they they went back to their homes. Danny and Shelly gave Penny a ride to her hotel but she thought she would take a walk before calling it a night. As she walked her life was flashing before her. From here on in she would indulge in watching Shelly's life. It was all she needed to be happy. Her thought of having a boy friend to fulfill her life were vanishing. It used to be a vacant part of her dreams. Would I ever find a good man? She realized more than ever that it wasn't necessary. Life had given her a wonderful daughter and that made up for all the bad things she experienced. A winter fog had set in and the harbour lights were squinting to get through it. Penny was alone but she didn't feel lonely. She went back to her hotel and took a long hot bath. It was much more luxurious than her apartment. That night she slept like a baby.

Shelly, on the other hand, couldn't sleep at all. She was too excited. This was the night she told Danny that she wanted a baby. Danny was fine with that. They stopped using condoms. It made the love

making more intense and reckless.

It was the morning of the wedding. Penny had come to Shelly's place dressed in her new dress. Shelly was walking around in a tizzy. Her mom was helping her stay calm. Ernie had also come over to their place. He and Danny were busy talking over the new ebike design Ernie had come up with. Since there was nothing like it on the market they both believed it was worth pursuing. It was 11am.

Are you girls almost ready? Danny hollered.

Penny and Shelly had been preparing their hair and make up in the bedroom. When they came out Danny's jaw dropped. Shelly had never looked more beautiful.....nor had her mother. Ernie started snapping pictures. His job as best man also included the photography duties.

Well, Danny said, shall we head over to Milos?

Shelly and Danny went in his car. Ernie and Penny went in one of his parents' cars that he had borrowed. When they arrived at Milos the front door to the restaurant was open. Gerry saw them and motioned to the band to start the music. Danny held Shelly's hand and slowly walked into the restaurant preceded by Ernie and Penny. They all took their place in front of the Greek Orthodox priest that Gerry had hired for the occasion. The band stopped playing and quiet came over the restaurant. The priest began his speech.....

We are gathered here today to witness the joining of Shelly and Danny in holy matrimony. He went on talking about the sanctity of their commitment, how two are stronger than one and the lasting power of love. It was a short speech but very meaningful. He then asked them if they accepted each other as their legal spouses 'till death do they part. They both agreed. Danny then took a ring from Ernie and placed it on Shelly's finger, reciting his commitment. Shelly did the same. The priest then said the magic words....I now pronounce you man and wife. Shelly and Danny kissed to seal the deal. The restaurant broke into a loud applause and the band started playing. After everyone took their turn congratulating the bride and groom, the crowd took their seats and the waiters started bringing the food and wine. The dinner was traditional Greek food and very large quantities. People started clanging their glasses with spoons and the bride and groom stood up for the first of several long kisses. Ernie and Penny both had a chance to deliver short speeches. Ernie was confident but Penny had a hard time making it through her speech. She was teary eyed and extremely proud of her daughter. After the speeches the dance floor was cleared. Danny and Shelly started dancing and it wasn't long before Ernie requested a dance with Shelly. Danny danced with Penny and then everyone else joined in. It was a joyous occasion. Bobby asked Shelly for the pleasure of a dance. They embraced and felt the closeness they had when they were young. Danny watched them enjoy their moment and had no jealousy. He knew Shelly's upbringing was different than his and most other children. He wasn't going to make the mistake of being possessive with Shelly. After her and Bobby had their dance Shelly walked over to Danny and gave him a big hug. This was the happiest day of her life.

The party was winding down. Ernie, Bobby and some others helped pack all the presents the bride and groom received into Danny's car. Shelly and Danny expressed their gratitude to everyone and were the first to leave the restaurant. When they got home they brought all the presents up to their condo. It took several trips. Shelly took the one from her mother and opened it. It was a blanket that she had knitted. How nice Shelly thought. It will keep me warm forever. Danny's parents had given them money. This

would go to their savings for a house. They took their wedding clothes off, had a shower and collapsed in bed. Shelly took her favourite position under Danny's arm. They lay there in quiet knowing that words would ruin the spell they were under. Night time came and they fell into a deep sleep. When they woke up it was Christmas eve morning. They had breakfast and went to the Gorge for a canoe ride. The tide was coming in and they just went with it for about a mile or so. Then they turned the canoe around and paddled hard against the current to get back to the dock. Danny said....I'm starved. Shelly knew he would be. She was too. Let's pick your mom up and have her over for lunch.

OK Danny, Shelly said.

They phoned Penny and went to her hotel. She walked out and jumped in the car.

Did you sleep well mama? Shelly asked.

Like a baby sweetie.

Shelly started lunch when they got home and Danny started opening the presents.

Thanks for the blanket mama. I really love it.

I'm glad sweetie. I put all my love into it.

The presents varied from cutlery sets, pots and pans to gift certificates at fine restaurants. Shelly had never received so many gifts. It was overwhelming. After lunch Danny did the dishes while Penny and Shelly sat on the couch underneath the blanket Penny had knitted. Danny went to lie down on the bed and Penny and Shelly fell asleep on the couch covered in the blanket.

The girls woke up to the smell of coffee. Danny was busy in the kitchen putting some of the new kitchen utensils in drawers.

Coffee girls?

You're a sweetie, Penny said.

The girls got off the couch and sat at the table. Danny put a coffee and some cookies in front of them.

I was thinking we could go out to the Butchart Gardens after supper. What do you think?

That would be nice Danny, Shelly said. I don't think mom has ever been there, have you mama?

No I haven't. They say it's beautiful.

It is, Danny said, especially at this time of year. The whole grounds are lit up with Christmas lights. It'll be fun.

Everyone sipped their coffee and started to get into the spirit of Christmas. Shelly put the TV on and they started watching the classic Christmas movies. Supper time rolled around and Shelly started

making some pasta. Penny helped with a salad and Danny got on the computer to look at new listing and research the market. Christmas wasn't a good time to sell houses. The one on the Gorge that he and Shelly looked at was still not sold. It would be perfect Danny thought. It's just out of reach right now. Shelly put supper on the table. She felt good surrounded by the people she was closest to. This is what normal people experience she thought. She started to think that her mother would need someone to take care of her in her older age. She wouldn't be able to live on her own forever. Danny's folks had each other but she new Penny wouldn't find a good partner and maybe that was for the best.

After supper they drove out to the Butchart Gardens. It was an old quarry that had been landscaped and covered with flowers, trees and exotic plants from all over the world. The Christmas lights were everywhere. A group of singers dressed up in old English costumes walked around singing carols. Shelly brought her video camera and was shooting everything. She would make a home movie out of this. It was cold and they hadn't brought gloves or scarfs so after a short while they got back in the car and headed back home. After dropping Penny off at her hotel they went back to their condo, sat on the couch and enjoyed Christmas eve together.

I'm taking your last name, Shelly said.

Really? Danny replied.

Yes I am. If we have a kid I don't him/her with two last names. Are you OK with that?

Of course I am Shelly. I wasn't expecting that. I'm quite proud actually. Speaking of kids....do you want a boy or a girl?

Two of each, Shelly replied.

Two of each????

I'm just kidding Danny. It doesn't matter to me but I am feeling a stronger urge to have children every day. I guess my biological clock is ticking faster or something.

Shelly cuddled under Danny's arm the way she always did. It was time to start a family.

Shelly woke up before Danny on Christmas morning. She spread her yoga mat on the floor and began her routine. With the wedding and Christmas preparations she hadn't had time to do yoga. It felt good as it always did. She came back into her body space. This was her centre. Her classes had gone well and she was thinking of teaching another night instead of doing the empathic work for Dr. Michael. The thoughts of having a child and getting a house were in the front of her mind. As always, it would take more money. She could see that her mother would need taking care of eventually as well. Too many thoughts. Shelly stood on one leg and did the tree pose. At that moment Danny walked out of the bedroom, looked at her, and went into the shower. He thought of his new life. Now he was a husband and would probably be a father eventually. He also thought of the extra money they would need. He liked Ernie's idea for a new ebike that could handle heavier loads. That might be the key. It would cost to build a prototype but maybe it was worth it. Shelly finished her routine and joined Danny in the shower.

Good morning Mrs. Horton, he said.

Good morning Mr. Horton. Merry Christmas to you.

And a very merry Christmas to you Mrs. Horton.

They embraced under the hot shower. The water fell over their bodies like a welcome rain. They were both getting turned on. Danny was getting hard and Shelly was playing with his penis. She turned the water off, took his hand, and escorted him back to bed. They were both dripping wet but Shelly didn't care. They fell onto the bed and fell deeper into their passion. Their love making was more intense and spontaneous since they stopped using condoms. Every time they had intercourse Shelly hoped she would get pregnant. They rolled on top of each other and both had explosive orgasms. Danny fell off Shelly and collapsed in ecstasy.

I guess you could say we have officially consummated the marriage, Shelly said.

Danny laughed out loud. After a ten minute rest Shelly got up, threw the bed sheets into the washer and went back to the shower with Danny.

It was lunch time and Shelly was preparing bacon and eggs. Danny's phone rang. It was his mother.

Hy Danny, merry Christmas.

Hy mom.

How are the bride and groom doing?

Very well mom. Very well indeed.

Do you want to come over around 2pm. We can exchange presents before we eat.

That'll be fine mom. We'll pick up Penny and be there around 2. See you then.

Shelly put lunch on the table. Three eggs, six pieces of bacon, four pieces of toast and coffee. They both had an appetite after the sex. Danny did the dishes and Shelly called her mom.

Hy mama. Merry Christmas.

Hy Shelly. Merry Christmas to you and Danny.

Danny's folks want us over there around 2pm so we'll pick you up just before that, OK?

That's fine sweetie. I'm going for a little walk and I'll be waiting in the lobby for you.

OK mama. See you then.

Shelly went to the bedroom and got her present for Danny. It was a fine Omega sports watch. A Speedmaster. Waterproof and shock resistant. She brought it into the living room and sat on the couch. Danny saw the present and went into the closet to get his for Shelly. It was a gold necklace with a

diamond pendant.

Here's your present Danny.

