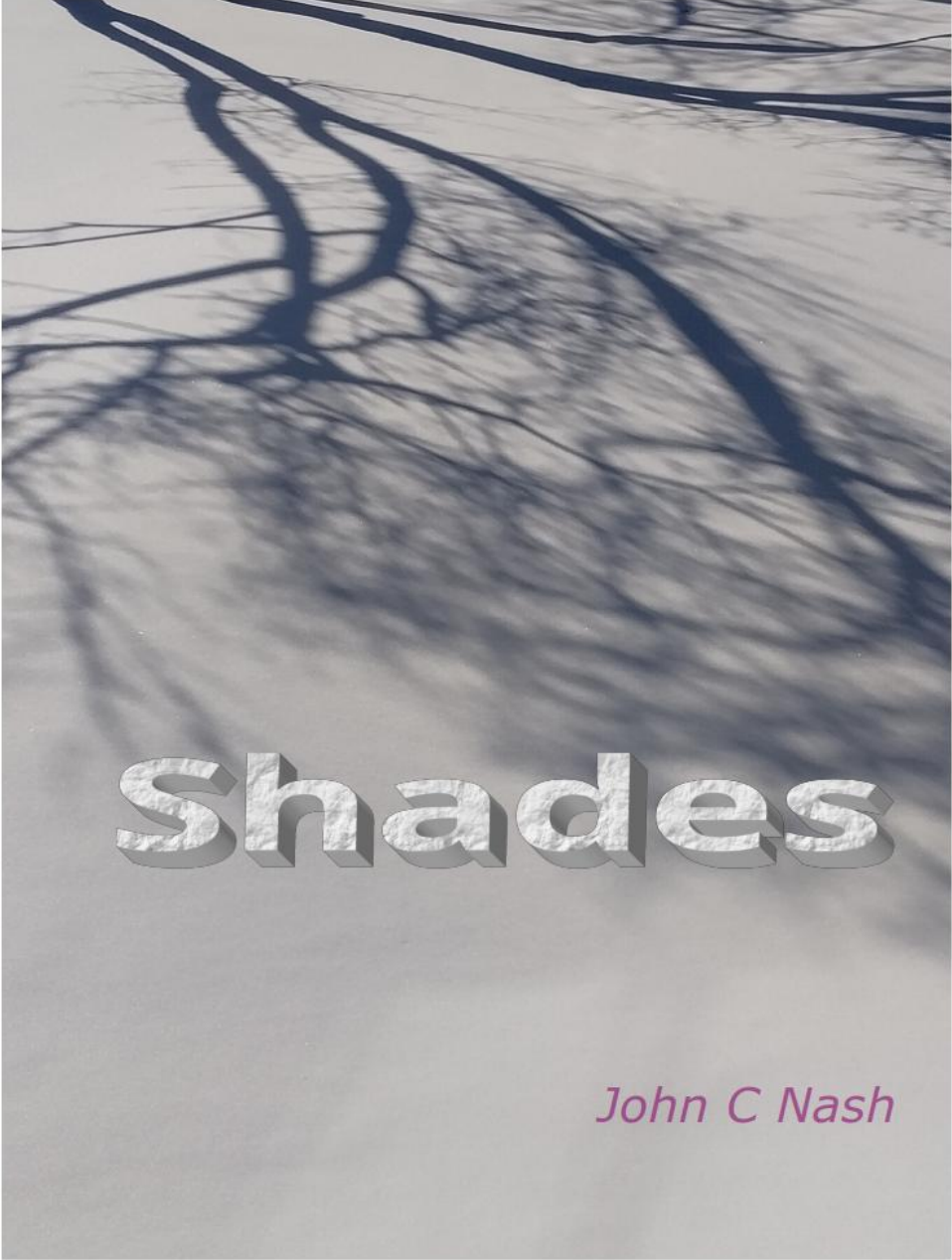




Shades

John C Nash

Shades

a novella

John C. Nash

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Shades is a work of fiction. Characters and situations are inventions, though geography and related matters are based on publicly available information.

Cover design based on a photograph taken by the author.

John C. Nash, Ottawa, 2026

Hollywood loves ghost stories. Halloween produces millions of little spooks. Angels and fairies have had a lot of discussion and debate over the years. But what of the spirits themselves. What existence do the shades enjoy? Are they interacting with us? With animals or inanimate things? Do they haunt special places, or do they frequent the everyday?

Preamble

Shades is a significant excursion from genres of creative writing in which I have worked previously. My usual writing has sought to capture behaviour and thinking of particular periods and places, with a result that hopefully matches what might have been observed by a fly on the wall or a cat in the corner. The present novella, by contrast, is a loose nod to the moody mostly monochrome movie – a particular 4 Ms – of Wim Wenders’ *Wings of Desire* (*Der Himmel über Berlin* in the original).

Since the story is about what most people call angels, I have had to consider religious belief. That is certain to upset some people. While I can protest that *Shades* is a work of fiction, I would rather that readers would join me in a generous ecumenical tolerance.

In that one of my protagonists is a United Church minister, and I cannot recall having attended such a congregation among the many services in which I have participated, I hope I have got the main elements of my narrative correct. Or could shades similar to those presented be exerting a gentle influence?

John Nash, Ottawa, 2026

Joining the Watch

High above Victoria Harbour, two shades perched on the edge of the roof of the British Columbia Legislature. Gamma had been here regularly since late 1945. 41 was a novice, recently deceased in some ghastly political vengeance perpetrated by thugs hired by a supposedly civilized nation whose government had been taken over by so-called patriotic business interests and an authoritarian politician.

The shades were invisible to all the people around save for a small girl of about six years who had the ability, or perhaps the misfortune, to be one of a small minority of humans able to sense spirits. Even as young as she was, she had learned not to talk about what she saw or felt. Fortunately, she had also learnt that the shades could not or would not physically harm her. They had no means to interact with the physical world, their influence being entirely through the power of emotions. Thus the little girl noticed the pair of wisps on the edge of the roof, but was quick to turn away when she realized her mother was becoming conscious of her attention to the roof.

“A pleasant morning, is it not, 41.”

“Yes. I was told to report here to a shade called Gamma who would be expecting me.”

“Yes. I’m Gamma. I’ll try to bring you up to speed – I think that’s the modern idiom.”

“It’s all very confusing. I have a sort of video of my murder, but no pain or anguish about it. Then I was with a pair of spectres in a place that seemed to be nowhere at all and have no features to describe. They told me to think about being here, and here I am. And that you would instruct me on my role.”

“Yes. This is the afterlife. Heaven in some religions, but also hell for some shades.”

“Oh. I didn’t think those places existed. I was never persuaded that the various priests and preachers were right about God and the spiritual universe, and many were clearly seeking their own profit or pleasure or power. The same with many politicians and business-people.”

“Ah. So true, 41. But there is good and evil, and in both the physical and the spiritual world. Humans interpret both worlds in many ways, so they have multiple stories for God, or gods, and creation. In some of them you and I are angels, in others minor gods, in others ghosts or apparitions. Of course, some of these are interpreted by humans as malevolent, or devils. Indeed, some shades are unhappy, so try to recruit humans to their misery. That is, for what it is worth, my own interpretation of hell.”

“I don’t feel unhappy, Gamma. Nor do I feel happy. I am not in a state of discontent, just curiosity.”

“I was informed that you lived a life where you sought to do the best you could. A moral life. Not perfect, but perfection is rare and somewhat boring. I’m sure I’ll enjoy your company, though I’ve not been troubled by being mostly solitary for nigh on a century.”

“What is your history, Gamma.”

“I was a slave girl in a Greek city. Not one of the well-known places. I had a master who was, for his era, benign. He allowed that I could give food to the starving and rags to the unclothed. But I died in an epidemic when I was but 20.”

“And your name, that is, Gamma?”

“It was assigned to me. I think no name had been given to me, but a squiggle of ink on the scroll of the dead was interpreted as the letter gamma. What about you?”

“I’ve no idea, save that I think one of the two shades I met after dying had been a mathematician. He and the other shade mumbled something about Heegner Points.”

“Let me ponder. Yes. 41 is a rather special prime number. Well, you could do worse. For both of us the names are simple to say and easy to record.”

“What do we do here? Or anywhere, for that matter.”

“We watch. We observe. Occasionally, we can exert a very subtle influence for good. There are some humans – that little girl there by one of the stone lions is one – who can sense us. She pays a high price, though. If she says anything about us she will be regarded as having some sort of mental problem. In other ages she would be called ‘touched’ or worse. Some, mostly women, were tortured and executed for witchcraft. Still are in some parts of the world.”

“There’s a dog over there – the yellow lab – that seems to be looking at us.”

“Yes. Some animals sense us too.”

“Gamma. You mentioned exerting an influence for good. Are we able to use those beings that can sense us in any way to promote good or inhibit evil?”

“You’re a fast learner, 41. Yes. That is how we work, though mostly we observe. The various religious concepts of heaven are, if you consider them at all, rather unattractive in that they talk of eternal paradise. Very unsatisfactory, since it would be infinitely boring. Instead, we get to observe and to pursue our curiosity.”

“But are we allowed to interfere with the living world?”

“We have no way to directly interact with physical systems. But as you have noticed, some humans and animals can sense or perhaps even see us, which sometimes lets us nudge them to behaviour we desire or which may promote good or inhibit evil. However, it is not much more than the tiniest of stimuli, and it can sometimes misfire.”

“Gamma. I presume that malevolent shades may similarly try to encourage bad things?”

“Indeed. Humans have many stories of devils pushing them to sin, though exaggeration of the strength of that persuasion is rife. That humans can blame invisible others for their transgressions is very convenient.”

“Do we ... er ... ever fight with the malevolent shades?”

“Apparently there was once a conflict, but it seems now that if we are present, the forces of evil must keep away. But you can be sure they’re nearby. Keep that in mind, 41.”

The mongrel

A week passed in the Inner Harbour. This was a stabilization for 41. The last year which included both life and death had been filled with action and events. Now there was time to observe and contemplate, to be calm and untroubled.

With experience, 41 could now recognize those beings who were aware of himself and Gamma, though it was apparent that the awareness was of no more than a shimmer or wisp. However, 41 had noticed a medium-sized dog of dubious breed, in fact, of dubious breeds, since the dog was clearly the result of diverse pairings. Consequently, the dog's name was Mix, and the shades knew this.

Persistent observation, which 41 discovered was easy for a shade, revealed that Mix had a tiny space under the front steps of a house a couple of blocks south of the Legislature. There were bushes either side of the steps, and Mix was agile enough to squeeze behind one of the bushes, then nose aside a wooden lattice that was loose on one side. Under the concrete steps the ground was dry, and the dog had found some old rags and made a bed so he did not have to lie on the dirt and rubble that was there. While not perfect, this hidey hole was reasonably secure. Mix had, in fact, taken over the space after the homeowner put bottles of racoon repellent beside the entrance to the under-stair space. When racoons came to investigate the space after Mix moved in, dog urine under the bush discouraged them. In a fight with a pack of racoons, a dog would probably lose, but the racoons were nocturnal, and avoided confrontation with dogs if there were a way to do so.

41 could tell Mix was aware of his presence. Did the dog actually see him?

Curiosity led him to ask his colleague and mentor "Gamma. Does Mix see me?"

"'See' is unlikely. But he surely senses you. Possibly there is a zone of heightened brightness or colour, though how dogs see such things I have never pursued. It is clear by the movement of his head and eyes that he knows both of us are here."

"Do you think he might understand if I tried to communicate with him?"

"It may be possible, but I think unlikely. A millenium ago I was able to influence a mare to stop moving in a fog. Had she not stopped, it is likely she and her rider would have gone over a cliff, and the rider was a man of grace going to aid a community suffering an epidemic."

"How did you communicate, Gamma?"

"I focused my thoughts on the message. In my mind I said the words simply and clearly, without additional clutter. But I am still not quite sure how the horse perceived that message, though it seemed to work."

"Let us try to suggest that the dog should bury the racoon droppings. That will kill the smell and reduce the risk to the dog of roundworm."

The two shades actually both thought this message and were gratified when Mix followed the suggestion.

Around the Harbour, it was fairly easy for Mix to beg for food. He was sufficiently skilled at this that he would avoid supplicating for sweets or other

items unsuitable for a dog's diet. Several regulars knew him and one lady even brought some dog kibble and a bowl when she came.

41 spent the next month observing Mix, following his movements, learning the patterns of the dog's life. He noted the people Mix approached and those he avoided. Mix was clearly fascinated by small children, but would approach them gently, sitting for some time before moving a pace or two closer and sitting again, so the children had time to observe his approach. Those who showed anxiety the dog had the good sense to back away from.

Mix seemed to give anyone intoxicated by drink or drugs a wide berth. He also showed dislike of men with walking sticks, but women with canes or walkers he would walk slowly ahead of, making a path for them.

One day 41 saw a delivery bicycle racing down the street where Mix had his sleeping hole. The driver of a Ferrari decided to both park illegally and open his door without looking. The heavy delivery bicycle was able to put a dent in the Ferrari that would ultimately cost more than the price of most new cars to fix. The cyclist also had to be paid off. But in the collision part of the intended delivery, that is some meat – some very fine steak in fact – tumbled into a bush a few yards down the street from where Mix slept. The steak was extremely well wrapped or its scent would have caused its discovery by scavengers.

As Mix returned to his hole to sleep, 41 tried thinking hard "Look for meat two houses away."

This seemed to have no effect, so 41 simply thought "Steak!".

Mix wagged his tail and raised his nose to sniff. 41 thought "Steak under bush nearby." This caused the dog to nose around some bushes. As he looked one way down the street, 41 thought "No. No. No."

Mix looked the other way.

"Good. Good. Good."

Slowly Mix moved up the street.

"Near. Near. Near. Bush. Bush. Bush."

Mix turned toward a bush that was not the target.

"No. No."

Then he moved toward the one where the steak was hidden by the foliage.

"Yes. Yes. Steak."

At this point, Mix saw a part of the package lying on the ground under the bush. He crawled under the bush, and quickly secured the parcel. As a dog of modest size, he quickly checked about for dangers, then made a dash for his own area and sleeping hole, where he ate more meat than was possibly good for him. Indeed, he did not show up in the Harbour the next day, contenting himself with a short excursion to a small corner of the garden near his stair hole to do his business.

There had been some rain, and Mix had discovered a cracked plastic washing up basin on a pile of rubbish set out for collection and he had carried it, awkwardly of course, and set it next to the steps where it could catch some rain dripping from the bush. 41 wondered how he understood that this would give him a source of water close by if there were rain.

Crime stopper

Two days after the steak incident, Mix was lying on the top of a retaining wall by the harbour. This was at the edge of the patio of the Starbucks coffee shop in the old Canadian Pacific Steamship building that was now mostly taken up by the Steamship Grill and some upscale shops. This was near the grass border of the lower promenade of the Harbour. The wall placed Mix high enough to watch the people passing, but he could easily move up the grass slope or jump down the stepped wall to move away.

41 thought hard “Mix, wag your tail.”

Mix’ ears perked up, and he wagged his tail.

“Good dog, Mix.”

A few seconds later, 41 thought, “Mix. Look at the corner of the building by the road.”

Mix was not quite sure what he was sensing. 41 could sense confusion, so he thought “Look towards the road.” This time Mix looked in the direction of the roadway.

“Wag your tail if you see the man with the black cap standing against the wall near the corner of the building.”

Mix wagged his tail, but also growled. He knew this man as a drug addict. He had seen him grab a woman’s purse one day. 41 sensed what Mix knew and thought “Yes. He is waiting to rob another woman. You can stop him.”

Mix moved across the patio towards the building. He hugged the wall of that building, moving away from the door of the Starbucks toward the man. The man was briefly popping his head round the corner of the building to look at something. 41 knew he was watching for an opportunity to grab a purse if he could. What 41 knew but Mix could not see was an elderly lady with a walker coming from the restaurant and walking along the sidewalk towards town. As she came past the corner of the building, the man grabbed at her purse, but she had it over her shoulder and across her body. The lady screamed as she fell over. The man was trying to get the purse away from her when Mix bit his calf just above the ankle.

Now it was the man who screamed. Mix bit harder. The commotion attracted attention, and one of the coffee drinkers on the patio was an off-duty police officer who jumped to aid the lady. A couple of other men also stepped forward. They didn’t do much but did block escape for the miscreant. The policeman made sure he didn’t leave. A pair of women also came over to help the lady up, then to a nearby chair. Someone else was calling 911 for both police and paramedics to check the lady for injury.

“You can let go, Mix. Go and sit next to the lady.”

Mix did as 41 suggested. The lady enthused “What a good dog. You saved me from that man. Where’s your owner?”

Looking for a collar and finding none, the lady realized Mix was a stray. Further, she recognized that people would start to look for an owner, which might have negative consequences for Mix.

“Doggy. You’d better get along before the police ask about you.”

41, too, realized his mistake in suggesting Mix sit near the lady.

“Yes. Mix. Go for a while to your hole. I’ll tell you when things are clear.”

Allies

“41. You used your communication with the dog to good effect yesterday.”

“Yes. Gamma. But I was careless in suggesting Mix go to sit beside the lady whose purse was nearly stolen. I shall need to be more ... er ... thoughtful in future.”

“It takes time and experience, 41. In my own case I made some mistakes in my first couple of centuries. I was, in fact, watching the thief myself, and was happy you found a way to foil him. I was about to suggest you try to get Mix to leave when the lady did so for us.”

“I’ve tried to influence Mix to stay out of the Harbour today. In fact, I’ve suggested the waterfront on Dallas Road by Ogden Point Breakwater. There’s some benches there and likely some people eating lunch or snacks.”

“That’s as well, 41. Security people were looking for the dog. Someone was overly zealous in case he bit the innocent as well as the guilty. Also in case the crook needed a rabies shot.”

A few minutes later, 41 observed the little girl who could sense shades walking with her mother along the waterfront toward the breakwater. This was a common walk they took. 41 had ascertained they were mother and daughter by dint of thinking an appropriate question.

“Gamma. That’s the little girl who can sense us.”

“Indeed it is, 41.”

“Would it give her comfort if she knew others, like Mix, could sense us too.”

“Indeed, she feels very confused that others don’t notice us.”

41 maintained an awareness of the location of both the little girl, whose name was Julia, and Mix, who was plying the lunch eaters who were seated on some benches along sea wall walkway. By good fortune, that is where Julia and her mother were heading.

“Mix. Look for the little girl in the red dress. Yes. Over there.”

Mix seemed now to understand 41’s messages, and trotted along to the bench where the girl and her mother were now seated.

“Mix. Sit at the end of the bench beside Julia. Julia, this is Mix. He senses us too.”

Mix sat quietly beside Julia on the opposite side to the mother. The mother saw the dog and said “Julia. Ignore the dog. We’ll let him go away.”

However, Mix simply sat and waited, looking at Julia and her mother.

“Mother. He is friendly. His name is Mix.”

“How do you know his name?”

Realizing she would only raise questions for her mother, Julia responded “Does he not look like a mix of different dogs?”

“That he certainly does. But he has no collar, so is probably a stray or lost, though he does not look dirty or emaciated. Let us walk on and hope he finds his own place.”

They got up and walked along the seawall promenade away from the breakwater. Mix walked steadily beside the mother and daughter. When they came to the place where they would cross into the James Bay residential area, Julia and Mix noticed the shimmer of 41 and Gamma on the other side.

“Mix. There is a delivery cyclist coming too fast to stop. Warn Julia and her mother.”

Mix barked loudly, looking toward the cyclist he had now noticed. His bark caused Julia’s mother to look too, and she pulled Julia away from the roadway as the cyclist careened past.

Mix gave a soft bark and started to cross the road, and Julia and her mother did so as well. Mix waited on the other side, right beside the two shades. He gave another soft bark. Julia said “Good dog, Mix,” and smiled. Mother said “He saw the cyclist and warned us. I suppose we should try to find his owner. But we have no leash.”

Julia said “We could see if he stays with us. He’s walking beside us as if he’s trained to do that.”

“It’s fortunate we don’t need to take a bus, Julia, or he couldn’t come with us. Let’s go home right away.”

‘Home’ was a set of rooms at the rear ground level in a large house that served as accommodation and a reception venue for a multinational resource corporation who were involved with a number of potential projects in British Columbia. They could have used hotels, but preferred to maintain a discreet permanent presence that could be ready at any time, furthermore providing a secure workspace and communications along with a decor consistent with the corporation trade dress. The company referred to it as The Lodge, and having no better label, we shall too.

Julia’s mother, Angela, who was addressed as Mrs. Jenkins, was the housekeeper and cook, though she did not prepare food for receptions. Various local restaurants were contracted to provide meals and refreshments for invitees. Sensitivity to bribery and influence-peddling meant that none of the invitees were politicians or public servants, except when the corporation hosted a more or less public event where a balance of interests could be present. However, the corporation engaged lobbyists to communicate with both provincial and federal governments. It was useful that the house avoided the possibility discussions were overheard. Similarly, meetings with collaborators, suppliers and customers could be held discreetly, and those attending could be offered accommodation. Victoria was convenient for the provincial Legislature, but perhaps less so than Vancouver for business contacts. However, float plane services to Vancouver had terminals in the Inner Harbour, which was a fifteen minute walk from The Lodge.

The rooms Julia and her mother occupied were next to the large kitchen, the pantry and the laundry. The kitchen had a door to the back garden. They had their own living/dining room, bathroom and two modest bedrooms. To allow

Angela and Julia to eat separately when events were in progress in The Lodge, which would mean the kitchen might be in use by caterers, there was a counter on one side of the living room with a small bar fridge below, a hot plate, toaster, microwave and electric kettle. Truthfully, Angela hardly ever used these, though she kept her personal wine and soft drinks in the fridge.

At the front of the house on this level there was an office with various communication equipment and a powerful photocopier, colour printer, black and white printer, tools and machines for providing presentation material, a large work table as well as a pair of cubicles with laptop computers where visiting staff could work.

The house dated to the beginning of the 20th century. Essentially, the ground floor was the service and servants level. Besides the kitchen door, there was another on the side of the house for deliveries via the paved driveway that led to a large garage at the rear. Guests entered via a set of steps up to a front porch and doorway at the front. On that level were the reception and dining spaces, while another level up were four bedrooms, all with ensuite bathrooms. An attic had two more rooms and a bathroom that were perpetually referred to as 'just in case'. They were yet to be used.

As they came in, Mrs. Jenkins told Julia "Mix, as you call him, will stay in the garden until we can give him a bath. We'll prepare some notices to put up in the neighbourhood to see if we can find his owner. Make sure the garden gate is closed. He probably can get out if he really tries, but he seems to want to be with us, so I think we can take that chance."

Mix was not troubled to be in the garden. It had high fences, with the garage forming the enclosure at one side with a gap between the house and the garage closed by a fence and a lockable gate that used electronic fobs. In fact, fobs were used for all the doors. It allowed guests to be given a 'key' that was cancelled after they left if they forgot to return it. There was a small lean-to shed at the rear against the garage used to store flower pots, potting soil, and other gardening materials. It had a raised floor of treated wood and could provide a dry place for Mix to sleep.

Mix was fed some leftover stew and a bowl of water. He spent the rest of the day in the yard, exploring and sleeping, even though he had discovered a gap in the enclosure at the back of the garage, so could have left if he had wished. Julia came out several times to talk to him and toss an old tennis ball.

Good Ghosts

"Gamma. When I think of Mrs. Jenkins I get the story of a tragedy."

"Yes. Angela was engaged to a young man of some ability and energy who died in an accident on a large construction project. It happened that he was working for a subcontractor to the corporation, and one of the managers knew of plans for he and Angela to marry and arranged the job for Angela. However, even Angela did not know she was pregnant at the time her fiancé died."

"They let her stay and keep the job?"

“Yes, 41. The management of the house fell within the scope of the man who offered Angela the job. Perhaps at headquarters the optics of the situation would have been such that she would have been discharged. Echoing an earlier time, the title ‘Mrs’ was associated with the housekeeper position, as Angela was sadly left a spinster.”

“Gamma. I sense a lonely life, even with her mother in Oak Bay and her sister and brother-in-law in Langford.”

“That is true, 41. But many people are more isolated. Angela does have her mother and sister, as well as Julia. That focus on her daughter does distract her from dwelling too much on solitude. But you’ll realize that Julia was born just after the Covid pandemic lockdown started. Not a good time on top of her fiancé’s death.”

The next morning, Angela ordered some dog food – the corporation had accounts with any and every sort of supplier imaginable. She also ordered a collar and leash, if only to make it feasible to deliver Mix back to his owner.

After the dog food arrived around the middle of the day, Mix was given a bath – a novelty to which he did not object to as some dogs would. Then he was fed in the kitchen. The dog quickly consumed the food and drank some water.

41 thought “Mix. Go down the corridor to the garden door and sit.”

Angela said “I think he wants to go out. Julia.”

Mix was let out and he spent some time once more exploring the garden. After about an hour Angela wondered where he had gone. She looked out a rear window and saw that he was lying in the lean-to shelter.

“Julia. He seems to want to stay outside. Perhaps he’s actually a stray. You might as well put his water bowl out there.”

“Can’t he sleep inside, Mother?”

“Perhaps when we know him better and he knows us. Let’s see how he behaves. I just hope he doesn’t bark or make a lot of noise.

We’ll also have to watch and clean up his business.”

“Won’t he be cold?”

“Julia. If he’s a stray, he’s used to being outside. But there’s an old towel in that box under the stairs you can put down for him. Even though it’s late January, the forecast is not for freezing. He’s clever enough to realize he’ll be dry where he is lying in the lean-to. We can move some boxes and lay a board on top so he can keep out of the wind.”

Julia found the towel and picked up the bowl Mix had been given for water. She took these out to the lean-to. Mix got up to let her put down the towel. Julia put water in the bowl from the garden tap that was next to the lean-to.

“There you are Mix. I’m glad you’re here. People think I’m making up the ghosts, but I can tell you see them.”

Mix gave a very soft bark and looked toward the gate to the driveway. Gamma and 41 were sitting on the wall. What Mix and Julia saw cannot truly be described, but Julia said “Oh, yes. There they are. One of them told me your name. When I was three, I used to tell Mother when I saw the shimmers. I think she thought I was making it up. But sometimes the shimmers tell me

things. Not words. Just feelings. Or a name, like Mix for you. Well. The good ones do. There sometimes are some that I don't like."

Mix barked softly again.

"Can you bark two times if you see them?"

Mix gave two soft barks.

"Oh. Thank you Mix." Julia hugged the dog.

What 41 and Gamma noticed was that Angela was listening just out of sight inside the door to the garden. She had thought Julia had grown out of an infantile bout of story-telling. That she had chosen to go silent was troubling. Perhaps it was time to seek help.

A sympathetic ear

Angela phoned her sister that evening. They spent some minutes of small-talk before Angela told Barbara about Mix and what she had overheard in the garden.

"Barbara. Do you think I should take her to a psychiatrist?"

"She doesn't seem delusional when she's with us, Angela. A psychiatrist might try to treat an illness that isn't there."

"But she really thinks she sees something. She said 'shimmers' and also 'ghosts', and clearly thinks they somehow communicate with her, and that the dog can see them too somehow."

"In the 19th century lots of people thought spirits were real. Even Conan Doyle believed in fairies.

"But you know, we've a new minister here at the local church we go to. His name is Joe Douglas. His sermons are different. Very calming and gentle. A couple of people in the congregation have gone to talk to him about personal problems and found he helped them simply by listening. One of those people was very anxious because she sensed what she called bad vibrations in a house she'd bought. Reverend Douglas went, spent time with her, listened to her, and said some prayers with her. She says that her doctor wanted her to take tranquilizers or anti-anxiety drugs, but after talking to Reverend Douglas she was able to decline them."

"You think I should have Julia talk to him?"

"I think it's worth a try before you go to a psychiatrist. You'd only be delaying that by a few weeks if talking to him didn't help."

"Barb. Can you find out how we could set up a time? Saturday would be best."

"I'll see what I can do?"

Reverend Douglas was willing to talk to Julia. In fact, he suggested that since he wanted to go to the Emily Carr House, he could talk to Julia by stopping off on his way there the next Saturday morning. However, he pointed out that the conversation would need to be private for Julia to feel comfortable talking about the spirits she claimed to see, but that it would be inappropriate for him to be alone with her. His suggestion was that if the weather were mild and dry,

they could meet in the Inner Harbour and he and Julia could talk on a bench and Angela could sit some distance away out of earshot but still able to see them.

The most difficult aspect of the plan for Angela was telling Julia that she wanted her to talk to Reverend Douglas about what she saw.

“Julia. I was talking to Auntie Barbara the other night. She told me about the new preacher at her church. He has talked to people who see or hear ghosts, and she thought perhaps you’d like to talk with him.”

“I thought you said I wasn’t seeing them.”

“I didn’t think you did. But perhaps that is because I can’t see them.”

“I don’t **see** them. They’re just there. And I don’t **hear** them, but somehow I feel an idea. That’s how I know Mix’s name.”

“And does Mix see the ghosts?”

“Oh. Yes. I asked him to bark twice if he could see the ghosts I was looking at, and he barked twice looking at them.”

Angela had overheard this very episode, but she said nothing about it for now.

Shared visions

Angela and Julia had Reverend Douglas’ mobile number, but he’d told them he’d be wearing a Blue Jays baseball cap, so they found each other easily at the Victoria Visitor Centre. Mix was with them, on his new leash so they would not get in trouble with bylaw officers.

Angela said “Mix and I’ll wait up here. There’s some benches down there against the wall.”

When Joe and Julia were seated, Joe wasted no time.

“Your family is worried that you apparently see ghosts.”

“I don’t really see them. They’re just sort of there.”

“Like there’s a couple of bits of smoke on the roof of the Visitor Centre?”

“Yes! Can you see them too?”

“As you said, it’s not really seeing them. But there’s two there.”

“Why don’t other people believe us?”

“I’ve learned that only very few people, and probably some animals, can sense spirits. But history has many stories of ghosts, or spectres, or shades, or angels, or gods, or spirits, or fairies, or who knows what other names for them.”

“Those two are nice. They told me Mix’ name. And Mix can see them too. I asked him to bark twice if he did, and he barked twice.”

“Yes. Those two seem benign. There are some not nice ones I’ve encountered.”

“Do you talk about them to other people?” Julia was curious.

“Not directly. People want to see for themselves, but the shades – that’s what I call them – just are not there for most people, so they may think you are lying to them, or having what’s called a hallucination – a vision that isn’t real. When I was young, I got into quite a bit of trouble that was called ’making

things up', so I just kept my experiences to myself. When I was about 11 there was a girl in school who was looking at a shade I could sense. After noticing this several times, I asked her if she was aware of the shades. It helped to know there was someone else who felt them too. I've met a few other people who had varying abilities to sense them, but it's quite a rare ability. As you've found, it can cause difficulties when others don't believe you."

"What did you do?"

"I don't say much about the shades. They have a very limited influence on the real world. From my experience, they can only act through humans and animals that can sense them and feel their messages. Trying to convince people of their presence is very difficult. Everyone gets upset, then most of all you."

"Of course, in my business I get to talk about God and lots of things that have to be taken on faith, including angels. Whether the wisps we sense over there on the roof are angels or devils or something else I don't know."

"I'm sure they're not devils," Julia said.

"Yes. I get a strong feeling that they are good spirits. And somehow I heard a story recently about a dog who bit a man who was trying to rob a lady of her purse. I think it might have been Mix."

"I could ask him."

"Yes. Though I suspect that he may only answer sometimes. My experiences with spirits always seem to allow of another explanation. So while spirits are acting in one interpretation of events, in other viewpoints there are no ghosts."

"So people can say there aren't ghosts if that's what they want?"

"It's often what they believe – most people aren't deliberately accusing you of being a liar."

"That's sad."

Nothing was said for a minute or so.

"Julia. I hope I've not made things harder for you."

"You see them too. Well I'll use the word 'see'. Kids at school sometimes talk about people who see things in a nasty way, like they're really sick in the head. But knowing I'm not alone is good. Just that I still have to keep quiet about what I see, except to you and Mix."

"That's true. And it's not fun. But sometimes the good shades are helpful."

"Yeah. I have a feeling they told Mix to bark when a cyclist was going along fast and might have run into us."

"Stuff like that."

"Still, I'm sorry I'm not more helpful."

"It's OK. You've made me feel a lot better about it. Mix did too."

"Let's go find your mother."

Invitation to lunch

"That didn't take very long," Angela said, looking distressed that the exercise might have been a failure.

"We're great, Mom. Reverend Douglas was easy to talk to."

“Oh. Well, I suppose that’s good.”

Joe said “Julia seems sensitive to the spiritual side of life. I pointed out how much of my work with religion refers to spirits that only a few individuals are able to sense. Also that when others don’t have the same ... er ... experience there can be misunderstandings and a lot of unhappiness, so it’s usually best to keep things to oneself.”

Angela was unable to say more than “Oh.”

“Mom, Shall we walk Reverend Douglas to the Emily Carr House. It’s close to home.”

“OK. Do you want to take charge of Mix and lead the way? But wait for us at any road crossings.”

Angela held back a little so she could talk with Joe. “Is Julia all right? You weren’t talking long.”

“I believe she’s fine. I’ve known several people who were able to sense things that almost nobody else could. Some animals too. In history there are all sorts of stories and reports of spirits under a huge range of names. Julia senses something, and it may be on the edge of imaginary. I’ve advised her that she may be best to be circumspect about talking about such things, though I didn’t use that word.”

“You don’t think it’s dangerous?”

“I’m certain it isn’t. She’s a bright and intelligent young woman. As she matures, she will hopefully find ways to incorporate her sensitivities into her everyday life that are helpful to herself or others. Many societies, including our own in earlier times, acknowledge spirits, while today they mostly are considered to not exist, though indigenous societies still hold them sacred.”

“But we aren’t trying people for witchcraft as in Salem,” Angela countered.

“That is happily true. But the tragedy of Salem underlines the need for caution in talking about spirits today.”

“Reverend Douglas. I appreciate you talking to Julia. When you finish at the Carr House, would you like to come back for a sandwich lunch? It won’t be fancy, but save you having to find a place and spend money. Julia seems happy to have talked with you, so I feel I owe you. I’ll give you the address – come to the side door.”

Socializing

Joe Douglas rang the doorbell of the Jenkins’ area of the house at half past noon.

“This is nice, Mrs. Jenkins.”

“I’m the cook/housekeeper for the house, Reverend Douglas.” Angela went through a brief explanation of her situation. Angela’s sister Barbara had already told him most of this, but he preferred to let people tell their own histories. Moreover, he wondered if Angela would find it difficult to admit to a minister that she was an unmarried mother.

"You haven't mentioned a Mr. Jenkins. Are you raising Julia on your own?" That he knew the answer meant his question was close to dishonesty.

"My fiancé was killed in a construction accident just before we were to marry. I didn't realize I was pregnant until after the funeral. My employers have been remarkably generous. I try to repay that with the best service I can render. They call me Mrs. Jenkins, but it's a courtesy title."

"Like Reverend. I never feel it belongs to me. I'm just Joe Douglas, and I'd prefer you call me Joe."

"Angela for me then."

"Can I offer a smoked salmon sandwich with cream cheese, lettuce and tomato? Julia wanted to watch a video about whales, so she's had her sandwich – peanut butter. Kids aren't so interested in the good stuff."

"I'd not easily have found anything that good on my own. And the salary of a young minister can't be called lucrative. Though I'm part-time. I do about 24 hours a week at Home Depot in the fastenings or similar departments. Nuts and bolts rather than hymns and prayers."

"Do you have a family, ... er ... Joe?" Angela was curious. She was soon to celebrate her 28th birthday, and estimated Joe could not be more than a year or two older.

"No. Afraid not. Came close to getting married just as I was coming up to being ordained about five years ago. I'd been going with Jennifer for several years and we talked of marriage. My financial prospects could have been a factor, but they weren't the essential reason we broke up."

"Can I ask what you believe was the cause?"

"Well, it's much the same as with Julia."

I've not been entirely honest, but I also sense what I call shades. I don't say much, and would not tell you except that I want to be up front with you. I could sense the same shimmering that Julia was seeing this morning."

"I'd no idea. Where were they?"

"We both sensed something on the roof of the Visitor Centre. However, if Julia senses things as I do, there's nothing absolute or definite to describe. That's why I recommended she be cautious how she talk about what she does sense."

"Do you hear voices?"

"No. Sometimes get a sense of something. A hint of an idea. Julia thinks Mix got such a ... I suppose message ... and barked at the cyclist the other day. But obviously, there are other explanations that are just as plausible that don't involve spirits. That's why caution in talking about what we experience is sensible."

"Do you believe in ghosts in the way Hollywood likes haunted house movies?"

"I think there may be places where spirits, if we may call them that, are concentrated. But for myself, I'm convinced they can't do things like move objects or make chains rattle. I think whatever influence spirits have on the tangible world is through people and animals who can sense them, more or less emotionally rather than through the senses. For what its worth, it's my guess

that Mix was the dog who bit the man who attacked the elderly lady near the old CP building, and I wonder if he got some sort of suggestion.”