He opened it and his eyes dilated.

Wow. It's beautiful Shelly.

You can wear it all the time Danny. It's waterproof and shock resistant. Just don't get hit with anymore logs.

Danny laughed as he gave Shelly her present. She opened it and was equally as surprised.

Oh Danny, it's beautiful. Will you help me put it on?

Danny put the necklace around her neck and closed the clasp. Then gave her a kiss on the neck. She turned around and hugged him. They didn't need to say thank you. They didn't need to say anything.

Penny was waiting in the lobby when they arrived. She walked out to the car with her hands full of small presents. Danny got out of the car to open the trunk.

You didn't have to get presents Penny.

I know, but I wanted to. They're just a few bottles of wine.

They loaded up the trunk and headed to Charlie and Judy's place. Ernie saw them coming and went out to help with the presents. The house was decorated with outside lights and the inside had a real tree with colourful ornaments. You could smell apple cider and cinnamon coming from the kitchen. Judy welcomed everyone and everyone went into the living room. It was a large house. Shelly looked around her and thought how nice it must have been growing up in this place. Penny was looking around as well. Their eyes met and they knew what each other was thinking.

Can I get some apple cider for anyone? Judy asked.

Everyone except Ernie accepted. He had already started into the wine.

Shelly and Danny got a purse for Penny, a crystal vase for Danny's folks and a book entitled "how to be successful at your own business". Charlie and Judy got wine for everyone and when they saw that Penny had done the same they laughed. Ernie didn't buy presents this year and no one judged him. He was in a transition phase and everyone knew it. It was just nice to have the whole family together.

How's the ebike design coming Ernie? Shelly asked.

Not bad. I've been doing some drawings and talking it over with Tommy. We figure we could build the prototype in his shop but there isn't enough room to manufacture there. Plus, we would have to farm out some of the construction. It's coming along but slowly. I can't believe no one has done this concept yet with ebikes. If I'm lucky I might be the first one to put this on the market. In the mean time I'm

learning as much as I can from repairing bikes. I think ebikes are only going to get bigger so I might be getting in on the ground floor.

I'm going to come see you at work next week , Shelly said. I might be in the market for a new bike. Supper's ready, Judy hollered.

Everyone took their place at the table. Charlie gave his usual welcome.....

We're not religious but I would like to thank everyone for being here today. It is nice to see our family growing.

With that he started carving the turkey and everyone loaded up their plates. The boys took twice as much as everyone else. That was normal. Penny and Shelly took a little of everything.

Penny was feeling a need to be involved in a conversation so she asked Judy.....Danny tells me you are retiring soon. Do you have travel plans or anything?

Yes we do. We love Hawaii so I think that will be our first trip. I don't know where we'll go after that. I need to find a hobby or something to fill my days.

Charlie piped in. Ya, I don't want to just sit back and do nothing. I like to tinker with old cars and I have the garage to work in so I'll find something to do.

That mustang you gave Danny is beautiful, Penny said.

Ya. That was a fun project. I think it will help Danny's image in the sales world. Speaking of which, how's the real estate market doing Danny?

Not bad dad. I have a few listings and the market is brisk. It'll be quite this week so I'm taking time off but I'll be back at it the first week of January. We looked at a house on the Gorge but it's out of our reach right now. We'll see what the new year has in store for us.

After supper the girls took care of the kitchen duties and the boys went out to the garage. Charlie was working on another car, a 57 chevy. It was almost finished and road ready. It just needed a paint job.

This is a real beauty dad, Danny said.

Ya. They're in demand right now so I should get a good dollar for it.

How much do you think?

Maybe 40k.

That much?

Ya. This one is in good shape. I rebuilt the motor and the body is solid. A few patches of bondo but not too much. When it's done I'll take you for a ride. But I wanted to talk to you boys about something.

Danny and Ernie looked at each other.

I think Ernie has a good idea with his ebike design. I have this garage and when I sell the chevy I'll have some money to spare. I'd like to invest in the prototype. We can build the prototype right here and start manufacturing if we get orders.

Wow. Ernie said. That's very generous of you dad.

Well....I'm just buying myself a part time job. I'll be retired this time next year and I'll need something to do. Why don't you do schematic drawings and we'll put a business plan together.

OK dad. I'll do that.

The boys went back into the house and sat in the living room. The girls came in with coffee for everyone. Shelly sat beside Danny and Penny sat beside her. Shelly got one of her impressions from Penny. Something wasn't right. It was probably her lungs she thought. After they finished their coffee they loaded up their presents and said their goodbyes. It was a wonderful Christmas. When they arrived at the hotel Shelly said she wanted to escort Penny to her room. In the elevator she asked Penny about her health.

I didn't want to spoil the day Shelly but yes, my lungs are not healthy. I have to watch what I do and not put a stress on them. It seems like old age is going to visit me sooner than I would like.

I felt it mama. Take care of yourself and I want you to know that Danny and I will take care of you. We are looking at getting a big house because we want to have a family and we will give you a room.

Thanks Shelly. I'm going to keep working for as long as I can. I'll probably be able to get a long term disability pension before my old age pension so I'll be OK that way. But thank you and tell Danny thanks too. I'll be catching a bus tomorrow morning back to Vancouver. It has been a wonderful Christmas. I love you.

I love you mama.

Shelly stayed in the elevator and went back to the car. Danny looked at her.

Is she OK Shelly?

Not really. Her lungs are getting weak. She's going to need help eventually.

She took Danny's hand and squeezed it. We need a big house Danny.

Shelly and Danny spent the week between Christmas and New Years canoeing and doing leisurely activities. They drove around a lot looking at the houses Danny had listed and other houses that were for sale. There were many that were well under a million dollars but they wouldn't accommodate large families. They would have to wait until they had enough money. Ernie quickly went to work on the designs for his ebike. There were parts to be sourced and costs to figure out. His predictions were pretty accurate. It would cost about \$10,000.00 to build a prototype and the bike itself would retail for about \$2,500.00. Their cost would be around \$1,250.00. Ernie was lucky to have his dad's garage for the start

up and Tommy's shop to start selling them. He decided to call the bike "Gypsy". Penny went back to her job helping other women recover from addictions and get their lives together. Her life wasn't as exciting as everyone else but she felt more at peace than ever before. Being part of her daughter's life made all the difference in the world.

Shelly went back to work after the holiday. The programs were running smoothly. The human library was accumulating quite a catalogue of personalities and was bringing more people into the library. Her yoga class filled up quickly. People were making their new year's resolution to stay healthy and were signing up for her yoga class. Danny sold a house in his first week back to work. Instead of going out to celebrate he put every dollar in their savings account. Owning a house was priority one. If sales were steady they might have enough money by summer time.

Winters were predictable in Victoria.... rain, rain and more rain. This meant Danny and Shelly stayed indoors a lot. It also meant they had lots of time to make a baby and when Shelly missed her period in April she knew she was pregnant. They were over the top excited about it and so was their family. She went to the doctor and he confirmed that she was indeed pregnant. His advice was to continue doing things as normal but to cut back on her work load. The yoga class would have to go. Danny, on the other hand, was on a roll. He had sold three houses by spring time. The house on the Gorge still hadn't sold. As it turned out it needed a new roof. That would be expensive. Ernie had started to build his prototype. He worked all day for Tommy and at night he worked on his bike. The bike itself was built but having the boxes fabricated so they fit would have to be farmed out. He approached a metal fabricating shop with his designs. He would start with three kinds of boxes....one for people wanting to transport and display their crafts, another for trades people like carpenters and a third for restaurant couriers transporting food. For now, the best metal to use would be aluminum. It was readily available and inexpensive. When the first box was completed Ernie cycled to the metal shop to take a look. They put it on the bracket and aside from a small adjustment, it fit securely and didn't rattle when the bike was in motion. The first prototype was completed. Ernie cycled back to Tommy's and show his creation.

Not bad Ernie, not bad at all. How does it handle? Tommy asked.

It's OK without a load. Let's load it up and see how it handles with weight on it.

They took a bunch of scrap bicycle parts and put them in the box. It was an extra 50 pounds on the bike. Ernie hopped on and started peddling. It was smooth. Once he got going he turned on the battery. The bike started to cruise. Ernie felt a rush of satisfaction and accomplishment. This was the maiden voyage of his enterprise. He circled back to the shop.

It needs a good paint job, he said. Then we can put it on display and see if we can get orders.

I think we should farm the paint job out too, Tommy said. It needs a professional finish.

Ernie brought the bike to a car painting shop and had them do the job. He got them to make a stencil saying "GYPSY" and put it on the back of the bike. Two weeks later the bike was sitting in Tommy's shop and getting all sorts of inquiries.

Spring time in Victoria is a beautiful season. Not only does everything start blooming but people come

out from hibernation mode. Charlie's winter car project was completed. He called Danny and Ernie and arranged a time to take them for a ride. He picked them up and went for a cruise along the ocean front. The boys were enjoying the ride and Charlie was enjoying being the chauffeur. People would stare at the car whenever it passed.

I'm going to be a little sad to see this one go, Charlie said.

You don't have to do this just for us dad, Ernie said.

That's OK Ernie. I am excited about your ebike design. I can always buy another car to fix up but it's getting to be hard work for this old body. I'm looking forward to working on a smaller vehicle.

The ocean air was sweet. Charlie took the scenic drive and dropped the boys off. Then he went back home, picked up Judy, and went for another ride. When he returned home he put the car up for sale on facebook. It sold that week for \$40,000.00. He knew it would.

Shelly and Danny were doing there finances and figured with Ernie's contribution and their savings, they were \$20,000.00 short on the down payment for their dream home. They all got together and had a meeting.

Do you think Charlie would help us with the down payment guys? Shelly asked.

I think so, Danny said. Ernie agreed. He just scored on that chevy. I guess the only way to see is to ask.

Danny picked up his cell phone and called.

Hy Dad.

Hy Danny, what's up?

Well, I'm sitting here with Shelly and Ernie. We've been going over our finances and we almost have the down stroke for that house on the gorge. We're \$20,000.00 short. We were wondering if you and mom could help us come up with the difference?