“There’s lots of charlatans and scam artists claiming to communicate with spirits,” Angela said with an edge of complaint.

“Don’t I know it! A good reason to be cautious. Even though churches still have exorcism rituals, I’m really reluctant to offer them, and fortunately never have been asked. More generally, I try to offer prayers that a place may have peace, calm and grace, and I’ve used that approach a couple of times. Exhortations to drive out devils seem to be out of sync with today’s world. Moreover, there are real cases of psychosis arising from either drugs or illness. Illusions can arise from natural phenomena or by deliberate human invention. I view my job as one of supporting people in their attempt to lead lives of goodness and decency, not as an investigator into the paranormal.”

“You’ve not tried to investigate what you or others sense?”

“I’ve kept some notes from time to time, but mainly for my own ... er ... understanding is I think the word. I don’t have a belief that I can put into the form of a doctrine or a catechism. Certainly far too little to try to convince others to join me in some religious congregation. Besides, there are more than enough people trying to break up communities into little pockets of different beliefs. I’d rather look to find ways to find a more general contentment.”

“Hard to argue with that. And I’ve got to admit Barb was right that you manage to transmit a sense of calm. It’s a gift, Joe. I’m afraid I’ve not a lot of time for many of the bible stories. I regard them more or less as fairy stories.”

“I have difficulty accepting many of the stories as historical at face value. They are, after all, being reported through a very distorted lens of weakly observed, second hand reporting through multiple layers of translation. The best stories serve as guidelines for living. But a lot of the bible stories seem a distraction in the context of the modern world, since they don’t really apply if they are based on the structures of the ancient world. Those that concern human behaviour can, of course, serve us, but those about battles between tribes – lots of smiting – are, I think, unhelpful.”

“You’d better not say that to some of your congregation, Joe. They’ll want your scalp or some smiting.”

Joe laughed. “Yes. There are many who want everything cast in stone. And those stories really are almost of the stone age.”

“Ah. Here’s Julia. Time for some chocolate banana bread?”

“You’ll spoil me.”

Clock ticks

Gamma and 41 had not been nearby while Joe and Angela had their conversation. They did not pay attention to what was said, but in the way of spirits they were cognizant that it was taking place and could, if they so wished, consider the dialogue carefully in a replay. It was now the early morning of Sunday, and the two shades were located on top of the Beacon Hill Park Story Pole, where

they could observe the Strait of Juan de Fuca, which was at that moment largely invisible to conventional senses because of the darkness.

“Gamma. I have a feeling that both Joe and Angela are quite lonely.”

“Loneliness is, sadly, an emotion that makes humans extremely vulnerable.”

“I agree. In life I was most fortunate to find a wife with whom I could share my hopes and fears, my happiness and my sorrow.”

“My own life did not give me such opportunity. I was a slave. Moreover, I was born with crooked bones. That meant I was not seen as attractive, though it also let me avoid unwanted attention of my owner and his family and friends. Others were not so fortunate.”

“That is a pity. There is great joy in the sharing of life, and where two people care for each other, much pleasure to find of both physical and emotional forms.”

“In the two millenia since my death, I have had occasion to observe such partnerships. Unfortunately, also many cases of abuse and evil.”

“Even in life, I encountered such situations. A terrifying sadness.

“Gamma. My widow I know is surviving and making a modest success of life after escaping the ... er ... tyranny that resulted in my demise. Is it part of the plan that I not feel I must be near her?”

“I believe that the essence of good, the entity some call God, suggests that it cannot be helpful if spirits are anguished to be near those who, in life, they were closest to. Those they loved. But some shades do get drawn back to their nearest and dearest. Generally it is unhelpful to all concerned. I believe many humans then talk of being haunted by spirits, and perhaps it is the strength of emotion that permits that. The shades become frustrated and the living humans unhappy and distracted from living. Better that we are less involved.”

The Addict

While we have followed the dog Mix for a while, our shades, 41 and Gamma, were able to pay attention to many characters. In particular, they maintained a watch on Zack Brown, the addict whose attempt to rob the elderly lady had been thwarted by their influence on Mix.

Zack spent several very uncomfortable nights in the Vic PD lockup. His attempted theft was far from his first crime. Moreover, his actions had been increasingly violent. Worse, he had been already out on bail, and a news commentator had used him by name in presenting arguments for for tougher treatment of such offenders.

Zack’s involuntary detoxification, even with some medication that was offered, masked the soreness from the bite Mix inflicted on his ankle, but three days after he was arrested, he was finding the ankle sore, and asked the gaol guard if he could get it checked. A nurse renewed the dressing, which had been put on right after Zack’s arrest. Apparently, this should have been done daily. However, the nurse said the wound did not appear to be infected. There was no mention of the possibility of rabies. The nurse did not want to have to go through the paperwork of arranging the appropriate schedule of shots, and Zack

had on a previous occasion hit her in an intoxicated rage. She rationalized her lack of action by thinking that arresting officers should have caught the dog for testing. She could not even block the passing thought that Zack's demise would be no loss to the world.

"Gamma," 41 asked "do drug-addicted people like Zack have a proper capacity to make moral decisions?"

"A good question, 41. Capacity to make moral decisions – the idea of free will – has a long and fractious history in legal, ethical and religious debates."

"I do not hear you answering my question, Gamma. Should I take it that there is not a clear response?"

"Perceptive of you, 41. Indeed, I have pondered on many occasions about the moral culpability for actions or omissions of those whose reasoning is impaired by some substance, injury, or interference with their thinking, or even the suggestions we may make to those susceptible to our presence and hints."

"Gamma. Were you present at any of the debates and conflicts over predestination and similar Calvinist ideas?"

"Unfortunately, yes. So much waste of thought and effort, particularly effort to kill people whose opinions differed from one's own. How the choice of burning at the stake arose as the response to an accusation of heresy seems to be without record."

"I can only agree, though that agreement comes with great sadness. But I am surprised that in my present state I can still be plagued by questions on an individual's capacity for moral decision. However, my thoughts on Calvin were because it has always struck me how predestination absolved the individual of responsibility for morality, making further discussion irrelevant."

"Again, very perceptive, 41. That we are here, trying to be an influence for good, speaks volumes against predestination. However, there are still many dimensions to related ideas. They won't go away."

Mix's mixed fortunes

Rabies, or rather vaccination for it, was present in Angela's thoughts too. The realization that Mix was very likely a stray had been pushed aside by concerns about Julia, so it was almost a week after Mix arrived at The Lodge that Angela checked the City web site and found that Mix needed a licence and a rabies shot, with both a microchip and a distemper group disease shot recommended strongly. It would cost money, but since Mix had allowed Angela to help Julia to talk about what she sensed, the expense would be worth it. Truth be told, Angela liked having Mix around. He was friendly but not a nuisance, barked very little, and was picky about where he did his business, always using a small corner of the garden behind some low bushes. It was convenient to clean up regularly but not necessarily instantly.

Gamma commented "Poor Mix. The vet will no doubt recommend neutering, which saves on the dog licence."

“I think Angela feels uncomfortable about that. She’ll likely decide to wait a year.”

This decision was, as it turned out, unnecessary. The veterinary office chosen, Gamma and 41 noted, was almost next-door to the city lock-up. As soon as the vet’s assistant had completed the initial paperwork, she took a handheld scanner to find out if Mix had a microchip. To the surprise of Angela and Julia, he did. However, the owner database gave information for which the telephone had been disconnected. The assistant put the name and address into her web browser.

“Oh dear. The first item is an obituary, and it’s from two years ago.”

Angela had noticed with surprise that the chip scanner reported the pet’s name – Mix. How had Julia known that?

The vet greeted Angela and Julia and they brought Mix into his examination room. The vet felt all over Mix, who appeared curious, but didn’t fuss, which was a relief to Angela. The vet said,

“With the microchip we’ve found, it’s likely he was vaccinated, but with the former owner gone a couple of years, we can’t find out for sure. He’s been neutered, and we know he’s four and a half years old. I’ll recommend the rabies and distemper-group shots.”

Thus Mix had to put up with the soreness and mild fever of reactions to the shots, which he’d actually had before. The shades, having not bothered to scrutinize Mix’ history in favour of following the actions unfolding at the veterinary office, now considered the present. 41 had wondered if he should try to communicate the existing vaccinations via Julia, but recognized that there would be too many awkward questions for the young girl.

Needless to say, Mix was soon licensed and no longer a stray.

The evening of the visit to the vet, as they were finishing dessert, Angela asked “Julia. When the vet’s assistant looked up Mix’s microchip, I saw that his name was Mix on the data.”

Julia didn’t need the question to be asked, but answered “Somehow I just knew it.”

“Do you think the ghosts told you?”

“I suppose so. I don’t hear a voice or anything. I just seem to know or get an idea, though sometimes I feel like there’s a friend near me or behind me.”

“You’re not frightened.”

“No. Why would I be?”

“Because there’s a stranger nearby.”

“But they’re not strangers. Like I said, I sense a friend nearby.”

“Are they always the same ... er ... spirits?”

“I don’t know. They feel the same. Mom. I have once or twice felt some ... not nice ones were about. Maybe there are some bad ones too.”

“Do you ever feel the bad ones here, at home?”

“No. I haven’t felt them for a long time, and never here. The time I remember most was when we went on the ferry. We went by a house on an island, and I felt sort of cold. I was glad when the ferry left it behind.”

Angela remembered that house too. Why? It did have a sombre and unpleasant air. Perhaps she sensed things too, but not with the same sensitivity as Julia.

Lightning strikes

Angela's school friend Nancy worked for the city of Saanich in the Parks, Recreation and Community Services department. She'd taken a degree in fine arts at UVic. Her job, was, she supposed, about as close to her studies as one might hope. Her salary was modest, but it was fortunately sufficient, if she was careful, to provide a decent living if her tastes were not too ambitious.

One of Nancy's recreational activities was to play her violin with the Vic Fiddle Society. Her violin was a reasonable one, but with care, it could be considered a sunk cost rather than an ongoing expense. VicFiddle asked a reasonable \$25 per year membership. On the first Friday of each month she joined 80 or more other musicians, mostly with fiddles, in the hall of Esquimalt United Church in that suburb. A big wall of sound, mostly familiar Celtic tunes. There were also some pick-up jam sessions around the area, for example, on selected Sunday afternoons at the Fernwood Inn. However, that group played by ear, and Nancy was used to sight-reading. Still, she'd occasionally join some acquaintances at people's homes to play.

The week when Mix was taken to the vet, Angela's employer had a regional meeting at The Lodge. One of the visitors was a 30-ish man, Adrian Varley, who was the senior aide to a vice-President of the company. He approached Angela to ask "Mrs. Jenkins, is there a place where I might play my flute without disturbing others. It will only be in the early evening."

Angela suggested the veranda at the rear if the weather were benign, but said he could also play in the kitchen after the dinner was cleared away. With the door closed, sound would be muted. She also offered him a lamp that could be placed on a counter to make music easy to read. She added "Do you play in any groups, Mr. Varley?"

"Just amateur jam sessions. I learned that Victoria Fiddle Society is playing on Friday night, so I'm planning to stay over and take the ferry bus to Vancouver on Saturday."

"My friend Nancy Jones often goes, but she says there's a big crowd."

"So I've heard. Should be interesting. I downloaded the pdf files of their music books and I've got them on a tablet."

Thus there was about an hour of gentle music, quite well-played, each evening, and at a volume that was low enough that neither conversation nor watching TV was disturbed. On Friday night, Adrian could have taken a cab to Admiral's Road, but decided to take the bus, even though he had to take two and change at Yates Street. However, he found the hall easily, paid his visitor fee, selected an unoccupied chair in the crowded hall and set up his portable music stand and his tablet, for which he had a clip to minimize the chance it would be knocked on the floor.

One of the organizers welcomed everyone, made some announcements and then introduced the evening's leader, a youngish woman who was well known in the Celtic community. However, when she announced the first tune, Adrian heard the woman sitting next to him say "Damn. No charge."

"If you can help get the music up on mine, we can share," Adrian suggested.

At the break, the woman said "Thanks for letting me share. My charging cable seems to be broken."

"No problem. And I'd have been futzing all the time trying to find the right page."

"Yeah. They don't give you much time. But you played well."

"I practised every evening this week. I'm over from Vancouver for a corporate strategy meeting. We have a company house in James Bay."

"The Lodge. My friend Angela runs it."

"She mentioned a friend. You must be Nancy. I'm Adrian."

While there were donated refreshments being sold at the break, our two musicians spent too much time introducing themselves to each other to get any. After the last tune, it was only around 9 p.m., and Adrian asked "Can I suggest a coffee somewhere?"

"You could, though I'm not sure where." Turning to an older woman who was packing up beside them, she said "Jacqueline. Do you know if there's any coffee shop open nearby?"

"The only one I know is Esquimalt Roasting, but they close at 4:30."

"I have some of their coffee," Nancy said, laughing. "Adrian. Why don't we go to my place? It's only a few blocks away."

"Jacqueline. Do you want to walk with us? This is Adrian Varley from Vancouver who's over working here for the week."

"Thanks, Nancy. As you know, my night vision isn't great and the street just here is pretty dark. I'm OK when we get to Esquimalt Road."

The crowd spilled out to the street. Most found cars. A few walked the block to the bus stops. Our trio went several blocks along the main road. Jacqueline turned into one building, then Nancy directed Adrian to the next.

"This is very atypical for me. I've never invited someone I just met for coffee."

"Caution is understandable. Should we say good-night now?"

"No. I'm enjoying our conversation. And Jacqueline knows you're with me. Besides, it's starting to rain."

Indeed, there was the beginning of a steady downpour. For the next hour and a half, our new friends were so busy learning about each other that they did not notice. Nor the time that was slipping by. When they did, Adrian said "I'd better get back to The Lodge."

"Can you get in without waking someone?"

"Yes. They use RFID fobs. They're set up for the dates we're there, then become inactive if we forget to hand them in. But I'll give mine to Mrs. Jenkins after breakfast. I'd intended to take the morning bus to Vancouver, though now I wish we'd more time to get to know each other."

"Did you book the ticket?"

“No. Perhaps I’d a premonition. Or thought it might be nice to take a look around Victoria before leaving.”

Nancy pulled the curtain aside. “Oh. It’s still raining. In fact, quite hard. You’ll get soaked, because you’ll have to wait for two buses or walk from Johnson Street.”

“I’ll get an Uber or a cab. Though it’ll feel like I’m tearing myself away. It feels very comfortable being with you.”

“Yes. I feel the same.”

Nancy took a deep breath.

“Adrian. I feel very odd saying this, but why don’t I text Angela that you’ll miss breakfast. That isn’t an invitation to sleep together, though for some strange reason I won’t be offended if you want to talk about that. I’m as stickler for precautions, and thanks to a rather short interaction with a man who lied about his marital status, there are some condoms in the apartment if we drift in that direction. And ... er ... I’ve no idea why I said all that. I’m not promiscuous and have actually rather little experience of men.”

“I ... I’m not quite sure how to respond. I already told you there’s nobody special in my life now, and that is the truth. There have only been a very small number of women in my life, and I would love to forget my performance with the early two, where I was unspeakably clumsy. And I seem, like you, to be ... er ... unsurprised that I feel I can talk to you about ... er ... well ... sex, along with just about everything else. However, I’ll be comfortable with taking things a bit at a time.”

Nancy texted Angela to expect Adrian when she saw him. Then she found a towel and facecloth from her linen closet. “I’ll give you a fresh toothbrush I have, too.”

“I hope you’ll let me pay you back somehow.”

“If we keep going as we seem to have started, I’m sure we’ll work something out.”

“Yes. ... Er... Somehow that seems how things should unfold.”

“I’m afraid I don’t have pyjamas I can offer.”

“Do you have some bedclothes for the sofa?”

“I can find some. Or we could share.”

“If we do, I’d feel better taking a shower first.”

“Me too. Do you want to go first?”

“How big is the shower?”

In this manner two people ended up in the shower together.

Their interaction was noted quietly by our pair of shades.

“Gamma. Are there any spirits steering Nancy and Adrian? They seem to be being pushed along rather precipitously.”

“Not that I can discern, 41. I believe this is the influence of hormones and a long period of missing companionship and affection.”

“Assuming they are being truthful with both each other and themselves, one can only hope that they will succeed in finding contentment together.”

“You say contentment, 41. Not happiness. Do you prefer contentment?”

“I can’t say prefer. But my experience and understanding is that contentment is calm and stable, but happiness rather ill-defined and uneven. Reason versus emotion.”

“Nicely put, 41. I enjoy your thoughtfulness.”

Sermon or homily

“Come along, Julia. We need to get the bus if we’re to get to Joe’s church by 10.”

Angela and Julia were taking the Blink bus to Langford to attend a service Joe would lead. Sunday number 95 bus service was every 20 minutes, but the distance was enough that they needed to get to the Legislature stop by twenty to nine to have plenty of time to find the church. Julia wanted to go upstairs, and they took one of the pair of seats at the very front. The day was bright and dry, and the ride was uneventful. Julia seemed happy enough to sit and enjoy the view.

During the ride, Angela could not help thinking of Nancy and Adrian. The suddenness of their pairing up. Adrian had come back on Saturday to get his bag and turn in the fob. But it was clear he would not go home until some time on Sunday. If the relationship proved genuine ... well, Angela had known that intoxication with Bob, Julia’s father. Was she jealous of Nancy? Maybe. On the other hand, she wished her friend well. Adrian seemed like a nice man. Reasonably good looking, but not a type who would trade on it for advantage.

It was only in the last few months that Angela had even started to think about how she might find someone to love and be loved by. Not that she could imagine how she might meet someone or find occasions to get to know them. While she obviously met Adrian in the course of her employment, she would not have a route to get to know someone like him in the way Nancy had. Between her duties and Julia, she would have to be creative to find a convenient time to go out on a date.

Noting that Julia was looking out towards the parapet of one of the bridges across the highway to Langford on which they were moving, Angela asked “Are the spirits around?”

“There’s a shimmer on the bridge there, but I’m not sure it’s any I usually feel.”

They met Barbara and her husband George Henley outside the church. ‘Church’ was a bit of an exaggeration, as it was just a unit in a strip mall. Joe was setting up a new congregation in a young suburb. If you looked carefully you could even see indications of the shoe shop it had been previously.

However, the front windows had now been frosted up to within a couple of feet of the ceiling. The lino floor tiles were covered in the centre with a big carpet, with some old church pews – clearly salvaged from somewhere – on each side, and some stackable chairs in rows at the rear. There was a cross on the back wall and a modest lectern in front of it. On either side of the cross were two quite large TV screens. A very spartan form of church that the LeaderSHIFT

program had managed to get going when the shoe shop went bankrupt and the lease on the space was looking for a taker soon after the Covid pandemic lockdown ended. Joe Douglas had offered to take on the job of running things on a part-time salary for a year or so.

He'd done well. The seats soon all filled, and Angela then realized why there was a big shelf of square cushion pads as people took them and sat on the floor. That explained why there was a big space in front of the chairs.

The screens lit up with 'Welcome to Langford Holy Spirit Community' and music started playing from a keyboard to one side of the lectern. The musician was a youngish woman who could play really well. The opening was the old classic hymn *All things bright and beautiful* and the lyrics came up on the screens as Joe walked in from a door at the side of the back wall. Angela noticed there was a sign beside the door for a toilet. There were several small children and babies. A toilet was a necessity.

There did not seem to be a choir, nor anyone in vestments. Joe was dressed in normal attire of shirt and slacks, without tie. But there were people singing well, neither mumbling nor shouting, and mostly in tune, and they carried through all four verses and refrains.

Joe began "Welcome everyone to our regular Sunday service. The service is a time for reflection, some prayer, and hopefully a recharging of spiritual and emotional batteries. We'll use some readings, some songs – they're often called hymns – and a couple of periods when we won't talk or sing. I'd say periods of silence, but there are small children and babies here. Until they are old enough to understand, we'll accept a best effort, with the kitchen and washrooms if a little one get's into a crying spell or a tantrum.

"After the service, there'll be some coffee and cookies for those who would like to stay for a few minutes. Now let's think about the things that have given us satisfaction this week, as well as those that we'd like to improve. While we do, Michaela will play *Adoration* by Florence Price."

After the music, one of the congregation went to the lectern and read one of St. Paul's epistles. Then there was a hymn Angela found familiar but could not identify. Then another participant read a passage from the New Testament, after which Joe came again to the lectern.

"This is the time when I'm supposed to give a sermon or a homily. We won't get into arguing how a homily and a sermon are different or we'll start some terrible religious wars and won't be able to enjoy the open table dinners with the Anglicans or play bingo with the Knights of Columbus."

Here there was laughter, and it was full-throated.

"This week I'm going to talk about ghosts. Not the kind in horror movies. The kind that are part of our lives and were part of many of the biblical stories. Modern life doesn't acknowledge spirits as much as scripture does. But since we're all here, I'm going to take a flyer and say at least some of us believe there are spirits around.

"Now I'm not going to tell you they've got wings or halos or how many can dance on the head of a pin. I am going to urge you to watch for those occasions where there's goodness in action, and to be cautious when evil is afoot. My

belief is that on such occasions, there are generally spirits about, and the good ones are our friends. I'll let you envision them in ways that you find appropriate and helpful to your own situation and feelings.

"The ultimate spirit, or ghost, is God. Ministers are often expected to speak for God. These ministers are very often men, and they usually make God masculine. That's probably due to the cultural traditions of the societies that generated the scriptures. It's good to see that our Church of England friends now have a very worthy woman as their Archbishop of Canterbury. And some of you may remember a little film called *Dogma* where Alanis Morissette played a very non-traditional God, one that was friendly and unlikely to inspire fear. That portrayal upset some people, but I think we should be glad that the story does make us think about God and how He or She may exist.

"Whatever our understanding of spirits, let us aim to use that understanding to live good lives. Moral lives, where morality is driven not by rules that are followed blindly, but built on decisions aimed at the greatest good for all.

"I encourage you to think and talk about these ideas. But do keep your sense of perspective. We're aiming to live good lives, not solve all the mysteries of the universe.

"Now let's sing again, then say the Lord's Prayer."

Angela realized that the service would be over in less than an hour. Joe had kept his sermon short and up-beat in stark contrast to the droning boredom that had put her off going to church as an adolescent.

Lunch in Langford

Angela and her family members stayed for the after-service coffee. Barb introduced Angela to a couple of sets of people. George saw Joe close by and said "Joe. If you wish, you're welcome to join us for lunch along with Angela and Julia."

"I'll have to close up here first, which will take anything from twenty minutes to half an hour."

"I'll write down our address – though I think you probably have it – and sketch a map for you on the back of this out of date notice and you can come when you're ready."

Barb and George's house was only a few minutes walk away. As they walked, Angela asked "Will Tony or Samantha be around?" These were the Henleys' 17 and 19 year old children. Barb was a decade older than Angela.

"Tony might be, if he's back from rugby practice, but Angela's off at UVic working on a term paper. They've not met Joe yet, and don't show much interest in church."

"Will Mom come by today? I've not seen her for a couple of weeks. She's been busy each time we wanted to get together."

Barb said "She phoned to say that she might drive over mid-afternoon depending on the weather and other things. I get the feeling that she may have a boy-friend of sorts in that outdoor group she joined."

“It’s been ten years since Dad died. She’s only 64 and still active. Still working three days a week as receptionist for that real-estate office.”

“I suppose I’d like the kids to see more of her while she is still vital. Probably guilt over not spending enough time with our own grandparents.

“Here we are. I’ve some soup going in a crock pot.”

“Aren’t they called slow cookers these days?” Angela responded.

“Yeah, but this one was Mom’s until she got a new fancier one. However, I think she regrets giving me the old one. It works just fine and hasn’t got all the buttons and do-dads on it.”

“Do-dads’. Barb. The kids’ll be saying their Mom’s a dinosaur.”

“Wait until Julia gets a bit older and you’ll get your comeuppance, little sister.”

Joe showed up about 20 minutes later on a bicycle, for which George opened the garage. “Park it inside. Been kids taking bikes for a ride and dumping them places. Not major crime, but a nuisance.”

“Part of my job is to try to instil more social responsibility, but it’s not easy to get teenagers into church or anywhere else to have a serious conversation about life and how it should be lived.”

Barb put a bowl of soup in front of Joe and pointed to the home-made bread, thanks to a breadmaking machine. There were two types of cheese on the table. George asked “Weren’t there conversations about using the worship space for a drop-in centre or a food bank?”

“Indeed there were. I’d like to open an afternoon gathering place, say 3 to 6. The two obstacles are my shifts at Home Depot and figuring out activities. I don’t want idleness.”

Angela said “Would there be interest in homework help? Maybe some students helping others to overcome obstacles. Possibly even some math or language tutorials.”

“That could work. I’ll make some notes and raise it at the church committee meeting and if the response is positive, have an open discussion session instead of a sermon during Sunday service.”

“What about the food bank idea?” George asked. “I can see the need, but the space isn’t big and there’d be stuff all over the place. Possibly a risk of spoilage and vermin.”

“I’ll come across like Ebenezer Scrooge,” Joe said. “The plain logistic issues that George mentioned are an obvious problem, and one that probably kills the idea. However, more fundamentally, I’m actually opposed to the concept of food banks. Not to there being food banks, since there is genuine need. But in a society as rich as ours, and one that has signed on to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that says food is a basic right, surely we shouldn’t need to rely on private charity?”

“Good point,” Barb said.

“If we do get the so-called drop-in centre, though Angela’s idea points to a name like *Homework Helpers*, I do think we might consider offering some food, and something more substantial than cookies.”

George said "You could offer a modest meal for the helpers. Could get you some buy-in from the kids. And those helping could be allowed to invite others they figured might be in need."

"Those ideas might be useful to persuade the more conservative members of the church management committee. Thanks."

Conversation devolved to current events, both local and world-wide. After some brownies were consumed, Angela said "Julia and I are going to take a walk on the Galloping Goose Trail. I know Barb and George are going to do some yard work. We'll stop back before we head home. Probably need a bathroom break."

"May I join you for a while?" Joe asked.

"Sure," Angela agreed.

Once they'd walked the few blocks to the trail and they let Julia take the lead about 5 metres ahead, Angela said "I guess you want to ask how Julia is doing?"

"Oh. Well, I am interested in knowing. But ... er ... actually I wanted to ... er ... ask if I could call you sometime. Possibly go to a movie or ... er ... You know. For someone who has to speak publicly as a career, I'm making a real hash of this."

"Joe. I'd ... um ... be delighted for you to call me. If you have your mobile, we can exchange numbers and emails etc. But I'm just as awkward as you. I've almost no real experience of dating."

"Thanks for making that easy for me. I guess neither of us has much practice in one-on-one socializing."

"I met Bob, Julia's father, when I was around 19. I'd had a few dates before that. Nothing serious. Generally ran around with a group of kids, and we did things together. Bob was killed in the construction accident when I was 21, and you pretty well know the rest. A lot of my time has been keeping things going. In the last couple of years I've found things more stable. The grief isn't so sharp, and I've been able to think a bit about how life might go on."

"And I already told you how I broke up with Jennifer, then really got swept along with becoming a minister. I want to do well at it."

"You already do. I liked the service. I expect we'll come fairly regularly, though it's a bit of a hike for us."

"There's a lot of pressure towards regular attendance, but if I'm honest, in your place I could see myself attending the Cathedral Evensong at 4 o'clock on Sunday afternoons. It's pretty close to where you live. In fact, that's one thing we might do together if it appeals to you. I'll even let you accuse me of wanting to have a cheap date, or get you into church, even if that's an Anglican one."

They both laughed. Angela said "I've seen the notices about the Evensong and thought about it once or twice. Yes. We could try that."

Julia was looking at something in the bushes. Angela was concerned it might be spirits, but it turned out there were a pair of chipmunks facing off over a nut. The walk continued congenially for another quarter hour before they turned off to find their way back to the Henley's house.

Gamma and 41 had been observing things from a distance.

“Gamma. Did either of us try to influence things today? I know I did ponder whether Joe and Angela would find comfort with each other. But I made no effort to put thoughts in their minds.”

“Nor I. But 41, we don’t have, nor need to have, influence on all the happenings of the human or animal world.”

“That’s a relief. We would have too much to do.”

The shades laughed, a laughter echoed by birdsong and squirrel chatter and the rustling of bushes, some of which were just starting to bloom.

After Valentine’s

A week later was the Sunday following St. Valentine’s day. Joe was going to meet Angela at the Lodge and they were going to Evensong, then have a meal at a Vietnamese restaurant nearby. Angela, wanting to be able to talk with Joe, arranged with the mother of one of Julia’s school friends that Julia could go there for supper. Angela had already reciprocated by way of payment when the mother wanted to go out with her husband for Valentine’s. A happy arrangement for both sides, and one they realized would be useful from time to time in the future.

At the restaurant – a small, simple place with a few tables and a young Asian woman serving – Angela asked “Joe. Could you sense any shades in the Cathedral today? The atmosphere was very conducive to meditation and possibly to the presence of good spirits.”

“Yes. I felt a few were there. I think perhaps for their own reasons. It seems possible to me that they – or at least some of them – have a life, if we can call it that, where they have thoughts and emotions. There’s a tendency to consider them as being totally absorbed with the beings in the world.”

“Do you think they are the souls of the departed?”

“There has been that theme in much of the writings and discussion of spirit life, though where that specific idea comes from I’m not sure. It definitely seems to be a concept that runs through the religious sensibilities of lots of cultures and faiths.

“Am I correct that you are more ... er ... accepting of the idea of the shades than in the past?”

“Maybe. And previously I never thought that perhaps Bob’s spirit might still be around.”

“I take it Bob was – is – Julia’s father?”

“Yes. Robert Murphy from St. John’s Newfoundland. Though I’m not sure how I’d deal with his spirit. It would be good to talk with him, but embarrassing when I’m out with someone, like I am now with you.”

“I’m pretty sure the shades don’t usually interfere with the lives that continue. If you think about that, it could lead to far too much confusion in the world.”

“That makes sense, Joe. And gives me a sense of relief.”

“Are you in touch with Bob’s family?”

"After he died, I wrote to his parents, then again after Julia was born. Never had a reply. They didn't come to the funeral, though apparently there was some communication with the undertaker and with the inquest into the accident. At the time I was pretty much a mess emotionally and not functioning all that well.

"Bob had left home after some disagreements. His parents wanted Bob to stay in St. John's and take over a café they ran. Fish and chips apparently. He didn't like the idea of having to be there every day, rain or shine, sick or healthy."

"That's a pity. For them and for Julia."

"Maybe they think I'm after money or something."

"I suppose that could be a factor. It may be worth another try to communicate. Did you ever try phoning?"

"No. There was just an address in Bob's stuff. We'd just started living together. Had been planning our wedding. Jumped the gun in getting pregnant. Well, we wanted children so I'd stopped taking the Pill."

"There's plenty of precedent. Mary and Joseph in the Bible, for example, weren't married at the time of what the Catholics celebrate as the Immaculate Conception. It's a public holiday in Spain even. Except Joseph was still around for the birth of Jesus and Joseph and Mary were considered married by that time. He's last mentioned when Jesus was 12 years old."

"He almost seems overlooked."

"The Bible is surprisingly uneven in who it mentions or doesn't. Of course, we've no assurance of its completeness. I have to be a bit careful not to be too open that I think it has a lot of the usual inaccuracies that come with journalism of all types."

"Joe. You'll make me think you're a terrible minister!"

"But I hope one who sincerely wants to help people. To make their lives better in some way."

"That comes across clearly, Joe. I'm really glad Barb suggested you talk to Julia. Not just for that. I'm enjoying our time together."

"Me too."

"Angela, it occurs to me that I might be able to contact some people in churches in St. John's to find out about the Murphys. Even if you didn't try to get in touch, you could have a small file for Julia when she gets older. And possibly the Internet might let us get more information, though Murphy is so common a name we'd likely have a lot of digging to do. I'm guessing that after writing you were discouraged and didn't make any special effort."

"Oh. I just realized that Julia was born in the middle of the pandemic. You must have really been isolated."

"Yes. But my mother came and lived with me, but it wasn't much fun. And the lack of reply from the Murphy's was a downer, so I didn't feel like making much of an effort. But Julia will undoubtedly be curious at some point. She's even asked questions once or twice about Bob, but didn't follow them up. They were questions I could answer, but it would have been natural for her to ask more. So maybe a bit of investigation would be useful. I'll try the Internet, and

let you know what I find. If I hit a brick wall, we'll see if your church colleagues can help.

"This noodle in soup is very good. A good choice. But I know your finances aren't flush, so we'll split the bill."

"No we won't. I invited you, and I've already had two lunches courtesy of the Jenkins sisters."

"All right. Put that way, you can take the bill. And thanks. I'm really glad of this outing. I've been too much of a hermit socially."

"Me too, despite the congregation."

Monday in the news

Human remains found on island

Workers carrying out renovation work on one of the Gulf islands discovered human remains in shallow graves in the basement of the cottage where they were working. A police spokesman said that while it was too early to make any definitive pronouncement, the findings were being treated as a potential result of foul play.

As Angela read on, she realized the cottage was the one seen from the ferry where she and Julia had felt uneasy.

Research results

Midweek, Angela tried calling Joe, but had to leave a message because he was working. Around a quarter to ten, her phone rang and she could see it was Joe.

"Hi Joe. Back from work?"

As Angela said this, she realized they hadn't talked about Joe's living arrangements.

"Yes. But it's drizzling a bit. Had to be careful on the bike and make sure lights working."

"I've no idea where you live. We've talked about all sorts of other stuff."

"I've a pretty tiny basement unit in the house of a congregation member. I suppose you'd say parishioner, but I'm not sure I think of our setup as a parish, even though that term is used within the United Church. Let me give you my address to put in your contacts."

After Angela had put in this data, she said "Thanks, Joe. I was calling to let you know what I'd found out about Bob Murphy's family. When I tried searching 'Robert Murphy St. John's' I got his obituary, but then saw there was another very soon after for Robert Senior. Apparently his father passed away from what they said was 'sudden illness'. Then I found an item not long after that Magic Dory Café had closed due to the death of the owner and his widow being unable to carry on. It mentioned a sister, Caroline. Bob didn't talk about her that I remember."

“Were you able to get any information about Bob’s mother?”

“Only that her name is Laura. I tried a canada411 search, but nothing came up. Tried Robert Murphy too, and there was a number, but when I tried it was out of service, so the database is out of date.”

“Why don’t you email me what you found and I’ll see if I can find anyone in St. John’s who knows Mrs. Murphy. Also to act as an intermediary, because these days I wouldn’t expect her to want to talk to a stranger calling in. There’s too many crooks and scammers about.”

“Thanks, Joe. I’ll do that. Also thanks again for Sunday. It was really nice. Best date I’ve been on in years.” They both laughed, knowing that it was the only one.

“Me too,” Joe said. And they laughed again.

“We’ll see if we can get out to service on Sunday. But expect us when you see us. If I come, I’ll bring some picnic stuff.”

“OK. If it’s nice, we can go over to the shore by Royal Roads, though we’d need to take the bus and walk a bit. Or find somewhere closer.”

Dinner with mother

The next evening, Angela, Julia and Mix were picked up by Madeleine Jenkins so they could have dinner at Grandma’s apartment.

“I hope the dog is well-behaved, Angela.”

“I do too, but so far he’s proved very good. Though we should make sure to give him a short walk. Don’t want any accidents.”

“Definitely not.

“I’m surprised you acquired a dog, though.”

Julia explained how Mix came into their lives. She related how Mix had barked to warn of the cyclist. She didn’t mention the shades.

Madeleine said “I tried calling the Lodge on Sunday, but it went to the corporation message, so I hung up.”

“Mommy went out to dinner with Reverend Douglas,” Julia said.

Madeleine’s eyebrows raised.

“Joe is the minister at a new church – well it’s a new congregation that has services in a strip mall unit – out in Langford.”

“Barbara mentioned she was going to a new church. But you went out on a date with him?”

Julia and Angela passed a quick glance at each other, then Angela said “Julia and I went to a service a few weeks ago, and Barb invited Reverend Douglas to join us for lunch. Then Julia and Joe and I went for a walk along the Galloping Goose and he asked me if I’d ever gone to Evensong at the Cathedral and we ended up going then having some Vietnamese food after. Julia was invited to dinner with a school friend.”

Madeleine said “It’s good you’re getting out again. I hope he’s a nice man.”

“Joe’s really nice,” Julia said. “He talks to you, not just talks.”

“While that’s an odd way to put it, Julia has described Joe quite accurately there,” Angela noted.

Sunday picnic

Madeleine provided a way for Angela and Joe to spend private time together. She suggested that she come to the Sunday service, picking up Angela and Julia in her car, then take Julia to lunch at a Tim’s or Subway and then shopping for a new outfit for her upcoming sixth birthday in April. This year it coincided with Easter.