Charlie was expecting this call. He didn't want to make it too easy for his sons so he waited for them to ask.

I think I can do that.....but it's a loan, not a gift. You have to pay me back when you get on your feet with the new place.

Danny smiled at Shelly and Ernie. They knew he had agreed to help them. Danny thought he would razz his dad.....

OK dad, but can we still get your garage and free labour for a couple years out of you?

They could here Charlie's laugh on the other end of the phone.

You guys drive a hard bargain but OK. You got it.

Thanks dad. I love you.

I love you too son.

Shelly sat back on the sofa. They were going to own a house on the Gorge.

Danny approached the real estate agent that was selling the house. He negotiated a little better deal but by the time Ernie fixed up his cabin and they fixed the roof there would be very little left in their bank accounts. They took possession and the three of them did their first walk through. There was a small suite on the ground floor that would be suitable for Penny to live in. They would charge her a minimal rent to cover hydro and maintenance but the rest of the expenses would be covered by all three of them. They would keep the condo and rent it out. If things got tight they would sell it. Shelly loved the big kitchen. She envisioned growing their own vegetables and cooking jumbo zucchini boats. There was a master bedroom and a second bedroom that would be the kid's room but with so many mouths to feed she saw herself spending most of the time in the kitchen. They walked down to the waterfront. There was a small floating dock. It needed some work as well but it would be perfect for the canoe. Shelly put her arms around her boys.

We have our work cut out for us, she said.

It took several months to fix the roof and do all the renovations that needed to be done but by July they were moved into their new home. Shelly was four months pregnant and showing a noticeable baby bump. She left all the lifting to the boys and started planting a garden. Ernie had a fridge and hot plate in his cabin but came up to the house whenever he wanted a good meal. Shelly decided to order one of Ernie's ebikes. She put it on her credit card and would pay it off that way. This gave the bike project credibility. For now she just put her yoga mat in the box but told Ernie she would need a back seat for her baby. This got Ernie going on a new design. It also got Charlie busy in his garage again. When Shelly's winter yoga class was over she decided to take a break from teaching. She continued doing her own yoga and now adapted it to her pregnancy. Her only commitment was her job at the library and she would be taking maternity leave from that soon. Her life centred around making her new home as comfortable as possible. They rented their condo to a stock broker named David Bromel. His rent covered the mortgage and expenses and left a couple hundred dollars a month extra which went towards their mortgage on the house. The garden was looking better all the time. Danny kept turning more soil over and Shelly would come along and plant vegetables. They also planted an apple tree for the baby. They would grow together.

Tommy's bike shop was a busy place. There were always repairs to be done and more people were buying bicycles instead of cars. One day a woman walked into the shop. Ernie went over to help her....

Hello, may I show you something?

Yes, the woman said. I noticed your three wheeled ebike in the window. I am thinking of getting one but I can't find exactly what I'm looking for. I am a massage therapist and I do house calls. I use my car but sometimes it's hard to get parking so I have to lug the table a long ways. Do you have a bike with a box big enough to hold a collapsible massage table?

Yes... and no Ernie said. We make these bikes ourselves. The bike is the same but we fabricate custom boxes. We would have to get the measurements of your table and custom make a box to fit it. It can be done.

How much would it cost?

Between \$2,500.00 and \$3,000.00.

And how long would it take?

Around three to four weeks. I work after hours on the ebike designs.

OK, she said. I'd like to order one.

Alright, Ernie said. We would ask for \$1,500.00 down. I will figure out an exact price and you can pay the balance when it's done.

That's fine, the lady said.

Ernie went behind the counter and started writing an invoice.

What is your name?

Michelle Kern.

And your phone number?

250-987-6574

OK Michelle. We'll get right on that and get back to you. Can you phone us with the measurements of the table?

Well, it's just in the car now. Do you want to come and measure it?

OK, Ernie said.

As they walked out to her car Ernie couldn't help but notice what a pretty woman she was. He wondered if she was single or not. He looked at her ring finger and she wasn't wearing a ring but that didn't mean she wasn't married. Michelle opened the trunk and Ernie reached in with his measuring tape then wrote the measurements down.

OK Michelle. This is all I need.

He began thinking how nice it would feel to have a massage from Michelle or even better, have sex and a massage.

I'll call you in a couple weeks and let you know how it's going.

With that Michelle got in her car and drove away. Ernie immediately contacted the metal shop and ordered a box to hold a collapsible massage table.

Shelly was finding it more and more enjoyable just staying home. Her thoughts always went to her baby that would be arriving soon. She had the baby's room already prepared with a crib, dresser drawers and a closet with lots of baby blankets. Up until now she didn't know if it was going to be a boy or a girl but when she went for her next doctor's appointment she wanted to know. They arranged an ultra sound and discovered it was a girl. Now she had to come up with a name. This provided endless hours of enjoyment for her and Danny. The thought of calling her Naomie crossed her mind but that name was tinged with too much sadness. She wanted a happy name. She wondered if the baby would be bisexual and empathic. One thing she knew for sure, the baby was going to have a good home and a normal upbringing with a normal mother and father. Shelly stared out the window at her yard and the little apple tree they planted. The vegetables were beginning to pop through the ground. She went outside and walked down to the dock. Danny had put two chairs there. She sat down and enjoyed the sun. The paddle boarders waved to her as they slowly passed her yard. This was so much nicer than the orphanage she thought.

Ernie had been spending every evening in Charlie's garage working on the bike for Michelle. Charlie detected a change in his son.....

You're really keen on getting this order finished aren't you Ernie.

Well, gotta' strike while the iron's hot dad. That's what you always told us right?

Ya....I did. So who is this one for?

Ernie knew he was busted.

Ahhh....it's for a lady named Michele. She's a new customer at the shop.....and she's real pretty.

And a massage therapist to boot?

Ahhh.....ya.

Well....we better not waste anytime then. 'Don't want to keep a pretty massage therapist waiting do we?

Ernie just laughed and kept working.

Danny's year was going well. Not only did he sell three houses he had been chosen by his company to head up the sale of a twenty house development in Saanich. A farmer had passed away and his children decided to develop the land they inherited. This was the biggest deal Danny had ever undertaken. If all the houses sold he stood to make a half million dollars. The development would be ongoing for about a year but houses could sell before they were even built. It was prime land....country living but close to

Victoria. He would come home dog tired after work. Shelly was there with a good supper waiting for him. She would listen to his stories of how things were coming along. There were many political hurdles to overcome. Many of his days were spent in never ending, boring meetings with city hall. They had to make sure the developers were complying with all the building regulations. This was Danny's responsibility. If something went wrong it was on his shoulders. And lots of things did go wrong. It was a good learning process though. When it was over he would be qualified for the next development. After supper Danny collapsed on the couch. Shelly would wake him up and tell him to go to bed. He would get up, walk to the bedroom and collapse on the bed. Shelly just smiled at her husband. He was a hard worker and would be a good father.

Ernie finished Michelle's ebike in three weeks. He phoned her and let her know it was done. It came in at \$2750.00. The next day she came to pick it up. Danny took the massage table and slid it into the box. Two sides had been made collapsible so it could easily slide in.

Take it for a ride Michelle and see how it handles.

Michelle got on the bike and went for a ride. It was a bit at weird at first because it was heavy but once the battery kicked in it was easy to handle and it stopped on a dime. This would save her a fortune in gas and solve the parking problem. She drove back to Tommy's and parked the bike.

This is perfect Ernie. I'll square up with you.

Ernie went behind the counter and wrote up the invoice for the balance. Michelle payed with her credit card. He knew it was now or never so took a shot in the dark.....

Are you dateable? He asked.

Michelle laughed a small laugh and said.....yes I am.

Ernie heart began to race with anticipation.

How would you like to go out for supper this weekend?

I would like that very much Ernie. Where did you have in mind?

How about that restaurant at the inner harbour.....the Lighthouse?

That sounds fine.

OK. I'll pick you up at 7.

Michelle smiled at Ernie, turned and left the shop. She got her bike and drove away.

Danny didn't own a car so he had to make arrangements to borrow Danny's. This of course meant he would have to tell everyone he had a date and that meant he would have to answer a whole bunch of questions. Shelly was the first to deliver the interrogation.....

So what does she do?

She's a massage therapist. She goes to people's houses that aren't able to get around.

Where does she live?

OK....OK.....I just met her. When I get more information you guys will be the first to know. Ernie had enough razzing and went down to his cabin. He couldn't get Michelle off his mind. She must like canoeing he thought....but then he would have to bring her to the house and he didn't want Shelly and Danny ruining his courtship. He decided to get out on the water himself and lowered the canoe into the water. An immediate calm came over him. The next time he went canoeing he would have Michelle with him. As he was drifting in his thoughts his cell phone rang. It was Tommy.

Hy Tommy, what's up?

Hy Ernie. We need to get together. I just got a call from a Lucky's pizza. They are the biggest pizza restaurant in town and they heard about GYPSY. They want to talk about placing and order for ten bikes. Where are you now?

I'm canoeing on the Gorge Tommy.

Well, can you come in to the shop right now? We need to put some numbers on paper.

OK Tommy. I'll be there in 45 minutes.

Ernie turned the canoe around and headed back to shore. He told Shelly the news and quickly jumped on his bike. All sorts of ideas were going through his head. The box would have to be heated to keep the pizzas warm. That was the first problem. Then there would have to be something to keep the pizzas from sliding around....and so on and so on.....

When he arrived, Tommy was sketching ideas on a piece of paper.

Hy Ernie. The way I see it we have to design a box that holds the heat.....

And also prevents the pizzas from sliding around, Ernie added...

And has a lock on the box so pizzas don't get stolen when the delivery guy goes into the building...Tommy added.

Ok. Ernie said. Our first step is to contact the metal shop and get their price on this. It's going to be a lot more than the standard box.

Ya. I'm guessing the bike could be closer to four grand retail. Plus, we've been getting my dad's work for nothing so far. We gotta' pay him something.

Ya. Why don't you talk to him and I'll go over to the metal shop. This could definitely bring the shop up to the next level.