The weather wasn’t great, so Madeleine dropped Angela and Joe at the house where he had his apartment.

“Welcome to my abode. Will tea be fine with whatever you’ve brought?”

“Yes. Fine. But I had coffee. Better visit your facilities.”

“It’s plain. But I did do housekeeping yesterday, and not expressly because I thought you might visit. The guest towel is the beige one.”

Angela had brought a couple of small quiches that she had made, along with a plastic container with some salad.

“This is really nice. Thanks,” Joe said.

“Your apartment is much tidier than I’d expect from a bachelor.”

“If it isn’t, it’s not liveable because it’s so small. Just the bathroom, the galley kitchen and this all-in-one room.”

Indeed, there was a bed along one wall, a small sofa and chair with coffee table, a not-too-large TV hanging on the wall, and a table and three chairs. There was a laptop computer on the coffee table. Clearly no space for a desk. A pair of shelves were fastened to the wall with some books on them. Beside the bed was a two-drawer filing cabinet that served also as a bedside table with a lamp on it.

“Afraid I didn’t put in any dessert, Joe. I was thinking we might find an ice cream or something.”

“Not to worry. I’ve some baklava I got at a little bakery on Friday.”

When they’d finished, Angela took their plates to the kitchen and soaked them. Joe was coming in to put away the extra pastry, but there wasn’t room to pass. What happened next, even the shades never agreed, but either Joe kissed Angela, or Angela kissed Joe. It wasn’t long or passionate, but friendly and affectionate. Then each stepped back in shock.

They both said “Oh!”, then Angela said “I didn’t mean ...”

“Nor did I.”

“But I wanted to.”

“Yes. Me too. It’ll mean we need to do a bit of thinking.”

“Yes.” Angela said, uncertainly.

“Let’s do the British thing and have another cup of tea,” Joe suggested.

Angela laughed and said “Good idea.”

Joe was going to offer the sofa, then moved to the table. Safer.

Meanwhile, Gamma and 41 were observing. “Gamma. That almost was like one of us was giving them a nudge.”

“Not me, 41. And I can’t detect any other spirits about.”

“On the other hand, it’s almost like we’re not doing our job, if indeed we are supposed to do anything.”

“They are behaving with remarkable composure, actually, 41.”

There was a period of silence while both Angela and Joe sipped tea. Joe said “Do we need to say anything about what happened?”

“Perhaps I should say that I like being with you, Joe. For the first time in years, I’m not always looking backwards.”

“I like being with you too. For today, why not leave it at that and we’ll take things a step at a time. We’re both unmarried, and our interaction hopefully will be a positive one no matter the ultimate outcome. If our feelings continue to grow, then we’ll need to think how we want to go forward together.”

“Yes. I guess there’s no hurry, Joe. Somehow feelings like that always feel urgent.”

“But we’d better be wary of acting hastily. I’ve a congregation, you’ve a daughter.”

“They’ll be back soon, I think.”

“Oh. Angela, before I forget. I meant to tell you I emailed a colleague in St. John’s that I met at a church conference several years ago. Pamela is with a church there. I sent her the two obits and the article about the closure of the business. She said she would ask around, but would do so discreetly so as not to cause upset if the family were firm in not wanting contact with you and Julia, though I believe that would be unfortunate for everyone.”

“Thanks. I’ve waited this long, and I’d actually be happiest that the matter be kept fairly quiet. If they decide they do want to get in touch, then the news can be shared. And if they don’t, I’d rather not have that spread around because ... well I’m not sure the reason.”

“Yes. Exactly. People can misinterpret decisions to not communicate. Let’s hope Pamela has some success.”

Ride home

Madeleine was driving Angela and Julia back to The Lodge.

“Joe’s place is very small.”

“Yes. Though I found the lack of daylight more difficult than the small size.”

“He’s a nice man, but it seems his ... er ... resources are rather limited.”

“I know Mom. But it’s consistent with what he does, and does well.”

“That’s true. I’m just being protective Mother and prickly Grandma.”

“Why are you prickly, Grandma?” Julia asked.

“Mothers always worry about their daughters, Julia. Joe doesn’t have much money, and if you and your mother team up with him, life could be hard. But he seems a very good man, so I’ll try to be as positive as I can.”

“Thanks. And I’ll try to be positive about your friends, too,” Angela said.

“Really, Angela! What do you mean?”

“Barbara thinks you’ve got a boyfriend.”

“Hardly a boyfriend. Charlie McNabb in the outdoor group has invited me to join him for lunch a couple of times and I’ve had him over for dinner once. Oh, Julia. Look at that funny car over there.”

There was, indeed, a wildly painted old Volkswagen Beetle parked on the opposite side of the street they were driving along. However, it was obvious Madeleine wanted to stop the direction the conversation was taking.

Gamma and 41 knew, of course, that the dinner with Charlie had also included breakfast, but Madeleine, in common with many of her age group, found it very uncomfortable to admit that she very much enjoyed and wanted the physical as well as social pleasures she found with Charlie, who, like her, was widowed, though fully retired. Moreover, they’d only shared overnight time once so far, and both were unsure how they wanted the relationship to evolve.

Girl talk

A couple of nights later, Nancy came directly from work to have supper with Angela. Julia was present for eating, but was allowed to watch a video in company of Mix before being helped to bed. Nancy and Angela stayed in the kitchen to natter.

“It’s been a whirlwind life for the last couple of weeks,” Nancy said.

“I was a bit surprised that you let Adrian stay over two weeks ago.”

“So was I! Could hardly believe it was me.”

“Hope you took precautions. Bob and I stopped taking precautions, but we were planning the wedding and we wanted children, though I didn’t find out I was pregnant until after he died in the accident.”

“And you ended up having Julia at the beginning of the pandemic.”

“For my sins, yes.”

“The way Julia turned out, how you made her wasn’t a sin, Angela,” Nancy said solemnly.

“With that I most definitely agree,” Angela said. “But I’d still urge you to take care.”

“Thanks to Mendacious Michael, I still had some condoms, though I had to check they weren’t beyond their expiry date.”

“Which implies you used one, at least.”

“I’m suitably embarrassed and blushing down to my toes,” Nancy said.

“Or else you’re hot and bothered remembering some really good orgasms.”

“Well, maybe.”

Both women laughed.

“What about you, Angela? Surely it’s time you started to socialize.”

“I’ve actually made friends with a church minister out in Langford, but we’re not anywhere near as ... er ... active as you and Adrian.”

Both laughed again.

“At least your minister is a local bus away. I went to Vancouver over the weekend. I wanted to go the weekend before. Sort of a madness. But Adrian had some obligations to a family member visiting Vancouver.”

“You really are in up to your eyeballs, aren’t you, Nancy. I sure hope you don’t get hurt.”

“Me too. I’ve not felt this way before. It’ll be a big let-down if things fall apart.”

“Do you have any idea how Adrian feels? I didn’t get much chance to get to know him, but he seemed straightforward.”

“I think he’s as surprised as I am how fast we’ve come together. We want to keep getting to know each other better, which’ll be work or expense or both with the separation. But we’ve talked quite a bit about making sure we don’t mis-step. So we’re trying to have conversations about different aspects of life and what we like and dislike. Somehow, up to now, things seem to be falling into place, but it’s very early days.”

“You might want to do plenty of video calls and try to organize longer times together,” Angela suggested.

“Yeah. Weekends are just too frantic. Neither of us have learned much about each other’s family. ”

“Joe’s met my family, including my mother. It was Barb who introduced us. I should ask Joe about his family. I did see some photos in his apartment, but they weren’t recent. The scenery looked like the prairies.”

Julia came in with Mix trailing behind her.

“The video’s over?” Angela asked.

“Yes, Mommy. I came to say goodnight to Aunt Nancy.”

“Thank you, Julia. I hope you sleep well.”

“Pour yourself and me a glass of wine, Nancy. I’ll be a few minutes. Perhaps you can make sure Mix has some water. Let him out if he goes to the door, and back in when he’s outside it.”

Nancy put more water in Mix’ bowl. He had some kibble in the food bowl and nibbled a mouthful. Then, as Angela predicted, he went to the door. Nancy let him out and watched as he went round the corner of the garage and then came back a couple of minutes later and waited by the door. She let him back in. After she’d sat down at the table and sipped her wine, she found Mix lying beside her chair.

“I see you made friends with Mix,” Angela said as she came in.

“He seems very well-behaved. How did you come to get a dog?”

Angela told the story, minus mention of the ghosts.

“So he’d been a pet, then a stray.”

“Joe thinks he was the dog that stopped a thief who grabbed a woman’s purse a day or so before he warned us of the cyclist. He seems very aware of dangers. I’m really glad to have him for around for Julia and I.”

Phone chat

Angela phoned Joe about 8:30 on Wednesday night.

“Hi Joe. How are things?”

“Pretty good. The management committee approved in principle the Homework Helpers drop in, along with the idea of some food for the tutors and those they invite to join in. We’re looking for a sponsor or sponsors for the food, and I think we’ll find them somehow.

“How about you?”

“Pretty good. Mom liked you. Concerned, of course, that part-time ministers have to be careful with money. However, Barb had sussed out that Mom has a sort of boyfriend, and mentioning him rather diverted attention from you and me.”

“Wicked sisters. Wicked daughters.”

“Joe. Do you have brothers or sisters? You’ve not mentioned family, but I noticed some old photos in your apartment.”

“All back in Saskatchewan, not far from Prince Albert. Mom, Dad and my brother Steve run the family farm – crops only, no livestock. And my sister Joan and her husband Nick are schoolteachers in PA.”

“Do you ever get back to see them?”

“Been over a year, and not for want of trying. But my parents were out last Fall for a week. They won’t likely get out until next November or December given the farm activities. And Steve and his wife Dianne have four kids under 14. Joan and Nick have 3, but they’re all over 8 now. Keeps the grandparents occupied.”

“And it’s pretty expensive to get to Prince Albert from here by any mode of transport,” Angela volunteered.

“It’s a good two days’ drive, and the ferry time and Vancouver traffic can really make it three. And I’ve no car. Planes are sometimes affordable. But since Greyhound left Canada, there’s no buses any more. Not a lot of choices. At some point I’d like to have a car. I don’t need fancy.”

“Yeah. I have a driver’s licence, but I’ve never owned a car.”

“I had an old clunker when I was in university, but that was in Saskatchewan. Insurance then was a bit cheaper, and the car was 16 years old when I got it and 20 when I had it towed to the wrecking yard. I’ve been saving up to get one, but the pandemic slowed down progress.”

“I probably have enough for a cheap used car, but I’m trying to keep a rainy day fund for Julia.”

“Yes. I think you’ve got to do that. And where you live, I think a car doesn’t make a lot of sense, unless you’ve a need to get where buses don’t go, or want to go up-island.”

“For around Victoria, I’ve a bicycle, but haven’t used it since Julia was born. She’s still a bit young for riding out to Langford, say.”

“One of the congregation offered me a bike a while ago. It turned out to be quite decent, without being fancy. You know that you can put bikes on the front of buses to get out here, of course.”

"Somehow slipped my mind.

"I guess Julia could be old enough to ride on side-streets or trails, but not, of course, on main roads, which is more or less what they all are around here."

"Angela. If she did learn to ride and had a bike, it could be stored here or at your sister's place. Then we could ride out here. And you could put your bike on the bus, so you'd have it near home for errands."

"Yes. I suppose I'd better start looking for a bicycle for her. But I'd better ask her if she's interested. No sense pushing her before she's ready."

"Absolutely. But I'll keep my eyes open. Out here there's kids growing bigger than their bikes all the time. It's the nature of the suburbs.

"By the way, are we doing anything together in the next while?"

"I'd like to, Joe. Do you want to do Evensong at the Cathedral again, then come for dinner. Julia goes to bed quite early to give us time to talk."

"Sure. That'd be nice. Anything I can bring?"

"If you like a beer, I'll suggest you bring some. On the rare occasion I drink any alcohol, it's white wine. When my friend Nancy came over the other night was probably the first wine I'd had since Christmas."

"I'll see what I can do. It won't be communion wine."

"Is it not very good?"

"There's various traditions, but both the Methodists and Presbyterians who are the traditional founders of the United Church favour grape juice. Not very interesting. There's now some nice non-alcoholic wines, but I've heard no mention of them for communion use."

"Company is more important than wine. Particularly your company, Joe."

"Yours too. Sleep well."

The shades had been listening discreetly.

"41. There seems to be no need for our suggestions for Joe and Angela."

"I agree, Gamma. They're handling their friendship with remarkable care and kindness. But both of them want much more emotion, and indeed more physical closeness."

"That's always a ... shall we say perturbation for humans."

"Indeed, 41. Their reserve is exemplary, but both would like to find a way to enjoy physicality. For Joe, that could be inconsistent with his ministry, or at least with how a minister is expected to behave. And Angela is wondering how she would find private time with Joe without seeming to push Julia away."

News from Newfoundland

It was the Tuesday evening following, around quarter to ten, that Joe phoned.

"Hi, Thought I'd phone to let you know I just forwarded an email I had today from Pamela. I only just had a chance to look at things. Had some overtime as a colleague at work has a child in hospital for surgery, so I only saw it a minute ago."

"Must be important. Should I go turn on my computer?"

“Well, I could tell you that Laura Murphy wants to get in touch, but why not open the email if it’s not inconvenient.”

“I’m walking there now. It’s in the kitchen. Well, you probably know that from when you were here.”

“Now you mention it, I remember seeing that there was a small desk with a laptop by one wall.”

“Yeah. The kitchen’s kind of my command centre, even if it’s not in my private area. Laptop’s booting now.”

“Always seems slow when you’re waiting.”

“Yes. Though mine’s pretty good. The company tends to replace machines after two years, and they buy decent machines. Ah. There’s your message. Let me read it.”

“I’ll wait.”

“Oh. I see Mrs. Murphy emailed your colleague Pamela MacIntosh. So this is a double forwarding.

“And now it makes sense that I didn’t hear from her. She had both her son and husband die. My letter wasn’t written until the end of 2019 because I was struggling to cope. And when she got that letter, she wasn’t doing well, since she was trying to keep the restaurant going on her own, and she mislaid the letter. Then covid hit, and the restaurant was under even more pressure.

“Oh. She’s now moved, and didn’t get my second letter. She thinks the new occupants of their house – who were tenants who got into arrears with Covid – didn’t forward letters. She says there’s been other things gone missing.”

“The story is sad, but the news for you is good, Angela.”

“Yes. I’ll respond right away to let her know I’ve received the information. And I’ll put together some photos and put them up on my Google Docs space.”

“Make sure you limit who can see pictures of Julia. A lot of people leave things open, but there are some bad people who take photos and use them to create images for different kinds of criminal purposes. On Docs you have to restrict access to each file or folder and list the emails of the people are allowed to see it. Also don’t let anyone with the link access the file. I also ask anyone that I send pictures or links to to ask me if they want other people to be able to see them. There’s still the possibility that people capture pictures and forward them, of course.”

“That was almost a sermon, Joe. But I appreciate your caution, and I’ll take it to heart. Maybe I’ll wait until we’re together and have you check the settings.”

“Sure. Security is always better with two pairs of eyes.”

“Pity Mix doesn’t do computers.”

They both laughed. Joe asked “Is he settling in OK?”

“Like he owns the place. ... No. That’s not right. He doesn’t act bossy, just like he belongs. And he hangs around the door if it’s open.

“At night sometimes he even patrols the house if he’s inside, but often he’s outside in the lean-to where garden stuff is stored. We’ve made a space there for him with a rug and a water bowl between some boxes. Though I think from where he lies that he watches the house.”

“He also seems very well-behaved.”

“Yes. That was a worry when we first got him. I have to think of my employers, but Mix keeps out of the way as if he knows the situation.”

“On Sunday I was surprised that he was there any time I looked, but he just didn’t grab attention. And while I’m talking about Sunday, I really had a nice evening. The Evensong was good in that I usually am running services. It gave me some time for reflection without being ... er ... heavy. And dinner with you and Julia was really comfortable.”

“Yes. It was. I had a nice evening too. ”

“Better sign off. Goodnight Angela.”

“Night, Joe.”

The conversation had been noted by the two shades. 41 asked “Gamma, do you think there was any influence on the lost letters by any spirits?”

“41. Our essence, the essence of any spirit or ghost as perceived by live humans, is that we could be thought to interfere or touch upon the events of the physical world. You’ll note I avoided the expression ‘real world’. Though some might say we do not exist, hence are not real.”

“Obviously Gamma. René Descartes *Cogito, ergo sum.* implies we are real, even if we are not observable by most in the physical world.”

“I fear, 41, that our communications are un-noticed and un-noticeable beyond ourselves.”

“That is too pessimistic, Gamma. Think only of how we have managed to interact with Mix, for example.”

“Indeed, and with Joe and Julia also. Sometimes I get frustrated that I can do so little to advance the cause of good versus evil.”

“In life, I never anticipated that spirits would have moments of uncertainty and dissatisfaction.”

“If there were no uncertainty, 41, God could be accused of creating infinite boredom.”

Awkward subjects

The news about Laura Murphy pushed aside intentions of both Joe and Angela to arrange to get together on the weekend. However, Angela, after reading through Laura’s message and making a short reply with a promise of more in a day or so, remembered Barb had suggested Julia come for a sleepover on Saturday. She emailed Joe – it was now after 11 p.m. – to ask if he wanted to do something that would give a chance for less-disturbed conversation.

Final arrangements weren’t complete until Friday afternoon. Madeleine was going to drive herself and Charlie to Duncan to meet some friends of Charlie’s there. She would take Julia to Barb’s house after lunch Saturday on their way out of town. Joe would ride his bike or use the bus to bring it, they’d do a clean-up on Angela’s bicycle, then take a ride around the shoreline before making some dinner or getting takeout together.

Joe arrived at The Lodge around 2:15. Angela was outside finishing the cleaning of her bicycle as he cycled in.

“You’ve already got it ready to go?”

“I’ve pumped the tires and gone over it with a rag. Can you help me lubricate it? I found this bottle of stuff in the box with helmets and pump and stuff.”

Joe shook the bottle, which was still at least 3/4 full. “Should be OK. And it’s water based, so a bit less messy, but you need to apply it to the chain and elsewhere more often.”

The next few minutes were occupied with applying the lubricant to chain and wheel bearings. Joe tried the brakes, and made a small adjustment so the travel of the brake levers was reasonable. “The brake shoes are a bit dried out. May want to get some new ones soon. But they’ll work fine if you apply the brakes hard. May squeal a bit. Lets check the gears. I’ll lift the back wheel off the ground if you turn the crank. I’ll change the right hand gear setting, which is the rear sprocket, and when I ask, you can do the left one.”

The gears mostly worked, but Joe did adjust a small nut and screw on the rear cable, and when he tried again, the chain moved more smoothly.

“Give it a ride around the yard.”

Angela was unsteady at first, then found her balance. “Out of practice. But it seems OK.”

“Give the brakes a check. If we need to adjust them or the gears along the way, I’ve tools in my backpack. But it’s easier if we don’t need to.”

“For similar reasons, we should visit the loo. You know where it is. I’ll just make sure Mix has water, then we can lock up. I’ll also find some gloves.”

Being early March, the temperature was only in the low teens. Slacks and jackets, as well as gloves, were in order.

It was a bit after 4 when they stopped at the Moka House in Cadboro Bay. For some reason, they had ridden fairly steadily and hardly stopped except to plan or adjust their route, one that more or less followed the shore but avoided too many hills or awkward diversions.

“That was a good ride,” Angela said.

“Yeah. Glad I used the bus from Langford. I did an early shift today.”

“You work Saturday?”

“Busiest day. I did 6 to 1. We open at 7, but there’s generally some shelf stocking and other work first.”

“You must be tired.”

“Yeah. A bit. Might fade this evening.”

“Hmm. This is awkward”

“The coffee?”

“No,” Angela laughed. “The coffee’s fine. But ... I ... er ... I wanted to say it would be fine for you to stay over, but I didn’t want to imply ... er ... Oh. This is really embarrassing.”

“Yeah. Embarrassing. Especially for a preacher who is running the service in the morning. Though the Blink starts at about a quarter to 7, so I can get home in good time for the service, and I’ve got my sermon sort-of organized..

“But I think the real question is how to talk about sex. Or more critically, what we want to do about sex.”

“Yes,” Angela said, a bit hesitantly.

There was a silence of perhaps a minute. Joe said “I guess I’d better take the chance of an answer I won’t like and ask if you’re interested in me that way.”

“Oh. That’s not obvious? We kissed and ... then we’ve not said a peep about it since. But not from lack of interest. More the other way.”

“I ... er ... wasn’t sure. But ‘more the other way’ is how I feel too.”

“It would be easier if we didn’t,” Angela volunteered.

“Do you think so? I know I’d miss out on someone I really like to be with. Actually some people I like to be with, since Julia is a delight. And Mix too, though he probably doesn’t count as people.”

“That’s true for me too. I mean being with you. But what are we to do about us?”

“We’ve not done anything irreversible, and I’m pretty sure we’re not going to. Since we’ve not known each other very long, it’s possible we might not end up together. However, in tossing around ideas about us, I can tell you that if things continue for us more or less as they have, I’d feel we should team up. I hope that’s not too lukewarm a manifesto.”

“It’s actually reassuring as well as realistic. My feelings are pretty much the same. Too early to commit to a lifetime, but definitely a hopeful beginning. I think it’s planning the route from here to there that I can’t quite figure out.”

“Do you think we’re ready to try ... well, sex?”

“If things go wrong, then I’ll look back and say no. And if things do eventually go as well as I think they could, I’ll be kicking myself for the missed ... er ... er ...”

“I’d suggest ‘screaming orgasms’ if it didn’t suggest an overly imaginative opinion of myself.”

Angela laughed. “Joe, I love how you capture the silliness, or rather the silly awkwardness, of our conversation. But are you ready to take that step?”

“Yes. I think we both take seriously our obligation to make our friendship responsible and respectful, to give each other support and kindness.”

“Since you mention the word ‘responsible’, I guess that’s the next awkward subject.”

“Yes. And generally an uncomfortable shopping experience.”

“I wouldn’t know, Joe. When I was about 17 I had irregular periods, and our GP – I still go to the same one as my mother – put me on the Pill, or a variant of it. From the leaflet, it was clear it gave me contraception. When we’d made the wedding arrangements, Bob and I agreed I’d stop taking it.”

“You don’t have to answer this, but was Bob your only experience?”

“Yes. We met when I was 18. There’d been a couple of other guys I went out with, and they made some attempts to get me into bed, but I didn’t feel OK with them. I did with Bob, and I feel comfortable with you.”

“There were a couple of girls before I met Jennifer. One at a summer camp where we were both counsellors. Supposed to be keeping the boys and girls

apart. Then one single night disaster in University. Then Jennifer. With all of them I've used condoms."

"Are they reliable?"

"I think so. Properly used. An annoyance is having to withdraw carefully to avoid a spill. And I think the so-called failures are because they are a bit of a nuisance. Do you want to wait until you can get on the Pill or some other choice?"

"Since I had Julia, the period issues have been reduced. But I think the question is whether I want to wait. This will seem really sluttish, but I don't want to."

"I doubt true sluts – if there really are any such women, which I doubt – would bother to consider the issue of waiting."

"You don't think there are women who should be called sluts, Joe?"

"It's just a put-down by some men to excuse their own bad behaviour. All kinds of negative words are applied to women who enjoy their own sexuality, which from my perspective seems to be something given by God to create some joy for humans."

"Yes. You're right. And somehow there's less condemnation of men who can't keep their well, you know what I was going to say."

"If we keep on this topic, my pants are going to feel uncomfortable."

"Mine too. So what should we do?"

"I don't currently have any condoms, and definitely none with me. But there's a pharmacy just opposite, though I think we'll do better elsewhere. A youth discussion I participated in over at UVic had a very forthright young woman who had set up a web page with the appalling title *Bargain Bonking*. Apparently Costco is the cheapest if you buy bulk, but Shoppers does a 36-pack for under \$20. There's one at Hillside Mall, which we could pass on our way to The Lodge. Costco's all the way out in Langford and I don't have a member card."

Angela just said "I'm going to the washroom. Then we'll get on our way."

"Yeah. I'd better go too. Coffee in, etc."

Shopping, etc.

"Do you want to wait with the bikes?" Joe asked at Hillside Mall, where they could access the drug store from the outside.

"I'd prefer that, except I feel I should share responsibility with you."

"I intend to get the standard item, as others tend to be pricey and I've a suspicion that the difference is all hype. But I'll welcome your support."

They locked up the bikes to an upside-down U rack conveniently located just in front of one of the doors. In the shop, Angela was surprised at the number of choices.

"There seem to be all sorts of options. How do you know what to get?"

"Like I said — mostly hype I think," Joe replied. "Here's a box of 36. Oh. Three bucks off. From what I saw on the atrociously named web page, the price

is good.”

“If I divide the price by 36, even adding tax, I think they could advertise with the slogan ‘less than 50 cents a pop’.”

“Angela. Why do I get the feeling I should say ‘I’ll get you for that’?”

“Because it would let me say ‘Oooh yes, I hope so’.”

“We’d better pay and leave before we scandalize the staff and the other customers.”

The shades, who had been observing, were actually laughing.

“Gamma. In life I never realized spirits could enjoy laughter. Joe and Angela are behaving responsibly, but they are making a good effort to be light-hearted too.”

“41. One of the failings of most literature about heaven, as humans often refer to the afterlife, is the appalling seriousness of it all. Milton’s *Paradise Lost* is a paradise of exceptional boredom. The devils seem to get all the choice wording. At least that’s my view.”

Joe and Angela tried to appear as if they were not in a hurry. In truth they made exceptional time back to The Lodge, and almost rushed to put the bikes in the garage. Mix, in the lean-to, sat up and gave a soft bark of greeting. Angela checked his water, which was still half full, before opening the kitchen entrance.

“Let me feed Mix, Joe. You can pour us some wine. I got a box so I don’t have to finish a bottle.”

“Should we think of what we’re doing for dinner?”

“I suppose so. My mind is ... er ... elsewhere.”

Joe laughed. “Mine too. I didn’t want to seem too eager.”

“Use plastic glasses – yes those – in case we decide to sit in the tub or ...”

It took very little time before Mix was fed and there was a modest portion of Pinot Grigio in each of two translucent plastic tumblers.

“Joe, I said sit in the tub, but I feel a shower would be better given how I feel a bit sweaty.”

“Is your shower big enough for two?”

“It’s the one in the bathroom, but is separate from the tub. It’d be a bit crowded.”

“Then one at a time. But we can be together – got to eventually get used to each other.”

“I’m a bit worried you’ll see the imperfections. Stretch marks etc. And a bit more weight than is ideal.”

“The current obsession with rail thinness is, to my eye, not very attractive. Almost no real women look like that who aren’t anorexic. And I see my own imperfections every time I am in front of the mirror, even if I don’t want to look.

“There are, unfortunately, a lot of people who carry far more weight than is good for them. It has occurred to me to sermonize on the sins of the industrial food industry, but there are more immediate topics for my services.

“By the way, as far as I can tell, you’re not carrying extra weight.”

“You didn’t know me before Julia.”

“Maybe not. Maybe you were too thin then. But while we’re arguing about your real or imaginary extra weight, those condoms might reach their expiry date.”

“OK. I’ll get you a towel.”

Afterwards

“It’s gone 7. Do you want something to eat,” Angela asked.

“Yes. And some water to drink. We both lost some fluid there.”

“I’ve a couple of frozen pizzas and some veggies we could have on the side. There’s more wine if you want.”

“For me the glass I had is enough. I feel sort of drunk on you, actually.”

“At first it was embarrassing how you studied my ... ”

“Shall we say ‘sports equipment’,” Joe suggested.

“That’ll be OK for now. Yes. But then you were touching me and kissing me. I’ve not been treated like that before.”

“Sorry. Actually, I probably haven’t done that to a woman before. At least not as thoroughly. I didn’t mean to cause upset.”

“Just the opposite. It was fantastic. Couldn’t you tell from all the noise I was making.”

“Sort of, but at times it could have been taken for pain rather than pleasure.”

“I’ll be sure to let you know if you’re hurting me. And I’m thinking I’ll have to learn how to do something similar for you.”

“Not until you’ve eaten. You might be hungry and I’ll suffer an unfortunate accident.”

Angela was giggling. “All right. Let’s get some food and drink. Help yourself to water or pop, or put a splash of wine in our glasses and top up with soda. And there’s a robe on the back of the door you can use. The Lodge ordered some for guests, and I made sure I had one for myself, but they’re unisex and a decent size.”

They chose a pepperoni pizza and Angela cut up some mushrooms, tomatoes, and cucumber, and opened a can of artichoke hearts.

“Ooh. Not had those for a while,” Joe said. “Sex and artichokes. My lucky day.”

“If you had to choose between the sex and the artichokes, what would you say?”

“Hmm. That’d make an incredibly interesting, but possibly career ending, title for a sermon. ‘Sex or artichokes: a critical dilemma’. But unless my memory is faulty, I can’t say I’ve ever enjoyed sex more than with you this afternoon, Angela. And there were some good times in the past, but never better.”

“If I think about it, I can say the same.”

“I got the feeling that you most enjoyed when I was ... er ... I think you said ‘studying’ you.”

“Yeah, maybe. Well, that was when things felt the most intense. On the other hand, I really wanted to have you inside me, and especially when you climaxed. It wasn’t as strong a peak of sensation for me, but deeply satisfying.”

“I get the feeling we’re going to have to verify the correctness of your observations by repeating the experiment.”

“I hope so. We need to practice lots to ensure we have things perfect.”

Joe laughed, but Angela continued, “But was it better than artichokes?”

“That’s like offering a condemned man a choice of the guillotine or a firing squad. There’s no positive answer.”

“Well, I think we can arrange that you don’t have to choose tonight at least.

“But Joe, do we need to talk about what happened? I’m sure at least some of your – do you say ‘parishioners’?”

“I think ‘congregation’ more common these days,” Joe supplied.

“Well, some of them would surely disapprove.”

“That’s certainly the case. However, and possibly I’m getting the cart before the horse, but there’s a strong thread of understanding that it is the couple that makes a marriage. Maybe I’ve got everything wrong about us, but I feel that you and I aren’t a one-night wonder. Not that we’ve had a night yet. Still, I know that my feeling is that I’d like things between us to be ongoing, but the complexity of today’s living makes that messy.”

“Yeah. I’d not thought about it explicitly, but I definitely don’t want what a friend called ‘wham bam, thank you ma’am’. Yeah. I want things to be ongoing too.”

“When I talk about the Christmas story, it always strikes me that if it happened today, Joseph would be arrested for sex with a minor. Scholars generally accept Mary was between 13 and 15 when Jesus made his debut.”

“We’re both around double that,” Angela said.

“Which means we’ve more baggage to handle. Also life today has, or at least seems to have, a lot more bureaucratic and legal stuff to take care of.”

“Don’t I know it!”

“Not sure quite what you’re saying,” Joe said.

“Thinking about all the back and forth when Bobby died. We’d booked the wedding, but had only been living together a few months, not the two years that define common-law marriage for Workmen’s Compensation. And I only realized I was pregnant a few weeks after Bobby’s death. Fortunately a local MLA intervened and while WorkSafeBC wouldn’t give me a pension, there’ll be several hundred bucks a month for Julia until she’s 19, or longer if she’s registered in accepted post-secondary education. Bobby hadn’t been paying into CPP long enough for the death benefit but Worksafe also paid a chunk for funeral expenses. I put most of the pension money each month in an RESP, though I do send 50 bucks of it to a savings account for emergencies.

“Of course, all that took over a year and a half to sort out. And I wasn’t next of kin. The project Bobby was working on – he did framing and drywall – was led by the company that owns this place. Another contractor was operating the cranes, but a worker for the delivery of the framing material was allowed to hook on the straps. Something broke and Bobby was underneath. He probably should

not have been, and it was up to the crane operators to watch and inform people when a lift was happening. So all kinds of finger pointing, though WorkSafe is supposedly no-fault.”

“And this happened just before Covid?”

“Well, Julia was born just at the start of lockdown.”

“Somehow I want to say something very un-minister-like about the whole situation. I’m really glad you and Julia came through it as well as you did. Good for you both.”

“Things seem better now. Especially today.”

“With that I agree.”

“Joe. I’m a bit curious. Have you seen any of the shades today? You haven’t said anything about them for a while.”

“I’ve noticed a couple of shimmers, but some distance off. It’s funny. I don’t have any indication of which shades, but the two bits of shimmering seem to be familiar friendly ones, in fact, I’d say the same two Julia and I noticed together the first day we met.”

“Oh. Now I’m thinking about them I’ll be bashful.”

“What a pity. I was about to suggest ...”

“Well. I guess we can’t stop them from knowing.”

“No. But we could, of course, try for excellence,” Joe suggested.

“What was that? Did you say ‘sexellence’?”

Sunday morning scramble

“Oh no! Look at the time,” Angela said.

“Where’s your clock?” Joe answered sleepily.

“By the bed. Your side. It’s 8:15.”

“Oops. Better get going.”

There was a somewhat chaotic scramble as two people tried to wash and dress.

“Joe. Do you want anything to eat before you go? You’ll need something before preaching.”

“No. I’ll pick something up. There’s a Tim’s not far from my apartment.”

“I’ve seen it.

“We’ve about 15 minutes until the next Blink leaves the Legislature stop. You can get there pretty quickly on your bike. How about you go, just in case, and I’ll tidy a bit and try to make that bus? We can grab something at the Tim’s together if we’re lucky. If you’ve time, you can eat with me, else ride home to change. I’ll go straight to the church – I’d planned to meet Barbara and Julia there anyway.”

“OK. I’ll get going. If we don’t meet on the bus, then at the church after the service.”

Angela just made the bus before it left. Joe’s bike was on the front rack, and she found Joe inside.

“Whew! I’m out of breath!” she said.

“There’s no immediate need to speak. Take a few minutes to recover.”

Angela said nothing, but was suddenly aware she and Joe were holding hands as they sat in one of the seats over the back wheel of the double-decker bus. She didn’t recall Joe taking her hand, nor putting her hand in his herself. It just happened. Gamma thought to 41 “They’ll think you or I had something to do with that, but it was the result of being very in tune with each other.”

“My wife and I were like that. And if you watch, people of the age of Joe and Angela generally hold hands less than those in their later years.”

“41, I must confess I’d not paid attention to that. But your observation reflects how those who have, over a long time, found contentment together quietly interact in ways that tell you they belong with each other. And with each other, not to each other.”

“How true, Gamma. ‘With’ shows choice. ‘To’ would hint at obligation.”

Sermon for the third sunday of Lent

After the Gospel reading, Joe went to the lectern – they didn’t have a pulpit yet.

“Dear friends, both regular and guests. You may have noted that the Old and New Testament readings today both are about water and wells. I actually had a sermon written to explain that in the context of a dry-climate country of two millennia ago, water is going to be a big deal. Water – especially clean, safe drinking water – is still a huge issue in dry countries, and also in many parts of Canada. There’s also the metaphorical aspect of a water of eternal life.

Now it’s often the job of a church minister to explain the Bible, but over yesterday and this morning, I couldn’t find a lot of enthusiasm for intellectual discussion of some scriptures that will be a lot of work to make relevant to daily life now.

“Here and now our thirst is less for water than connection. We often say people are looking for love, or friendship, or companionship. In previous centuries, all those were lumped together under the word love. It was a lot more generalized than now. Today love has come to mostly mean romantic love. This is a sermon in a Sunday service, so we’ll leave the physical aspects aside.”

There were some giggles among the congregation.

“Words tend to slide in meaning over time, but I’d be really surprised if there’s anyone here who doesn’t know the feeling of caring for someone or being cared for by them. That is, we all have some understanding of love, but I’ll also be really surprised if most of us wouldn’t like more of it in our lives.

“Of course, as a preacher, I’ve got to broadcast the message that God loves you. And we’re a church with a Christian tradition, so ‘Jesus loves you’ is also an important message. Plenty more trouble for me when someone asks for an explanation of the Trinity. Important stuff, but again it’s theological stuff. Intellectually demanding, so even the very best minister is going to be pressed to make it gripping and immediate.

“My own experience and understanding is that most of us feel God’s love through the goodness of others. Sometimes from the love those people show, especially in quiet, unfussy actions. We may also find some sense of it in moments where we ourselves show charity and compassion. I’m not talking about self-satisfaction here. Whenever we engage with helping others, it’s worth a moment to consider if we’re doing the best we can, and doing it without needing reward or recognition.