Ernie had an agreement with Tommy that they would share the costs of production and split the profit.

That worked for the first two bikes but now Ernie was thinking a little bigger. Ernie might want a partner in the shop. If they were going to get orders like this they would have to also look at another full time employee. Charlie was officially retired and would be travelling. They needed someone who was younger and looking for a career. They might be out growing Charlie's garage with this order...if they actually get the order. Ernie went to see his dad. He laid out the plan. Just as he expected, Charlie didn't want to get involved full time. He didn't mind helping to get the ebike project off the ground but he and Judy had been making plans to go to Hawaii for a holiday. He was happy to see Ernie's idea taking shape but he was going to take a smaller role in it. The next day at work Ernie had a business talk with Tommy.

How's the heated box design coming along Tommy?

I think they got it figured out. They can install small heat elements that would keep the box warm. The electricity would come from the battery. It would reduce the time of the charge but the battery would have to be recharged every six hours. Not a problem since they only deliver around supper time to early evening. It's not going to be cheap though. Our total cost will be around \$2,000.00.

Have you factored in a full time wage for one more employee? Ernie asked.

No I haven't.

Well, Charlie is on board for the project but not for free, plus he doesn't want to spend all his time working. He is retired after all.

Ya. I hear ya'. What do you suggest?

Well, we have to look at hiring another person full time. They can work at Charlie's place for this project but I think we will have to start thinking a bigger warehouse to do our assembly and manufacturing.

Tommy just looked down at the floor.

I can't afford to hire anyone else Ernie. I don't make any more than you right now. We're a step behind the game right now.

I have a proposal for you Tommy. Take me on as a partner in the business. We put all our resources into this project. If it clicks we split the profit and watch the company grow...together. If not.....I don't know. We can't pull this off without the help of a full time employee....and we have to pay Charlie as well. He is giving us his garage for nothing not to mention all the work he did for free on the first two bikes.

OK Tommy. It's all or nothing time. I'll call my lawyer and have him draw up some partnership papers. We're fucked if this doesn't work, you know that eh?

We'll make it work Tommy. This ebike thing is going to take off.

So, as of now neither of us is making a wage, right?

That's right. Do you know anyone who wants to work for us?

Maybe.

Let's give our quote to Lucky's only tell them their cost is \$4,500.00 per bike and we need a 50% deposit to start the job.

OK Ernie.....here we go.

Ernie went back to doing the repairs that were backing up in the shop. We can't forget our bread and butter he thought. He realized he had just committed to a seven day work week. Friday rolled around and he went to pick up Michelle. She looked beautiful. She wore simple clothes but bright colours. When they sat down at the restaurant Ernie told her all about his new ebike enterprise. It felt good to have a sounding board because there was a good possibility it might not work. Michelle was self employed. She chose that route as opposed to working in a clinic and having to share the costs of secretaries and office space. It allowed her to work a thirty hour week and make the same amount of money, plus, she was building her own clientele. She was also able to charge a higher rate for her services because she had to travel to get to her clients' homes.

They ordered seafood plates and a couple glasses of wine. Supper was comfortable. Michelle liked canoeing and they agreed to do that one day. Ernie just didn't know when he would have time. After supper they drove around town. Ernie brought her back to her place.

Well, here we are. I had a.....

Before he could finish what he was saying Michelle gave him a kiss on the lips.

This was nice Ernie. Keep in touch.

She opened the door and left. Ernie sat in the car and thought....I think this went well. When he returned to the car Danny and Shelly were waiting for a progress report which he happily delivered. He also brought them up to speed on the partnership with Tommy.

It's going to work out Ernie, I just know it, Shelly said.

It will, Danny added. We'll cover you if you can't make the rent. We're family and we're in this together.

When Danny said that Shelly got the warmest sensation. This is how families are supposed to be she thought. Everyone helps everyone else. She put her hand on her belly. You are coming into a functional family she thought. Shelly went and sat in the rocking chair that was in the baby's room. It had a view of the Gorge. She dreamed of holding her baby in her arms and staring out the window. She picked up her cell phone and called Danny.

Hy Shelly, what's up.

I want to call my mom and invite her to the house for a few days. I'm feeling like I need her. She can get comfortable with her room and help me plan things for the baby's arrival. I think I'm ready to take my maternity leave.

OK honey. I'll be home late tonight. I got some buyers looking at the new development. Do we need

anything?

Just each other Danny....just each other.

Shelly called Penny and invited her to come for a few days. When she went to work the next morning she started the maternity leave paper work. Penny started looking into her retirement from her job. She was excited for the arrival of her grand daughter. That weekend Penny came from Vancouver and spent every minute with Shelly. She loved the room they had prepared for her. It was much nicer than her apartment in Vancouver. She also loved the garden. Her life to this point had been a struggle but it looked like retirement was going to be fun. Shelly was officially on maternity leave now so she had lots of time. It was August. The baby would be arriving some time in December. Penny and Shelly walked upstairs to the main part of the house. They sat in the sun room and discussed possible names for the baby. It was getting close to supper time so Shelly went into the kitchen and started preparing the meal. It would just be her and Penny at the table. Danny was working late and so was Ernie.

Those boys are hard working, Penny said.

Yes they are mama. I almost feel guilty....but not really. I got the maternity leave in place so I will have almost two years off with pay. Not bad eh?

Not bad at all Shelly.

How is your retirement looking mama?

It's OK. They'll give me a long term medical disability deal until I turn sixty. Then old age pension will kick in and the disability will be cut back somewhat. So basically I'll take home about \$1600. I can give you half of that for rent.

That's too much mama, Shelly said. Just give us \$500 for now. When I go back to work I'll need you to babysit just about every day. I would like to see you slowly build up a savings for yourself.

Penny walked over and hugged Shelly.

Thank you sweetie. That's generous of you. I'll be a good grand mother.

Shelly finished the cooking and Penny set the table for two. She was learning where everything was in the kitchen. She had her own kitchenette downstairs but she knew she would be upstairs helping out a lot. From the kitchen Shelly could see Ernie pull up in a car. It was Michelle's car. They walked to Ernie's cabin.

Looks like they are becoming an item, Shelly said....and then proceeded to bring Penny up to speed on Ernie's new girlfriend and his ebike enterprise.

Those boys are both very bright. You should feel lucky, Penny said.

I do mama. Ernie is building a bike for me and they just landed a contract for 20 pizza delivery bikes. We are all into this house together. I still have the condo as well. We rent that out so we are real land barons now.

I'm so proud of you Shelly. You have made all the right decisions.

Shelly just smiled at Penny and started to pick up the dishes from the table.

Let me do that, Penny said. You just sit down and relax.

OK mama but can you put the left overs on a big plate? Danny will be starved when he comes home.

Penny started doing the dishes and preparing a plate of food for Danny. Shelly just sat in a comfortable chair and rubbed her belly. It was late September and she was six months pregnant. Her back was starting to hurt all the time no matter how much yoga she did. Penny could see that she was in some pain.

Have you signed up for any Le Mans classes Shelly?

Not yet mama but I will this week I think. I'm really starting to feel different in my body. It's hard to get comfortable in any position.

Penny finished the dishes and came over to Shelly.

Lay on your side here Shelly. I'm going to rub your back.

Shelly laid on the couch and Penny stated to massage her. She knew all the spots that would be hurting. It brought her back to the days when she was carrying Shelly. She had no one then. It was such a lonely experience. She shut the world out for nine months. Now she could comfort her daughter and give her what every pregnant mother needs. It made her feel good and gave her another sense of motherhood.

That feels so good mama. Thank you. Maybe I'll get a massage table.

Danny arrived and walked in the door. He saw Penny comforting Shelly, walked over to her and gave her a hug, then bent over and kissed Shelly.

There's a plate of food in the fridge Danny, Penny said. You just have to micro wave it.

Thanks mom, Danny said. He had started calling Penny mom because she was starting to feel that way to him.

How was work? Shelly chirped.

Very busy. Things are coming along fine at the development. We have had an offer to buy the whole project before it is even finished. My boss is leery about doing that because he won't make as much profit as he would if he sold every unit himself. He'd still make two million dollars and I would make four hundred thousand so I think we should do it but it's not my call. Right now the market is strong but it could fall at any time. It would be nice to take a guaranteed profit. We would both make more if we hung on but it would be nice to have the cash now, pay off dad and get ahead of ourselves.

The micro wave bell went off. Supper was ready. Danny sat down and devoured his meal. Shelly got up and joined him at the table. Penny said her good nights and went down to her suite.

I think I'd like to get a massage table for the house Danny. Maybe Ernie's girlfriend could help me.

Ya. They seem to come up for air once a day so maybe you could catch her when they do.

Shelly just laughed.

Ya. I'm happy for Ernie. He's a good man and deserves a nice girl friend. I think his ebike idea is going to really take off. What do you think?

I think so too. If I make money on this development I'd like to put some of it into their bike store. We should pay dad off first and take a chunk off our mortgage as well but there should be plenty off cash to stay comfortable.

Shelly got up and kissed Danny goodnight.

I'm going to bed sweetie.

The next morning Shelly saw Ernie and Michelle leaving his cabin. She went outside to greet them.

Hy guys.

Hy Shelly. How are you doing.

I'm well. 'Starting to feel more aches and pains though. Mom gave me a massage last night and it felt good. I'd like to buy a massage table and was wondering if Michelle could help me?

I have an old one I don't use anymore Shelly. The legs are little wobbly but could be reinforced. You can have it for free. It's just taking up space in my apartment.

I can do that, Ernie said. We can bring it to the bike shop and I'll fix it there.

Thanks guys. That would be super.

Shelly walked into the garden and started looking at everything. Ernie and Michelle said goodbye to each other and then Ernie joined Shelly in the garden.

Looks like things are moving along with you two, Shelly said.

Ya. It's nice Shelly. She's a real nice woman. I got lucky here.

How's the bike shop going Ernie?

It's good. I'm partners with Tommy now. We aren't collecting a wage but the Lucky Pizza job will be finished soon and we'll make ten thousand each on that. I think we'll do OK in time. I'm working seven days a week and haven't had any time to get out on the water. Maybe this weekend Michelle and I will do some canoeing.

How about asking her for supper on Sunday Ernie? These zucchini are getting huge. I'll make boats. Mom is visiting for a while so we can have a nice family meal.

Sounds good Shelly. I'll ask her.

Sunday was a day of rest for everyone except Danny. He was trying to stay on top of all the problems that needed solving with the development. Shelly and Penny had gathered the large zucchini and other vegetables for supper. Ernie and Michelle bought a couple pies for desert. Shelly was pleased with this because her sweet tooth had grown exponentially since she was pregnant. She had a piece with some milk before they even started to prepare supper. Ernie had fixed Michelle's old massage table and assembled it in the sun room. This also pleased Shelly. She was getting used to being pampered. She wasn't expecting all this attention but everyone wanted to contribute to her comfort and well being. Her pregnancy was the centre of attention and most conversations eventually gravitated to that topic. Ernie and Michelle went down to the dock and put the canoe in the water. The Gorge was protected from the high winds that came off the ocean and was usually calm. Today was no different. It was a cool autumn day but the sun was shining. Shelly and Penny went up to the kitchen and started carving out the inside of the zucchini. They made some rice and stir fried some vegetables. That was loaded into the zucchini. A layer of tomato sauce was put on top and another layer of cheese on top of that. They had four boats in all. They took the fresh garden vegetables and made a huge salad. When this was done they went and sat in the sun room. Shelly phoned Danny.

Hy Danny.

Hy Shelly.

How's it going?

Not too bad. I should be finished by five o'clock and I'll be home around six.

OK. Everything is prepared so I'll put the boats in the oven around five.

OK. I'll be home around six for sure.

Everything was done. Shelly could just relax and watch people playing on the water. She couldn't help but think of Naomie. How she would have loved this house. It just wasn't meant to be she thought. Penny started asking what the latest possibilities were for the baby's name.

Well, my latest one is Marina...something....Horton.

Oh that's pretty Shelly. She'll be beside the water all her life so that's most appropriate. Have you shared it with Danny?

Not yet. I'm sure he has some of his own so we'll see.

Shelly could see Ernie and Michelle on the water. They were heading back to shore. After pulling the canoe onto the dock they walked up to the house and joined Shelly and Penny in the sun room. Michelle was a quiet person but had a confident vibe about her. She hadn't really had a conversation with Shelly yet because she was spending all her time with Ernie in the cabin.

I've made some coffee, Shelly said. Would you like a piece of pie and some coffee?

That would be nice, Michelle said.

Ernie was a little more hungry than that and helped himself to some left overs in the fridge. He could do that without asking permission. Shelly made him feel at home that way.

So how long have you been a message therapist, Shelly asked.

Seven years now. I worked in other offices for the first five but I prefer to work on my own. Plus, the clients I have tend to be less mobile and have more needs than average. I enjoy that kind of work.

Shelly was starting to get impressions from Michelle. Her back was getting week from the work she did. Bending over a massage table can be harmful posture she thought. Michelle surprised Shelly with her question....

Ernie tells me you do empathic work.

Shelly paused for second before answering. It was as if she could read Michelle's body and her mind.

Well, I was doing it for a doctor and also my yoga students but I have taken a break since I became pregnant.

Shelly really didn't want to get into it at this moment but couldn't see a way out without being rude.

I can feel that you have some back problems Michelle. I think it's from doing your work. I would imagine it is an occupational hazard for massage therapist. You might want to start doing some strengthening exercises or yoga for that.

Michelle was amazed at how accurate Shelly was.

I am not teaching yoga until I have recovered from having the baby but I can certainly recommend someone.

Perhaps I could get her contact info after supper. I think I should start do more exercises for sure.

Shelly didn't want to get into her empathic stuff with Michelle because she knew it would drain her energy. Instead, she got up and started putting supper together.

Danny will be home in an hour or so, she said. I'm going to put those zucchini boats in the oven and prepare the salmon. Can you set the table mama?

Ceratinly Shelly.

Can I help? Asked Michelle.

If you want to make the salad that would be helpful. You and Ernie could get some vegetables from the garden if you like.

Ernie and Michele went down to pick some vegetables. The garden was full of three different types of lettuce, two kinds of parsley, carrots, onions, cabbage and broccoli which could grow all year round in Victoria.

What a wonderful luxury to have a garden like this, Michelle said.

It is nice, Ernie agreed. I can't take any credit for it though. It has mostly been Shelly and Danny's work.

You have a nice family Ernie, Michelle replied. All my relatives are back east so I rarely see them.

Well, you can consider yourself part of this one if you want. Shelly is very friendly and appreciates family activities. I told you she grew up in an orphanage so she has had to build her own family. Her and Danny are going to make good parents and I'm looking forward to being an uncle.

Michelle walked over to the outdoor tap to rinse the vegetables then carried them into the kitchen. Shelly had a huge salad bowl waiting for her.

Will this be enough? Michelle asked.

It should be but you never know. My boys have big appetites and so do I now that I'm pregnant. I can't believe the amount of food I'm putting away.

That's normal, Michelle said. In fact it's healthy. I have had several clients who were pregnant and it's a good sign.

Shelly heard Danny's car pull up in the driveway. A warm feeling came over her. Their love was growing along with the little human that was inside her. He came in the door and went right over to her to give her a kiss.

Hello my love.

Shelly put both arms around him and laid her head on his shoulder. They moved slightly to the left and right as if they were dancing. Danny could feel the baby against his belly. They were three together. At that moment the timer went off on the stove.

The zucchini boats should be ready Danny. I'll get supper on the table. Do you want some coffee?

OK, Danny said. He knew everything was under control so he just took his place at the supper table. Shelly took the boats out of the oven and started to carve them. The salmon was also ready so she prepared five plates which Penny brought over to the hungry crew. Everyone waited for Shelly to be seated.....

OK, Shelly said. It's nice to have everyone here for supper. Let's dig in.

How is your work going Danny? Penny asked.

It's keeping me very busy mom. I think we might be selling the whole project before it is even completed. We got an offer from a Vancouver developer. My boss is going to think about it overnight

but I think he'll go for it.

Will you still make the same amount of profit?

Not really but the cash flow would be immediate and that would take a lot of pressure off us. I would rather do it that way but it's my boss's call.

That's great news Danny.

How is your suite downstairs mom? Is it comfortable?

It's perfect Danny. I'm going to be moving over in a couple weeks and really looking forward to it. I'm so grateful.

It'll be nice to have you here Penny.

Everyone finished supper and only Danny and Ernie had room for desert. No surprise Shelly thought.

Penny started to pick up the dishes. She wouldn't let Shelly do any more work. Michelle dished out some desert for the boys and then started to clean the dishes. Penny began drying them and putting them in the cupboard. She knew where everything went by now. Shelly sat in her favourite chair and stared at the garden. It had become a pleasant pastime for her. This year's garden was bountiful but next year's would even be better. She began to plan what she would plant. More preserves she thought. More squash for soup which she would freeze and more berries. Danny finished his desert and sat in the chair next to her. He held her hand and they looked at the garden together. Michelle and Ernie went back to his cabin and Penny went down to her suite.

What do you think of the name Marina for our baby? Shelly asked.

That's pretty, Danny replied. Marina Horton. I like that. What shall her middle name be?

I haven't got that far yet. Do you have any ideas?

I'll sleep on it and give it some thought.

Danny put his hand on Shelly's belly. Marina.....we are waiting for you.

Danny gave Penny a ride to the bus station the next morning. Michelle and Ernie were already gone and Shelly walked into the garden by herself. She was finding it difficult to bend over so she didn't do any weeding. The garden needed it though. Oh well, she thought. It is the end of the growing season so the garden will just have to wait. She walked further down to the dock and took a seat. The canoeists and paddle boarders waved as they slowly passed by. It would be another restful day for Shelly and Marina. Shelly imagined what it must have been like for her mother when she was pregnant. There certainly wouldn't have been the luxuries Shelly had. A wave of sadness came over her. Sadness for her mother and sadness that she didn't know her when she was young. She felt like she wanted her mother beside her. Then she started to think about Naomie and that made her even sadder. There was no reason to feel these sad feelings. Life couldn't be better. She picked up her cell phone and called her

mom.

Hy mom. I just needed to talk to you. I don't know why but I am feeling extremely sad. I enjoyed your visit and supper with everyone but today I am overwhelmed with sadness.

That's common Shelly. Your body is going through radical changes. All your nutrients are being used up by your baby. You have to keep putting more food into your belly. Get some blueberry pie and ice cream. It's a terrific cure for what is ailing you.

Is it that simple mama?

It can be honey. I'm sure you have regular doctor's appointments so talk about it with him the next time you see him. In the mean time....just enjoy the treats.

OK mama. When will you be coming over for good?

I'll be there at the end of the month. I just have a few loose ends to tie up.

I really need you by my side mama. I feel so strange carrying this baby.

It's a strange feeling for sure Shelly. There's nothing like it. Take care my dear. Mama loves you.

Hearing those words made Shelly feel a lot better. She walked up to the house, got on her ebike and headed for the grocery store. She bought an apple pie, a blueberry pie and a large bucket of butterscotch ripple ice cream. She drove home using the electric power. She could feel she was weaker in her legs. When she got home she immediately cut a large piece of apple pie and covered it with ice cream. Five minutes later she was feeling better. She went into the bedroom and had a nap.

It was October.. Shelly was starting her third trimester. She and Danny had been taking the Lamaze pregnancy course together. They did all the things they were supposed to do but Shelly still felt the uncomfortable pains of carrying a baby. She found herself being short tempered with Danny. This was also part of the process Danny learned. Who else could she vent her frustrations on? He took it in stride and acted out the role of compassionate hubby. Shelly would apologize after one of her outburst and Danny would just try to love her more. It wasn't easy. There is no practice run for this experience. Ernie and Michelle were also supportive. Michelle came over and gave Shelly massages. This was the best therapy for Shelly. She felt like her hormones were on a circus ride and Michelle's touch calmed everything down.