“We don’t always achieve such goals. Me included. Perhaps me especially, since I’ve got to maintain a higher standard. It’s useful to look in the mirror each day to tell yourself to try a bit harder. Without beating ourselves up over it, we can all aspire to love better. With that in mind, let’s sing *Love Divine all Loves Excelling*, which is a hymn often linked to this particular Sunday. Of the many tunes used for this hymn, Michaela found the music for *BLAENWERN* by Welsh composer William Penfro Rowlands. She’ll play one verse, so you hear the melody, then we’ll sing the first three verses. In North America, it’s less used for the hymn we’ll sing, but Billy Graham had people sing *What a Friend We Have in Jesus* to it.”

Sunday Lunch

Barb and George had arranged lunch at their house for their family and Angela and Julia.

“Samantha and Tony. It’s nice to see you,” Angela said on arriving.

“I read the Riot Act,” Barb said. “Sometimes we don’t see them for weeks at a time, just their laundry.”

“Mom! That isn’t fair. You make us do our own laundry,” Tony said.

“But she’s got a point that we’re not around much these days,” Samantha volunteered. “First Year UVic is really heavy. At least for me it is.”

Tony added “I’ve got a chance to get on the Provincial Juniors for rugby, so lots of practice. Plus trying to keep my marks up to get into University with some scholarship or grant money.”

Julia asked “Aunty Barb. What’s the Riot Act?”

“Oops. I don’t know.”

“I can help there,” Samantha said. “For some reason it came up in one of my classes. Well the expression ‘to read the Riot Act’ did. The Prof asked if it were an appropriate usage, so half the class were on their phones Googling right away. Anyway, it comes from the Riot Act of 1715, which has the wonderful title ‘An Act for preventing tumults and riotous assemblies, and for the more speedy and effectual punishing the rioters.’ It was worth memorizing that for its crazy wording.”

“But why do you read it?” Tony asked.

“Before the authorities could act – there weren’t police forces then, but the Army or local sheriff’s men – they had to confront the group that was assembled and causing trouble. That group had to be 12 or more, and there was a specific

wording that had to be read out before head-smashing could begin after the words 'God save the King' were spoken to end the proclamation."

"Was it like the Miranda provisions before interrogation?" Barb asked.

"Miranda's American, but yes. The Riot Act words say the King 'chargeth and commandeth' folk to go home peacefully. Lots of T H there. Julia. Nowadays the expression simply means to give a stern warning."

"Ooh. I'll have to remember that," Tony said.

"Did you have a nice evening, Julia," Angela asked.

"Yes. Mommy. Uncle George took me to Canadian Tire to look at bicycles. He had a tape measure, and I got to sit on several and Uncle George wrote down the numbers. Will I be getting a bike soon?"

"I hope so, but they are quite expensive, and you are still growing, so we'll look for a second-hand one for now. But we'll need to be careful that it's in good condition and the price is fair."

George said "I made a note of three that were of a size that I think would work. Julia liked one of those in particular. It wasn't the usual chopper style kids have today with no mud-guards."

"The one I liked best was light blue, and it had a basket on the front," Julia said.

"It may not matter what style as long as it allows Julia to learn to ride," Tony said. "I'll keep an eye out in case some of my friends have one that's not being used. They might let it go for 20 bucks or so if it's a bit grubby or scratched."

Angela said "You mean that a cheap bike would let Julia learn, but if she decided she didn't like cycling, we'd not have spent much. And if she did take to it, we can look for one that suits her better."

"Yes. And unless the training bike is wrecked, it's probably going to worth more or less what you paid for it. Most kids have what I call chopper bikes that are pretty well naked. No carrier or basket. No mud-guards. No lights or reflectors, so they're not street-legal as night falls."

Barb said "Julia surely won't be riding at night."

"Having lights can still be a good idea on dull days or as dusk falls," Tony said.

A long email message

Tuesday there was a long email in Angela's Inbox.

Dear Angela,

A thousand thank-yous for the pictures. And I will be extremely careful that nobody gets access – they'll have to have me show them. I'm glad you're careful. So many of my friends are proud grandparents, but they post all kinds of stuff on Facebook or other places. Tell the whole world when they're away for 3 weeks and the house

is open for burglary. Give away birth dates, family information, say where they go to the bank or to shop.

Edith, who's not quite a friend but who I meet at church, used to do this, but had her identity stolen. Several collection agencies saying she owes thousands in Toronto and Calgary. Except she never started the credit cards and she's never been off the Rock. After a whole lot of trotting round the banks, the police have finally got mildly interested, and it turns out she's not alone, but there'll be hell to pay for a long while with any financial stuff for her. The cops will likely do very little unless there's some physical violence. At least a local credit union has agreed to provide Edith with a limited service chequing account and debit card, but that's all she'll have for now, and probably for quite a while.

Let me set down my story so we can start to know each other.

Robert Senior and I met and married in 1981. We were a bit older than most – I'd been a schoolteacher, but Robert worked in the restaurant business. His family already had the Magic Dory Café from back in the 60s, and we took it over when Bobby – Robert Junior – was 10. We were doing all right up to the pandemic, and if Robert hadn't had a heart attack and died we'd probably still have it. Bobby's older sister Kathy is a schoolteacher too, but she had married Owen McLeod and they now live in Cornerbrook with their two sons Jack and Thomas who are 12 and 14.

Robert wanted Bobby to join the business, but though he was willing to help out from time to time, he made it clear that he wouldn't take it over. Both of them stubborn. Things escalated to a big row, and Bobby just left. We found a letter on the kitchen table that said he'd get as far away as possible. That'd be sometime in 2015, just after he turned 20. And no letters or calls at all until an RUC constable rang the doorbell in 2019 and told us Bobby had been killed in a construction accident, and that it had happened several weeks before, so the funeral was already long over. Moreover, one of the people in the chain that tried to contact me was going on maternity leave and somehow information about you was not included. I recall that the constable said something about Bobby having plans to get married, but I think Robert and I were so upset we didn't fully register what that meant.

Bobby's death sent me into a tailspin. I know I got at least one of your letters, but somehow both of them got lost. There's no real excuse, and I'm really sorry about that, especially as I realize I could have done a bit of investigation and found some way to contact you. Clearly, it also contributed to Robert's passing, and that deepened the chaos, though in some odd way it eventually made me wake up to the fact that both their lives had more meaning if I were around

to tell about them.

Truthfully, it's only in the last two years that I've begun to function more or less normally again. When Robert died just as the pandemic hit, I was already not leaving the house. With a lot of special arrangements, Kathy was able to come and she had the awful job of closing down the café. However, Robert had already planned to sell or close, and there was someone wanted the land. We didn't settle things until the beginning of 2022, but the money from the sale gave me a bit of a buffer against poverty. We'd fortunately been putting aside money for retirement, but things are always more expensive than you expect.

In any event, Kathy took charge, closed the business – she told me that she managed not to cry when she told each of the staff we wouldn't be reopening. The timing was such that we'd not got around to reopening as a take-out because the lockdown rules were changing every week. Kathy had to phone each person on staff personally, which is the right and proper way, though it wasn't up to her to do it, of course. After the last call she bawled for an hour.

Then she managed to find me an apartment in a senior's complex. It's a one-bedroom unit with an option to take meals in a central dining area. There are some rooms that have nursing, but I'm in the independent living part. Once I'd moved, Kathy got the house cleared and then sold. People were looking for places with plenty of rooms so they could work at home, and we actually did OK on the sale.

I'm hoping I can get out to Victoria – it's really a long way. I think Europe is closer. What do you think of late Autumn? I've no idea how much a hotel room would cost, nor how easy it is to get around. And I don't know anything about where you live and work except you said you have a sort of apartment in the house where you are housekeeper and cook. I looked up the address. My neighbour Sheila has got very good at using Google Streets. It's a nice looking place.

My postal address and telephone are below. It's a mobile phone, and I've learned how to do texts – Sheila says to say SMS, as some allow pictures and other stuff, but my plan may charge me extra for those. I do know how to attach pictures to emails, and there's going to be a session here next week about using what they call cloud storage, which apparently is like, or perhaps is, what you used to send me pictures. However, I'll be careful to learn how to restrict access to people I want to be able to see them.

For now I'll say thank you again, and look forward to getting to know you and Julia.

Love, Laura Murphy

PS. Call me Laura. Perhaps Julia will be happy saying Grandma Laura. Or Grandma Murphy, though I think that's second-best.

Wednesday night call

"Hope I didn't wake you, Angela. It's almost ten."

"No. I was reading a trashy romance in bed. Wearing PJs."

"Since I'm not there, I can't see that there's any issue in wearing PJs."

"True. And I'll admit to wishing you were here and the PJs weren't."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence. It's much appreciated along with the delightful image it brings up."

"Very un-minister-like, to use one of your expressions from the other day."

"It's a pity that it should be considered un-minister-like. I have an extremely difficult time thinking of our behaviour together as anything but positive. But there are people who can twist things around, so I guess we'll have to be discreet."

"To change to a topic that won't keep me awake, how's your week been so far?"

"I had a very nice long email from Laura Murphy, Bobby's mother in Newfoundland. It explained how Robert Senior died and with Covid the restaurant had to be closed. She's moved to a retirement apartment, and sold their house as well as the restaurant. Thinking of coming out here in the late Fall. Asked about hotels."

"And I'm guessing you're not sure whether to invite her to stay?"

"Yeah. Want to be welcoming, but not put myself in front of a bus if we don't get along."

"Angela. I suspect Laura's timing is not critical, so it may be worthwhile asking around. There may be house-sitting opportunities. And my own opinion is that it's not unfriendly to be up-front that you want to be friendly, but even best friends stay that way by having their own space. Maybe offer a few nights to let her get familiar with the city and get to know each other. Besides, Julia may need time to get used to the idea that Laura is her other grandma."

"That too. And it's on top of working out how we manage ... er ..."

"More delightful images to keep me awake."

"Joe! You're wicked. Well, not really wicked. Just a terrible tease."

"If I can be serious for a moment, I'll say the only real issue is how we present to others that we want to be together. If we were recognized as a permanent couple, which for a minister almost certainly means married, then even with separate residences, sharing a bed is unremarkable. Given how recently we met, I'm thinking that it's just a matter of time, assuming we continue along our current trajectory."

"That time is going to seem very, very long, Joe."

"Don't I know it!"

"Angela. Can I ask you if it weren't for pragmatism and matters of family, and in particular how Julia will feel, would you consider we were emotionally ready to marry? It's rather surprised me that I think that way."

"Yeah. I can't think of the future without you being there."

"And I haven't yet said I love you," Joe admitted softly.

"Your sermon was definitely moving that way. And I realize I've not told you I love you either, but I've not felt this way about anyone except Bobby."

"Good job we agree."

They both laughed.

"I'll talk with Julia and gently asks how she feels you and I should proceed. Not in any detail of course, but I can ask what she would think if you were staying over. I'm not going to let her be the arbiter of our relationship, though."

"But you still want to avoid a lot of discomfort and upset. That's important for us. We'll be much happier as a couple, as a family, without lots of anguish."

"Better get some sleep. Goodnight Joe. Love you."

"Goodnight Angela. Love you too."

The wisdom of children

"How was school today?" Angela asked Julia, who had just come inside after being brought home by one of the mothers in a small group who cooperated to ensure their children were escorted to and from their Kindergarten class.

"The teacher read a story, but it's from the book you used to read to me from."

"So you were bored?"

"No. I watched the shades on a tree branch, but the teacher asked me what I was looking at."

"What did you say?"

"I said I was watching the wind blow. It sort of looks the same. The shades are kind of like when you look at things through the air above the barbeque."

"Does Mrs. Rawton know you can read some books on your own?"

Madeleine had spent a lot of time reading to Julia, who, being quite astute, soon learned to recognize words and to read. She still had a long way to go, but was starting to devour all sorts of printed material and pestering anyone around to tell her what different words were and what they meant. Angela tried to accommodate this curiosity as well as she could, given the head-start Julia would obtain this way.

"I haven't told her. But I think she may have guessed. She caught me running my finger along a line of a book last week."

"Did she say anything?"

"She said 'That's a nice book. You could learn from reading it.'"

"Do you remember what book it was?"

"It was a book of dogs. All different dogs. There were lots of words I didn't understand."

"We'll have to teach you how to write down those words so we can look them up together for you. That's a good way to learn."

"But I'll need paper and a pencil," Julia said.

"I think we can afford that for you."

“Would you like some milk and cookies? Then we’ll take Mix for a walk. If you want we can take the tennis ball and go to the off-leash area with him.”

“He’ll like that.”

Indeed, Mix liked chasing the ball and bringing it back. He liked going for a walk. He liked being with Angela and Julia. His new leash was one which pulled out from a spool, and he could go as far as 30 feet should he wish. However, Mix was very aware of distance. The flexibility of the spool allowed him to explore a little beside the sidewalk or path, either a bit ahead or behind, but he somehow was able to do so without upsetting the pace of his walker.

As they walked, Angela asked “Julia, I wanted to tell you I had an email from a lady named Laura Murphy. She’s the mother of your Dad, Robert Murphy. His father was also Robert, who they called Robert Senior.”

“Are they my other grandparents?”

“Yes. But unfortunately about the time you were born, Robert Senior got ill and died. That’s why we didn’t hear from Grandma Laura until now. She was very sad about your Daddy and her husband, your grandfather. But she seems nice and she hopes to come and visit us later this year.”

“Does she live a long way away?”

“Yes. At the other end of Canada, in St. John’s, Newfoundland. We’ll read the email together after supper. It’s good that we’re now able to write emails back and forth.”

“Did Daddy not take you to meet her?”

“We had written them an invitation to come to our wedding, and got them ready to send out, but then your Daddy was killed in a work accident.”

“What happened, Mommy?”

“I suppose you’re old enough to know, but I hope it doesn’t give you bad dreams.”

“Because of what happened, Mommy?”

“Yes.”

“I know that there can be bad things happen to people, like when buildings collapse because of bombs, like we see on the TV News.”

“Well, your father was working on a building that was under construction. But there was a load of materials being lifted with a crane – like the one by that building on Douglas Street just past the Old Spaghetti House when we take the Blink. The strap holding the load broke and Daddy was underneath and he died.”

“That made you sad, didn’t it?”

“More sad than I’ve ever been. It took me a couple of years for the sadness to be less. Often I couldn’t do very much, I was so sad. Grandma Laura said it was the same for her. You’ll hear that when we read her email.”

“I hope I can help her to not be sad.”

“Often just letting someone know you’re thinking of them helps a lot.”

They got to the off-leash area and Mix got to race about fetching the ball. He also got to greet some other dogs, mostly ones he already knew. Lots of sniffing each other. Some dogs got excited, trying to sniff all the other dogs, bark at them, dominate them. Mix was not such a dog, neither dominating nor

submitting. He gave a menacing growl at any dog who tried to dominate him, a growl that caused even one very large dog to jump back.

After about twenty minutes, Angela re-attached the leash and they started home.

“Julia, I also wanted to ask what do you think of Joe? Reverend Douglas.”

“He’s nice. He understands me.”

“Yes. He’s told me he sees the shades – I guess that’s where you picked up that name for the shimmers you’ve sometimes called ghosts.”

“I don’t think he tells many people. You must be special.”

“He’s special to me too. I hope that doesn’t upset you.”

“Why would that upset me Mommy?”

“Well. You know other families. They have a Mommy and a Daddy. But your Daddy died before you were born. There’s just been the two of us. Now Joe and I are getting to know each other, and we seem to like each other a lot. At some point we may want to live in the same house.”

“One of the kids at school asked me where my Daddy was. I told her that he was in heaven, but I don’t think she believed me.”

“There’s not much you can do when people choose to be like that, Julia.”

“Does Reverend Douglas want to be my Daddy?”

“I think he does. But being a Daddy means both he and you have to want to be father and daughter. And we’ve not known him long. We’re still all learning about each other. Though you’re still quite young, I think you are old enough to know that both Joe and I don’t have a lot of money. I’m not sure we could all live at The Lodge – I’ll have to ask Mr. Watson if we decide to team up. Becoming a family together is important, but it can be a lot of work because everyone has to give and take. Things you’re used to change, sometimes in ways you didn’t expect, and that can be uncomfortable.”

Michael Watson was the corporate vice-president whose responsibilities included The Lodge and who allowed Angela to stay on after Bobby died.

“Mommy. If you and Reverend Douglas get married, he can’t conduct the wedding.”

“I’m sure he has a friend who’s a minister if we decide to get married.”

“Yes ... I guess so.”

Gamma and 41 registered all that happened in these conversations between Angela and Julia, as well as the joy Mix found in the off-leash area. However, there seemed no need to comment. Moreover, they had positioned their presence away from mother, daughter and dog to avoid being a perturbation on what was an important conversation.

Shopping with grandma

Saturday morning, Angela and Julia met Grandma Madeleine at Hillside Mall. When Madeleine and Julia had gone shopping before, they had not found anything in both the right style and size. Today Madeleine was hoping to buy Julia the new outfit promised for her birthday at the end of the month, but it was

going to be one that Julia got to choose. Of course, there'd be some guidance if it turned out Julia's choice were too extreme. Angela planned to see if she could get some shoes for Julia that would complement the outfit. They'd be practical shoes. Angela did not hold with footwear that was primarily decorative.

Angela also wanted to buy a bicycle helmet for Julia, as well as some protective gloves. These were now more urgently needed, as Barb had phoned the night before to say Tony had acquired a bike for \$20 which would be a birthday present for the little girl from him and Samantha. The pair of them were going to clean up the bike and put a new inner tube in one of the tires. Angela hadn't decided whether they would wait the roughly two weeks until the end of the month for Julia to get the bike. In some ways the real present was riding a bike rather than just having a bike. Eventually there would also be a lock and no doubt other things.

By agreement, they met at the Canadian Tire, since it was near the bus stop.

"Hi Grandma."

Madeleine was sitting on one of the benches by the main south entrance.

"Hi Julia. Are you ready to go shopping?"

"Yes. We're getting me a bike helmet too. Tony and Samantha have a bike for me for my birthday."

"Good for you. Hi Angela. Where shall we start?"

"Mom. I thought we should take a quick look in Canadian Tire for a helmet for Julia to see their prices. The likely other place is Walmart, and chances are we'll find an outfit for Julia there."

"Yes. That makes sense. Is there an entrance from inside the Mall?"

"I'm not sure, Mom. Maybe just go in the one outside here and then exit into the Mall if there is a door."

They quickly found the sports section and looked at a few helmets, which seemed to Angela to be quite pricey.

"They're a lot more than when I last bought one."

"When was that – probably over a decade ago," Madeleine answered.

"Yeah. More like a decade and a half. Well, I've written down a couple of names and prices. Let's see what Walmart has."

"Actually, you go ahead. I spied something near the checkouts I wanted to look at ... er ..."

Angela realized it was likely something for Julia's birthday. "Come find us by the bicycle stuff. We'll wait there for you."