Penny had moved into the ground floor suite. This also helped Shelly. They would take short walks together and talk about the baby. Marina was going to be her first name but they still hadn't decided on a middle name. Shelly wanted something from nature. Danny was at the point where he was just going to accept the name Shelly wanted. The last thing he wanted was to disagree over the name. Shelly and Penny were sipping herb tea when the phone rang. It was Danny.

Hy Shelly, I just got good news. My boss has decided to sell the whole development before it's even finished.

That's terrific Danny. I'm so happy for you.

It's going to make everything easier. The deal should close next week. I'll still be handling the real estate for a few months until all the buildings are completed but we are in for a big chunk of cash real soon. I'm coming home, do you want me to pick up anything for you?

Yes please. More apple pie and ice cream. I'm out.

Danny laughed.

OK honey, will do.

Shelly passed the news on to Penny.

That's so good Shelly. You're lucky to have such a good man.....and I'm lucky to have such good family.

Shelly called Ernie to let him know the news. He was also pleased.

Why don't you come over for supper tonight Ernie? Shelly asked.

OK, he replied. I've been working late these days but this is cause for celebration.

Shelly went downstairs to Penny's sweet and got her to come into the garden to help pick some vegetables for supper. She found it difficult bending down so Penny did the harvesting while Shelly told her the good news.

That's terrific Shelly. I'm so happy for all of you.

All of us mama, Shelly said. This means we won't have financial stress and you don't have to worry either.

Penny put her large bowl of vegetables down and gave Shelly a big hug. They didn't say anything. They just stood in the middle of the garden sharing their joy. Shelly looked at the apple tree they had planted for the baby. They had decided on Marina as a first name and at that moment the name Noel came to Shelly. She would be born close to Christmas so it made sense. Marina Noel Horton. Shelly rubbed her belly and felt the baby kick.

Ouch, she shrieked. The baby must have read her thoughts and realized she had just been given a full name. Shelly enjoyed being pregnant. It was a miraculous feeling every day and she had planned her life well enough to give Marina a safe and happy home. Good on me she thought. There won't be any orphanage for you Marina. I will teach you everything I know and guide you. Mother, daughter and grandmother walked up to the house and started to prepare supper. Danny came in the door and gave Shelly a big hug. Shelly told him she thought of a middle name for Marina and Danny immediately agreed. They held each other feeling the baby between their bellies. In a short time the baby would be born and they could hold her in their arms. Danny walked over to Penny and gave her a hello kiss then put on a pot of coffee. Supper was under control so Danny just sat back and enjoyed his coffee. Ernie pulled up on his bike, came in and sat down with Danny at the table.

So, good news today bro!

It sure is. Basically I'm going to get a check for 400k and keep my job until the project is completed. It's not as much as I'd make if we saw the project through to the end but it's a good deal any way you look at it. My boss is going to make two and a half million so he's happy. I'm going to pay dad off as well plus I think we should buy him and mom a ticket to Hawaii.

That's a good idea, Shelly said. We couldn't have bought this place without their help. Do you have any other plans for the profit?

I think we should put most of it in the bank. At some point I would like to own some revenue property so when we get older we don't have to work so hard. I also want to keep investing in Ernie's business. It's going to be a good business for a long time and I can see it employing several people.

Thanks, Ernie said. We're doing good there. I think the next step is to buy a commercial place where we can do more manufacturing and assembly. Right now we have to farm out a lot of that and it would be good to keep it all in house.

I'd like to buy a video camera and a computer for you Penny. When the baby is born it would be nice to document her growth.

Penny had been silent while she was preparing supper. She just enjoyed hearing these smart young people plan their lives.

Thanks Danny. That would be fun.

This would get Penny even more involved in the family. Danny liked Penny a lot and felt compassion for her. He couldn't imagine how difficult her youth must have been. When the baby was born and Shelly went back to work she would play an even more important role in the family. She would be the nanny/baby sitter.

Penny set the table and started putting food in front of the boys. They politely waited for her and Shelly to sit down and started to devour the food. Penny looked at Shelly with a grin. Shelly knew what she was thinking. Her boys were hungry dogs. It was almost comical.

Danny closed the real estate deal the next week and his boss cut him a check for \$400,000.00. He immediately put it in his bank account and wrote a check for \$20,000.00 to his father. He went to the travel agent and inquired about a package deal to Hawaii for his mom and dad. That would cost another \$7,000.00. He phoned his dad and invited him to lunch downtown. They met at Romeo's pizza. Charlie was waiting for Danny when he arrived.

Hy dad.

Hello son. How is everything going? How's Shelly?

Before he could answer, the waitress appeared and took their order. Danny ordered a chicken burger and Charlie ordered a plate of pasta.

Things are great dad, Danny said. Then he pulled the check out of his pocket and gave it to his dad.

Charlie looked at it and chuckled. I knew you would come through son. You're a good lad. Did that real estate deal close for you?

It did. We sold the whole development before the houses were even finished. It meant less money in the long run but I just made 400k. I also want to buy a ticket for you and mom to Hawaii. That's the interest on the loan so to speak.

Thanks son but I don't know when we can take that trip. I have some bad news. Your mom has cancer. It might be treatable and she has already started some chemo therapy but she's not going to be able to travel for a while. Let's just hold on that until we see how she does.

The news hit Danny hard. He simply never thought about the mortality of either of his parents. Life had been dealing him nothing but good cards lately and now he had to cope with this. All of a sudden he lost his appetite.

Your mom would like to see Shelly a little more Danny, I think it would be good for her. She's so excited about the arrival of her grand daughter.

Danny just sat in disbelief and had to force himself to respond to his dad.

Sure dad. I'll tell Shelly and we'll arrange a supper or something.

No, Charlie said. She doesn't want to be around a group of people. She just wants to spend time with Shelly. She's afraid she might not make it to Christmas and wants to meet her grandchild more than anything. Shelly is due sometime before Christmas isn't she?

Ya. Around the 14th or so. I'll tell Shelly the news and she can set up a schedule with mom. Did you know about Shelly's empathic work that she did?

No I didn't.

Danny proceeded to tell him how Shelly had this intuitive power that she used to help people, although she hadn't been doing it since she got pregnant.

Wow, Charlie said. That's one amazing woman you got their Danny.

I know dad.....I know. She is quiet about her skills because some people don't get it and it could cause problems. She's not a miracle worker but even doctors use her to help their patients that are blocked.

Father and son sat slowly eating their lunch. Life had just dropped a bomb on them. Danny tried to stay focused on his new daughter that was due soon but couldn't help thinking about his mom. One person comes into the world and one leaves. This is just how life works. They finished their lunch and gave each other a big hug.

I'll tell the news to Shelly today dad.

Danny went straight home to find Shelly sitting in the garden watching Penny weeding the plants that were still growing.

Danny! Shelly said with surprise. What are you doing home?

I just had lunch with dad and paid him off. I'm afraid I have some bad news.

Penny stood up and said....should I leave Danny?

No please stay Penny. I just found out my mom has cancer. Dad says she wants to see Shelly and spend some time with her because she hopes she lasts long enough to see her grandchild but if she doesn't she just wants to be around Shelly.

Penny walked over to Danny and gave him a hug. I'm so sorry Danny. If I can do anything to help let me know.

Thanks Penny.

Shelly sat in her chair and stared at the water. The tide was going out.

Ok Danny. I imagine she won't be in great shape to drive around town. I should probably go to her. I'm going to need a chauffeur and I think it's time we got a mini van. We'll need it when Marina arrives.

Danny nodded his head in agreement.

I'll go make some coffee, Penny said.

Danny sat on the ground beside Shelly. She put her hand on his shoulder but had no words to say.

Danny took the next day off work. Shelly, Penny and he went shopping for a min van and a video camera. They decided on Toyota with special seats for children. Danny got Penny to test drive it because she would be the principle driver....for a while anyway. They then went to Karisdale camera and purchased a video camera, a slightly better model than Shelly already had. Danny took his car while Penny and Shelly took the new van and headed to see Judy. When they arrived Judy was sitting in a comfortable chair in the living room. She looked white as a ghost. Danny gave his mom a hug and started to cry.

There there son. It's Ok. Your mom's just going through what we all do....eventually.

Charlie put on a pot of coffee and tea for Shelly. Afterwards Judy said.....I love you all but I would like to spend some time alone with Shelly.

Everyone understood. Penny left by herself while Charlie and Danny headed off in his car for a drive. They went to see Ernie at the bike shop.

I'll be back to pick you up in a couple hours, Penny said. She got in the new van and headed back home to do more weeding. She wanted to make their garden immaculate.

Shelly and Judy began to bond on a deeper level. Shelly could feel Judy's cancer was terminal and running fast. She hoped that she would see her grand daughter but didn't know for sure. Judy began to tell how she had her hands full raising two boys and how happy she was that Shelly was going to have a girl. They could do girl things together. She pulled out her knitting and showed her the things she had already knitted for Marina.....a hat and socks. Shelly was impressed.

Can you show me how to knit Judy?

Of course I can Shelly.

She got two needles , some wool and started showing her the basics. Shelly thought this would be a good way for them to pass the time in the days to come.

Charlie tells me you have empathic skills. Judy said.

Shelly looked at Judy and like so many other times before she didn't want to tell the feelings she was getting.....but she knew she would.

Yes I do Judy but I haven't been using them since I got pregnant. It kind of drains me you know.

What do you get from me? Judy asked.

Shelly knew she would have to tell Judy the truth but she thought carefully and altered her impressions a bit.....

I feel that your cancer is running very fast and you won't beat it....but I think you will be here to see your grand daughter.

Shelly thought this might give Judy a bit more will to live and that couldn't hurt.

Thank you Shelly. I sure hope so. I know I'm not going to beat this cancer, it's too aggressive. I feel worse every day. That's why I want to spend time with you. I feel most comfortable in your presence. Tell me about your life.

Shelly told Judy of her orphanage upbringing, her love of books, yoga, how she met Danny and how she met her mother. She left out the part about her sexuality. That wasn't necessary and Judy might not understand it. Judy just kept knitting all the while she was listening to Shelly. It was soothing her. She would nod off occasionally but then come back and have to recount her stitches. Shelly saw Penny pull up in the van. The door bell rang and Shelly let her in.

I'm going home now Judy. I'll come and see you as often as I can. How about afternoons like 2pm or so?

I would really appreciate that Shelly.

Shelly leaned over and gave her a soft kiss on the cheek. Judy looked up at her and gave a weak smile. Shelly got in the van and they headed home. Penny was happy to be the designated driver because Shelly broke down and cried.

You are a kind and giving soul Shelly, her mom said. She could tell Shelly had given Judy an impression session. When they got home Shelly went to her bedroom and had a nap. Penny went into the kitchen and started preparing a large batch of cabbage roles with the cabbage she had harvested from the garden. She would freeze them so it would be easy for Shelly to re heat them.

Ernie took the news just as hard as Danny did. Theirs was a functional family and it hurt that much more. Charlie and Danny walked around the shop looking at all the bikes. There were two new models of e bikes on the floor. His business was coming along nicely. They just had to figure out how to do more of the manufacturing theme selves instead of farming it out.

That problem will solve itself Ernie, Charlie said. You are growing slowly and that's a good thing. Don't rush into anything before you have all the angles figured out.

Danny took his dad back home and headed home himself. It wasn't often that he got home before supper time. Penny was in the kitchen and Shelly had just woken up from her nap. They sat around the table and some tea and coffee.

Danny, Shelly said, I did a reading on your mom. I told her I think the cancer is terminal but I also told her I think she will be with us long enough to see the baby. I don't know if that's true or not but I thought it would give her a little more hope and something to look forward to.

I understand Shelly. It's good of you to commit time for her but don't over extend your energy at her expense. You only have so much to give.

I know Danny. I will be careful. Now that we have the van mom can drive me anywhere. I'm learning how to knit as well. Judy has already made a hat and a pair of socks for Marina. They are so sweet.

Penny put the last of the cabbage rolls in the fridge and went downstairs to her suite. It was a bit draining for her too. Her role in the family just had more responsibilities added to it. Ernie drove up the driveway on his bike, waved at everyone through the window and went to his cabin. It had been an exhausting day for everyone.

Danny didn't want to see Shelly do any more work today so he suggested they go out for pizza. Shelly was into that. They went to Romeo's which was a favourite restaurant of theirs. The staff recognized them and also noticed how much bigger Shelly was getting.

When are you due? the waitress asked.

Eight or nine weeks, Shelly replied. It's getting a bit tedious. I think pizza and cheese cake will help.

They ordered a large pizza and were surprised when the waitress brought the cheese cake first. Just in case you need a pastry fix before supper she said.

Shelly laughed and took a few bites. It really did send a good feeling through her body. She and Danny

started to laugh and have a good time for the first time in what was a most stressful day. Their family was growing but they still had that feeling between them that they had when they met. For a short time they forgot about everyone else and just enjoyed each other's company. The pizza arrived and they dug in. Danny was starved as usual and Shelly was too. She was eating for two now and couldn't believe how hungry she was. She kept up with Danny as they polished off the pizza. Then she finished the cheese cake as well.

I feel much better, she said with a sigh. That should hold me until breakfast. Let's take a drive and look at Christmas lights Danny. I think we should put some up at the house too. What do you think?

Good idea Shelly. I'll do that this weekend.

Victoria is a pretty city at Christmas time. Oak Bay and the Uplands go all out with lights and decorations. Shelly enjoyed watching children playing around the colourful lights. Santa Claus was still real for them. A wave of sadness came over her. She flashed back to Christmas time in the orphanage. Her family was Bobby and Naomie. Thinking about Naomie made her even sadder. Don't do this she told herself. Don't let your mind even go there. Think of what you have now. She instinctively put her hand on Danny's shoulder. This brought her back from the dark thoughts that were running through her mind. She looked at Danny and felt all the security a good husband and father could give her. Let's go home Danny, she said. It's been a long day.

Shelly spent the next few days simply trying to stay comfortable. She tossed and turned in bed, then got up to sit in a chair, then moved around the house because sitting wasn't comfortable either. She decided it would be best to get out of the house and go visit Judy. Penny drove her there and went downtown to look for a laptop. Judy was happy to see Shelly again. It was one of a very few bright spots in her life now. Shelly gave her a hug and a kiss and took her seat in the rocking chair that was reserved for her.

How are you doing Shelly?

Oh Judy.....I can't get comfortable. Every time I move something else in my body hurts.

I know how you feel my dear but you will forget it all when the baby arrives. I've started another blanket. Here....you take the needles and keep going on it. I think it will take your mind off the pain.

Shelly gladly took the needles and wool. Judy was right. It got her mind going in another direction.

Tell me about you and Charlie mom. How did you meet?

Well, Charlie and I were teenage sweet hearts. We dated in high school. When he was eighteen he bought a motorcycle. That's what really got me hooked on him. We would ride all over the island. It felt so free and I felt like I was special. Other kids still didn't have their driver's licence. We both worked wherever we could but didn't settle down because we liked to travel on the bike. There were lot's of car shows in California. We would drive down there and stop wherever we felt like it. Everything was cheaper then. We could travel for a week on a couple hundred dollars.

Judy stared out the window and got into one of her memory moods. Shelly could see that and just let her drift for a while before bringing her back.

So when did you get married?

Judy shook her head and smiled.

Back then you didn't need a college education to get a government job and they were hiring like crazy so we both got jobs in different departments. We rented small suites and saved as much money as we could. After we were together for about seven years I got pregnant with Danny. That's when Charlie asked me to marry him. It was so easy to say yes. He wanted to have a family just like Danny does now. We bought this house and have lived in it ever since. We were lucky really. We were never out of work and the jobs had medical plans and all those lovely perks that government workers enjoy. Charlie was a good father. He spent a lot of time working on cars and motorcycles. He would enjoy them for a while, sell them and get another project going.

Shelly was getting a deeper insight into Judy's life. Her story was simple and compelling. She looked at her blanket and realized that she had knitted four inches while Judy was talking....and...her physical pain had subsided. She didn't want to leave the rocking chair.

So that's how me and Charlie started out, Judy continued. Then Ernie came along. He was completely different from Danny but they got along as good as two brothers could. They had their fights for sure. Sometimes Charlie would go out to the yard and have to pull them apart. That's when I wished I had a little girl. Boys can be so rough you know.

Shelly kept soaking up the stories and didn't say anything.....words get in the way when you have nothing to say.

Shelly saw Penny coming up the driveway to the house. She slowly got out of the rocking chair and opened the door. Penny came in with her video camera.

I was wondering if I could get some footage of the two of you knitting?

Sure, Judy said. Come in, come in.

Shelly went back to her rocking chair. Penny turned the camera on took some footage. This would go nicely in the video she was planning.

We should get going, Shelly said. I want to do some cooking today. I'll see you again soon Judy.

Shelly leaned over and gave her a kiss on the cheek. Judy smiled and went back to her knitting. It was another great visit for her. Charlie walked in the house as Penny and Shelly were walking out. He gave Shelly a hug.

Thanks for coming to visit her Shelly. She really looks forward to it. See you soon.

They drove home in silence. Penny admired her daughter's courage and warmth. When they got home Shelly made some tea for herself and coffee for her mom. Then she took out some chicken from the fridge and started preparing supper. Penny went out to the garden and picked some vegetables. The garden was getting thinner and only some broccoli, cabbage and squash remained. Next year she would plant more. There would be more time to prepare. When she went back to the house Danny had arrived. He was making a point of getting home earlier to spend time with Shelly. He was sipping a coffee and Penny could tell he was upset. It was emotionally difficult to be bringing a child into the world and

watching your mother prepare to leave the world. Penny started making a salad and boiling the vegetables.

I bought a lap top today, she said. I'm going to start making videos.

That's nice mama, Shelly said.

Danny just nodded his head. He wasn't in the mood for small talk. He didn't have his usual appetite. After supper he just went into the living room and laid down on the couch. Shelly went into the bedroom and Penny did the dishes. Sadness had come over the house.

November was a cold month. The winter rains had arrived and the sun rarely peaked through the clouds. Danny and Ernie made regular trips to stay with their mom or take her doctor's appointments. Charlie was getting worn out from the mental strain. He was watching the love of his life slowly slip away from him. Shelly's visits became more sporadic although she had now knitted three blankets and enough socks to last Marina a couple years. She preferred to stay home and let her mother help with the house hold chores like cooking and cleaning. They would take short walks in the neighbourhood and then Shelly would retreat to the comfort of her couch or bed. She was due in less than three weeks and it couldn't come soon enough. Each day seemed like a week. She hoped that Marina would arrive while Judy was still alive but she wasn't concerned about that as much these days. She just wanted to have the baby and in the second week of December she did. She felt her water break at noon on December 12th. Penny rushed her to the hospital and she went into labour. Penny phoned Danny and he got to the hospital as quick as he could. When he arrived he saw Shelly lying on the delivery table with Penny and the nurses surrounding her. He put on a mask, some scrubs and stood at the foot of the bed offering whatever support he could. Shelly began to yell in a voice Danny had never heard before....nor had Shelly for that matter. The doctor was waiting and looking and finally the head of the baby appeared. He gently coaxed it out and in a few minutes Marina Noel Dalton was born. Shelly was in tears and thought she was going to die. The nurse cleaned the baby and handed it to her. Marina was the only one who wasn't in tears.

The nurses cleaned Shelly with warm cloths. Danny sat beside her, too emotional to say anything. Shelly told him to take his daughter and he held Marina. She looked up at him and smiled. Danny couldn't believe his eyes.

Hello Marina. Welcome to our big crazy world. I'm your daddy.

Things were under control so everyone but Danny left the room. Penny got on the phone and called Judy to tell her the news. In her frail voice Penny could still detect her happiness. It looked like she would see her grand daughter after all. Shelly stayed in the hospital overnight and the next day Danny and Penny took her home. The crib was waiting for Marina and Penny was there to get anything Shelly needed. She called Ernie, Bobby and everyone else that Shelly wanted to know the news. Shelly collapsed in her bed. It had taken every drop of her energy. She slept for 12 hours and was woken up by the sound of Marina crying. She instinctively went to get her and knew she must be hungry. She picked Marina up, sat on the sofa and breast fed her. The crying stopped immediately. After ten minutes Marina smacked her lips in satisfaction and went back to sleep in Shelly's arms. Danny sat watching everything unfold. Shelly said to him....why don't you see if Judy can come over now?

Danny phoned his mom. She was very weak but told Charlie to take her to see Marina. Charlie carefully helped Judy into the car and they came to see their grandchild. Judy sat on the couch and Shelly passed Marina to her. A glow came over Judy. This was the little girl she had always wanted. Marina woke up and stared at Judy.

Hello little one, hello. I'm your grand mother.

Marina gave a little giggle and kicked her legs. That was her response. Judy looked at everyone with a proud grin on her face and gave Marina back to Shelly.

Let's see how the sock's fit, Judy said.

They were too big but that wouldn't last long. She would grow in and out of them quickly. Penny had prepared a snack plate and placed it in front of Charlie and Judy. They took a couple small sandwiches and a cup of coffee. Danny's appetite had come back. He took a plate and loaded it up. Shelly was also hungry. It was a perfect little party. Judy was exhausted so Charlie took her home. It would be the last time she left her house. Two days later she passed away in her sleep. The family had a small private service. Charlie took her ashes to the ocean four days later and scattered them by himself.

There are no ends, only beginnings. Charlie was devastated by the loss of his wife and elated by the arrival of his grand daughter. He started coming over to see her every day. He would phone first to see if Shelly needed anything and she usually did. The house was busier with Christmas activity and that meant more people to feed all the time. Charlie brought a real tree for the house and a bunch of decorations. It was looking like Christmas dinner would be at Danny and Shelly's place. That was fine with Shelly. Her energy was slowly coming back and she had started doing a short version of her daily routine. Michelle was also becoming a regular guest. She was spending more time with Ernie and loved holding Marina when she had the opportunity to do so. Ernie was beginning to sense that she wanted a child of her own. He didn't know if he was ready for that yet but enjoyed his little niece. Penny was like a maid. She kept everything flowing smoothly in the kitchen and would retreat to her place when the chores were done. She was getting lots of footage with her new camera and learning how to edit on the laptop. It was cold weather but she had taken up canoeing. She would drop the canoe in the water by herself and start paddling. It was good exercise and was helping a bit with her lung problem. She couldn't go for long distances but did what she could.

Shelly took this time to get back into reading and her painting. She had several books lined up, all about babies.....How to Take Care of Your Baby, Your Baby and You, The First Three Months, and on and on. She was beside Marina day and night. It was simply an eat and sleep schedule right now. Marina cried when she was hungry but that was normal. Shelly could see changes in her eyes and body every day even though they were very subtle. She started painting Marina as she slept. My little miracle she thought. What will you become? Are you going to be like me or totally different? Whatever you become you will be the centre of attention for quite some time. Marina opened her eyes and saw Shelly looking at her. She stared as if she could read her mother's mind. Shelly picked her up and said....let's go for a walk. She wrapped her up in a blanket, strapped on the baby holder to her shoulders and walked into the garden.

These are cabbage, this is broccoli and this is the apple tree we planted for you.

Penny saw them through the window but didn't go out to join them. She let Shelly enjoy this moment. The house was getting busier with human activity and Shelly needed these quiet times with Marina. The cold air made Marina wince but she was enjoying it. Shelly kept walking through the garden getting her boots muddy. She turned around so Marina could see the geese that were landing on the water.

What do think about that? She asked.

Marina laughed and shook her hands and feet. They were communicating. Shelly walked down to the water's edge and waved to a paddle boarder. Then she grabbed Marina's hand and waved it as well. The boarder paddled to the shore and looked at Marina.

Wow. You had your baby, she said.

Yes I did, Shelly replied. Her name is Marina.

With a name like that she's bound to like the water. She so pretty. Congratulations.

Then she turned her board south and kept paddling. It was the first person outside the family that Marina encountered.

Let's go visit grama, Shelly said. They walked up to the house and knocked on Penny's door. She was on her computer doing some editing. Marina recognized her and giggled.

That's a happy baby Shelly. She is always smiling.

Ya, I know. She's happy, I'm happy and Christmas is coming soon.

Shelly could feel Marina was hungry so she sat down and breast fed her. Five minutes later Marina fell asleep.

Short visit mama, Shelly said. I have to put her in her crib.

She went upstairs and put Marina down. Then she sat in front of her easel and continued painting her. She started thinking about Christmas presents but didn't want to go downtown and shop for everyone. She just wanted to stay home with Marina. When Danny came home she asked him if he would do the Christmas shopping. He obliged. He wanted calm for Shelly.

The build up to Christmas was slow but Christmas day was very busy and hectic. All hands were on deck to take care of things around the house. Shelly stayed in the background with Marina in her arms most of the time. She moved her crib into the kitchen for awhile because that's where all the activity was. It turned out to be a bad move so Danny moved it back into the bedroom. With all the commotion Marina had gotten cranky and even breast feeding wouldn't calm her down. Penny was handling the turkey and preparing the supper. Ernie and Danny felt like they were at an all day buffet. They kept munching on the food that Penny was preparing. Michelle had brought some shepherd's pie that she baked. Ernie brought four apple pies and three loaves of bread. Marina finally nodded off in her crib and this gave Shelly and Danny some time to go outside and sit on the dock. They didn't mind that a

light rain was falling. It changed everything. It was like everything they looked at was an impressionist painting. Shelly wondered how she could paint the rain. It would be on her to do list for the new year. She would get nine months off with her maternity leave, more if she needed it. She didn't know if she wanted to teach yoga again or do the empathic work. That decision would make itself she thought. Right now she was focused on being a mother to Marina. She understood the postpartum feelings they talked about in the books she read. She started feeling sad for her own mother who never got to enjoy the experience Shelly was enjoying. She grabbed Danny's hand and put her head on his shoulder.

What is it Shelly?

I feeling very sad Danny....very very sad.

Danny leaned his head onto hers.

It's OK Shelly. The feelings will pass. I'm here for you.

Danny knew Shelly felt all feelings with more intensity than other people. It's just how she was. It's why she had the empathic skills she did. It was a gift and a curse at the same time. He wondered if Marina would have that built in to her personality. He made a mental note to watch for it as she grew. As he was thinking those thoughts a giant grey heron landed on the dock ten feet away from them. They were both surprised but not startled. It was a good omen. They sat still and simply shared the space with another creature on earth. The heron had a band on it's right leg. It was probably rescued from some situation and the released back into the wild.

I think we have a new neighbour Danny, Shelly joked.

Ya, he's a beauty isn't he? Shall we give him a name?

Let's call him Bandy because of his leg band, Shelly said.

Bandy, that's a fine name Shelly. Can you imagine what Marina is going to think when she discovers him? It can be her pet heron.

Shelly laughed. Pet heron.....who has a pet heron?

Unbeknownst to Danny and Shelly, Penny was getting footage of all this. It was the best footage she had gotten so far. She was feeling happier than she had ever felt in her life. What a mystery life was she thought. She had gone from the depths of despair and drug addiction to this wonderful place in life. The role of grandmother felt like a warm sweater. She used to feel sadness and regret before Shelly came into her life. Now those feelings were replaced with happiness. The sadness still crept into her consciousness but it passed as quickly as it came. Supper was ready and she called Shelly and Danny to come inside.

The table looked as beautiful as a Christmas table could. The house smelled of turkey. Everyone started loading up their plates. Danny and Ernie were starved. Shelly took smaller amounts because she wanted to save room for desert. She flashed back to Christmas in the orphanage. How different life was now, she thought. She used to wish Christmas would go away quickly but now she wished it would never end. Marina started crying in her crib so she went to pick her up. She sat in the bedroom and breast fed her. That's all it took to calm her down. Shelly carried her to the table, held her in one arm

and finished eating her supper with the other. Michelle had finished her meal so she asked if she could hold Marina. Shelly passed her along. A warm glow started to come off Michelle. Shelly could sense that she wanted a child. She wondered if she and Ernie would give that try. Michelle just stared at Marina and Marina stared back. They were lost in each other's eyes. This would be auntie Michelle thought Shelly. Penny got up and started taking peoples' empty plates. Of course Danny and Ernie weren't finished yet but everyone else was. Charlie got up and helped Penny. This was his first Christmas without Judy. It was both happy and sad. Shelly's impressions seemed to be overwhelming her. She walked up to Charlie and gave him a big hug. He returned it. Michelle could sense Charlie's mood. She got up from the table and passed Marina to him. Marina was enjoying this and it was just what Charlie needed.

Hello little one, he said. You are the best Christmas present of all. Charlie's mood quickly shifted to happiness.

Shelly excused herself and went to lie down. The excitement and her empathic feelings were draining her. She was exhausted. She quickly fell asleep. Everyone just let her have her down time. She slept for several hours and when she woke up the party was over. Everyone had opened their presents and Shelly's were still under the tree. Danny was sitting by himself when she walked into the living room. Shelly walked over to him and snuggled under his wing. He knew she needed sleep more than anything. He, Ernie and Charlie had cleaned the dishes and the house. Penny was downstairs in her suite doing computer stuff and Charlie had gone home. Michelle and Ernie went to his cabin and crashed. Shelly looked out onto the water. There at the end of the dock was Bandy. He stood motionless as herons do taking in the beauty of the Gorge.

Are you going to open your presents Shelly, Danny asked.

I guess I should eh?

Danny had got some gold earrings for her. She immediately put them on.

They're beautiful Danny, thank you.

Ernie and Michelle got her a sweater, as did Charlie and coincidentally so did Penny. Shelly just laughed.

Well, I won't have to worry about keeping warm this winter will I?

Shelly went back to the couch and snuggled under Danny's arm.

there are no ends.....only beginnings