A few minutes later, Angela was getting Julia to try on different cycling helmets. The prices were in many cases a \$5 to \$10 cheaper than Canadian Tire, but the brands were, of course, different. It was difficult to tell what the quality was.

"Julia, Do you think you'd prefer a helmet with air holes, or one of the more solid ones? The solid ones would be good in rain, but they'll be hot on warm days."

"That one," Julia said, pointing to a solid helmet that looked a lot like a German military helmet, "only comes in black. I like this blue one. It's the

same colour as the blue bicycle Uncle George and I looked at.”

“It’s almost certain your first bike won’t be that one. Like Tony said, it’s good to learn first and find out what works for you. Sometimes quite ugly bikes work best for you, even if they don’t look pretty. But I’m happy to get you the blue helmet.”

Angela said this noting that the blue one was under \$20, but seemed to be well-made and had some exchangeable padding so the helmet could be adjusted for head size.

“Ah. There you are Mom. What do you think of this helmet? It’s got good ventilation and some adjustable pads to allow for better fit.”

“I think the same model at Canadian Tire was more expensive. Go for it if Julia likes it.”

“It’s blue. I like blue.”

“Ok. I’ll get this one that’s still all in its box and put it in the cart,” Angela said. “Now. let’s go to girl’s clothing and see what we can find.”

The Walmart selection of outfits was heavily biased towards casual and very colourful tops and shorts, or to summer dresses, often with catchy phrases or comic-book images. However, they did find a nice jacket and slacks suit. Madeleine said “I’m going to suggest that, plus a nice white or cream blouse, and while you and Julia try on a couple of sizes of the suit, I’ll look for a blouse and a matching skirt. Julia. Do you like the navy blue jacket and trousers.”

“I like blue. Even dark blue.”

While Julia and Angela were in the fitting room, Madeleine found three blouse styles and picked out two sizes of each. She also found a pleated skirt in a navy blue. She approached a staff member in a Walmart jacket “Excuse me. My daughter and grand-daughter are trying on a suit for the young lady. I’ve these blouses and skirt to go with the suit, but I see there’s an item limit that could make it awkward to see if things work together.”

“Let me see if they’ve got the size selected. If so, we only need the one size of suit, and probably can just take in the corresponding blouse and skirt sizes. But since you’ve approached me first, I think we can overlook the limit if we have to.”

Over a quarter of an hour, the suit, a skirt and two blouses were chosen.

Then they went to shoes, and found a pair of quite simple Mary Jane shoes in a dark blue that matched the outfits.

Madeleine said “It’s a quarter to twelve. I arranged to meet Charlie in the food court at noon. He said that Local Pizza is run by some Indo-Canadians and they have an interesting Tandoori chicken pizza. He says they offer a good deal on a couple of slices and some pop to drink. I thought we could get a selection and have lunch together. You’ll get a chance to meet Charlie.”

“Good. I’d like that. But we’ll need to make sure there’s a non-Tandoori option for Julia. Though kids do change their list of likes and dislikes. I’ve been lucky that she isn’t a picky eater.

“Oh. Before we go to the checkout, I need to get some new panties,” Angela said. “Elastic’s getting very tired in some in my underwear drawer.”

“Yes. I need some too,” Madeleine said. “Oh. Don’t give me that look! And not a word. Do you hear? Not a word!”

Angela was laughing, then said “As long as you’re treated properly, I’ve nothing to say, though some girl talk over a couple of glasses of wine might do us both good. And give us a few laughs.”

Late Saturday evening

Joe had an opportunity to work on Saturday afternoon and evening with a bonus because some other workers were away. It meant a quiet Saturday night for Angela, and she did some laundry while watching a Hallmark romance on TV. About 9:30, the phone rang – the land line – and it was Joe.

“Hi there. Didn’t expect you to call the landline.”

“I’ve got both your numbers in my mobile. Think I hit the wrong link. Do you want me to call back on your mobile.”

“No. I have an wireless handset here in my living room. In fact within reach while watching TV.”

“Quiet evening?”

“Yeah. Julia got to stay up until 8 o’clock because it’s Saturday. I’ve been doing some extra laundry for spring cleaning while I’ve a no-brain-work movie from Hoopla.”

“Is that one of the streaming services that you get via the Library?”

“Yes. Not generally great movies, but sometimes you get a nice one.”

“Tonight’s not good?”

“It was a Hallmark romance. Pretty standard plot. Good to do laundry to.

“How was your day working?”

“Long. I did 10 hours in a split shift with three hours in the middle to run some errands and do some shopping. 8 to 1 and 4 to 9.”

“Hope you got a chance to eat.”

“I made sure I had a good breakfast and I got a shawarma platter for combined lunch and dinner around 3. Having a bowl of shredded wheat with banana now.”

“Doesn’t sound like you’ll starve, but irregular timing and meal content.”

“You may have noticed I’ve not a big sweet tooth. In fact, I don’t like very sugary things. The awful slab cakes that get served at birthday parties are a menace for me.”

“You don’t have to eat them.”

“Just because you had your way with me doesn’t mean I’m not still a church minister who ends up at birthdays of parishioners.”

“Oops. Yes. I guess you have to look enthusiastic. Sort of lying, which must go against the grain.”

“Actually, a lot of churches stretch the 9th commandment about not bearing false witness against a neighbour to be a prohibition on mendacity. Otherwise

lying isn't really covered by the commandments. Moreover there's lots of pressure to be sensitive to the feelings of others. My compromise is to pick the smallest piece of cake and not eat the icing."

"Well. You needn't worry that you'll get icing from me, unless you eat what I've scraped off. I like cakes that have some texture and are just semi-sweet. There's a light fruitcake called a Dundee Cake that used to be Winston Churchill's favourite. I love it. But hardly anywhere in Canada has them for sale. The online BritSuperstore in the UK claims they'll ship a 315 gram one for about \$30."

"Ouch! That's crazy expensive."

"I've been learning how to cook one. There's a more or less religious war about whether you're allowed candied cherries or not. The purists say no, and also that you use Keiler's or Robertson's Seville orange marmalade instead of candied citrus peel."

"Can you get any other kind of light fruit cake?" Joe asked.

"Walmart sells one under the Britannia brand name, but it's made in India. And if you're lucky you can count a half dozen raisins or pieces of fruit in the whole 250 grams in the package, though it's not too expensive at about 4 bucks."

"Fruit cake's not so popular now. But I like it. As an alternative, I like things like raisin bread."

"Yeah. Or the various hot cross buns from the Cobs bakery," Angela said.

"Oh. I love those. But they're expensive enough that I have to ration myself. Or get the PC brand ones from the SuperStore. They're not the same, but OK when toasted."

"Do the Cobs ones compete with artichokes or artichoke-alternatives?" Angela asked.

"Ooh, a new euphemism. I like that."

"I'm afraid that's maybe as close as we'll get tomorrow. Julia'll be here. I'm hoping she'll find Evensong all right for the less than an hour it'll last. There'll be some baked pasta for supper."

"Don't get too anxious. There'll come a time when Julia will accept us sleeping together, but I'm sure we'll all do best if we avoid insisting on right away."

"She asked me if you wanted to be her Daddy. She's found a lot of comfort that you sense the shades too."

"You and I can't go forward unless Julia's a part of our team. But it means there's a bit of extra work to build a real family. And at some point there's the question of whether you and I want children together. I know I've not thought about that beyond knowing it has to be considered."

"Until you mentioned it, I hadn't either. Except, actually, when we were talking about contraception. Though those thoughts were about avoiding children. I haven't given any thought to whether I want children with you. That's really a different question. You know, Joe, I don't think I've given any thought to whether I want more children at all. Just not been part of my set of possibilities up to now. And you're right, it needs to be considered, but I do think

that I'd like it if we can enjoy each other for a bit first. Babies really suck the energy out of the parents."

"Yeah. I've not given those things any thought either. Sometimes it's hard to get out of the pulpit when you're a minister."

"I'm OK with you asking those questions, Joe. Society probably puts an extra load on ministers to get love and marriage right. Too much of a load really. But I want to get it right too. Getting it wrong will be too painful."

"Angela, nothing's certain, as you well know. We could get it wrong and break up."

"Getting it wrong for me doesn't necessarily mean a break up. We could stay together unhappily. Or we could, with love and caring, find that teaming up is the wrong thing for us to do, and find separate lives where we still feel good about each other. We'd still be getting it right in that case."

"Hmmm. Better make a note about that for a sermon. Very perceptive, Angela."

"Glad to be of service. Not that all this great intellectual understanding gets the ants out of my pants."

"I seem to have a few of those too."

"We'll talk more tomorrow over dinner. I'll take the bus."

"By the way, there's a Cobs a couple of blocks from the Cathedral over on Yates. Let's pick up some hot cross buns before the service for our dessert."

"Great idea. Sleep tight, Joe."

"Yeah. Time for some sleep. You too. Love you. Angela."

Mother-daughter girl talk

On Tuesday night, Madeleine came for what was called dessert, except all they had was a cup of tea.

"How did you find Charlie?" she asked Angela tentatively.

"He seems a nice man, Mom. He treated you with courtesy. Didn't dominate the conversation, but was attentive and thoughtful. I hope he's more or less the same in private. I've read some men put on a public act then are domineering in private."

"No. He's always very polite."

"I hope not too polite, or you'll not have much fun," Angela teased.

"I'm having a tough time dealing with ... well ... intimate things. On Sunday morning my neighbour Mrs. Carstairs saw Charlie leave at around 9:30. In the afternoon she made a snide remark that guests have to be signed in."

"Is she right about that?"

"Unfortunately yes. Though unless she was spying, she couldn't prove he didn't just come for breakfast. But I'd have needed to register his intention to visit on Friday between 10 and 2 when the office is open. The system is mainly for visitors coming from out of town."

"Is your neighbour a moralist, or just jealous?" Angela asked.

"Acts the former, most likely the latter. She's fat and sloppy."

"Maybe it's worth a quiet chat with the office manager. Tell them you want to avoid friction with neighbours but you have a friend who might sometimes stay over. You didn't mention if he parks on the property."

"No. He lives nearby and walks."

"Then tell the manager that there'll be no car, and no noise or nuisance, but you'd rather avoid having to plan each visit in advance. I'll be surprised if the manager won't simply wish you good luck and thanks for the heads up. If Mrs. Nosy complains, the manager will probably tell her that you provided notice, which you have, just not the formalities."

"Yes. Joanne's pretty sensible, and I know there's a few residents who have boyfriends or girlfriends. None of us are ready to move in together. We want our independence but also like companionship and ... er ..."

"Artichoke hearts," Angela suggested.

"What?!!"

Angela gave a short explanation. Madeleine responded "I'll have to remember that. 'Artichoke hearts' is a nice cover."

"Mom. I think it's good that you're able to enjoy life. Until Joe came along, I'd not realized how frozen I'd got. He'd not had anyone for a while either. A woman he thought he'd marry decided a church minister wouldn't have enough money to keep her in the style she expected."

"Doesn't that apply to you too?"

"There's certainly going to be some careful discussion around money, though more about choices of how to use it. With Joe's work at Home Depot as well as the church, and my revenue here, and Julia's WorkSafe pension, we're probably better off than many couples. Not rich, for sure."

"I hope you're not going to end up pregnant again. At least until you're ready."

"No. We were out on our bikes and stopped for a coffee and had a rather serious talk and realized we both wanted to ... you know. Then we got on the topic of how to avoid unhappy consequences and decided to get some condoms on our ride home. We actually found some on sale at a good price at the Shoppers at Hillside Mall. Joe offered to go in on his own, but I could tell he was sort of embarrassed, so we shopped together. I figured shared responsibility and all that."

"Good for you. And somehow I'm feeling a lot less awkward talking to you about such things."

"I'm not looking forward to 'the talk' with Julia. Perhaps this time with you will help me to get more at ease with such physical topics."

"Angela. Is Joe sleeping with you a problem for him as a minister?"

"So far we've only managed one night, which is a bit of a pity."

"However, the concern is not to cause scandal to his congregation. He pointed out that most churches consider that marriage is the commitment of the couple to each other. The church or state just witness and recognize it. And when we thought about it, both Joe and I said that we want our relationship to be ongoing. It's just so recent that making a proclamation would be premature. And while both of us figure it'll work out fine, though possibly nowhere near

like we expect, we need to give a bit of time so other people – Julia in particular – can adapt and hopefully support us.

“But clearly we haven’t been very ... er ... active. For example, we all went to Evensong at the Cathedral Sunday evening, then had a bite here and then he went home.”

“I’m sure you don’t want to have Julia asking awkward questions.”

“That’s part of it, I suppose, but I think also the minister thing. I can understand that, and in some ways it means we don’t go too fast, which could be sensible. My friend Nancy seems to have dived head-first into a relationship with a man who was one of the Company visitors who she met when they both went to Vic Fiddle night. He lives in Vancouver and they’ve been going back and forth each weekend.”

“How did you come to know Joe, Angela? You said Barb had him to lunch, but I get the feeling there’s more to it than that.”

“Barb suggested Julia talk to him. You may remember she used to talk about ‘shimmers’ or ghosts. I’d been thinking of taking her to a psychiatrist, but Barb said some people in the congregation had found Joe helpful to talk to. He was going to visit the Emily Carr House one Saturday, and we arranged to meet him by the Harbour. I stayed on the upper level while he and Julia went to a bench below where I could see them but they’d be able to talk privately. They talked for a while – actually very short – and Julia seems a lot more at ease since.”

“How would that be? Just a short conversation.”

“Mom. I don’t want you to get the wrong idea, but Joe says he sees or senses these spirits too. And so does Mix, I think.”

“You mean you believe in ghosts now too! That’s preposterous.”

“Calm down and listen a minute, then we’ll see if it still causes you upset.”

“First of all, Joe points out that all religions pretty well deal with spirits and believing in beings we can’t necessarily see. Julia says what she senses is like how air above a fire wobbles or shimmers. And she sometimes gets a feeling about something. When Mix started following us, then barked to have us notice we were about to be run down by a cyclist, Julia said his name was Mix. Then, when we went to the vet, they found he’d been the pet of a lady who died, and he had a microchip. Guess what name was stored?”

“That’s a bit creepy.”

“I guess it could be. But somehow Joe and Julia can sense whether spirits are good or bad, and apparently the ones they see or sense most frequently seem to give them comfort. Joe says he thinks they can only interact with the real world through emotions. They can’t rattle chains or throw things. Joe figures their influence can always, or almost always, be explained in other, more prosaic ways, so there won’t generally be direct evidence of them.

“Julia sort of says the same, but using language that fits her age. But they both realize that people can get upset and awkward, so they both mostly say very little. Julia had been keeping quiet because she wondered if anybody but her sensed the shades as Joe calls them. Having Joe and Mix come into our lives has calmed her down quite a lot.

"I asked Julia about bad spirits, and she said she sometimes felt there were what she called bad ones about, and mentioned the time we took the ferry to Tsawwassen and there was this old house on the shore that we passed. I know I felt something odd there too, and recently they've found human remains there. Several news stories."

"Does she talk to them?"

"Not that she's shared with me. She talks to Mix, but then most folk talk to their pets. My guess is Mix understands more than most dogs, and he seems to know when you're distressed. He's been a comfort to me too. I'm pretty sure he sees something of what Julia and Joe see or sense, but of course he doesn't tell us except in his behaviour."

"I've been surprised how unobtrusive he is, yet he's there. I've found him beside me once or twice. Oddly reassuring."

"We have to make sure he gets a chance from time to time to just be a dog. He loves chasing a ball in the off-leash area down by Dallas Road."

"Let me know if you need someone to take him if you have obligations. It'd make a walk for Charlie and I. He had a dog until a year or so ago and I think Charlie's missing him pretty badly."

"Sure. Mix seems to like you. When you're here he's often lying near you. I'm pretty sure he'll be happy to join you and Charlie, especially if he gets to chase a ball."

Easy rider

It was the Spring Equinox on Saturday morning that Angela and Julia took the Blink to Barb's place. Tony had the bicycle for Julia ready except for setting the saddle height.

Angela said "Oh. It's more or less a conventional bike with a basket and mudguards. That'll save some laundry."

Tony added "There's a front hand brake and rear pedal brake. Only one gear, and no lights yet. Does have a kickstand, however."

"It's blue," Julia said.

Indeed it was. Tony had Julia stand by the saddle and made an adjustment.

"Can you put your leg over the saddle and see if you can stand?" Tony asked. "I've set it so you should be able to put both your feet on the ground when stopped. I can also adjust the handlebar so you are comfortable riding."

There was some trial and error until the saddle and handlebars were set.

"Where should we try?" Angela asked.

"Round the corner is a cul-de-sac," Tony said. "I think we can do some preliminary trials there. Note that there's a handle on the back of the saddle so I can run behind. I think the first step is to get Julia comfortable pedalling and steering. But gloves and helmet to be worn, of course."

Surprisingly, Julia was a very quick study. Barb joined Tony, Angela and Julia in the nearby dead end that had a round loop at its end. Julia got on the

bike and with Tony behind went round and round the circle. Then they tried up and down the cul-de-sac.

After about ten minutes, Tony said "Julia, I think you are doing most of the work balancing. Let's try braking and stopping. I'll show you how, but you have to remember to put your foot down as you stop so you don't fall over."

Another five minutes were spent practising this.

Angela said "Julia seems almost ready to ride without support, but I'm really afraid of her falling and getting hurt."

"That's why I brought these," Tony said, reaching into bag he had brought along. He took out some elbow and knee pads used by skateboarders. They were a bit big on Julia, but would provide some protection. They chose a flat section of the road and Tony said "Try to go not very fast toward your Mom and my Mom and then stop where they are and they'll try to make sure you don't fall over. I'll help you get started."

Julia managed a couple of these short runs, then they moved to the circle and she was able to go round twice but then had a minor mishap stopping and fell.

"Are you hurt?" Angela asked.

"It's not nice to fall," Julia said, but inspection showed the pads and gloves had worked.

"Maybe enough for today," Barb suggested.

"Once more!" Julia demanded.

This time she went round the circle about ten times and managed to stop with a bit of a wobble, but remained upright.

"Well done!" Tony said.

This time Julia didn't object to stopping, so they returned to Barb's house for a snack and drink. Angela was ready to take the bus home, using the bike rack on the front of the bus, but Barb said "I want to do some window shopping downtown and also have some sister-sister chat. I'll drive you."

Conversation during the drive was largely banal. Julia was excited by the bicycle, and it was obvious that she would be riding quite well very soon. Thus the discussion was about where she might practise. James Bay was trafficky, and the streets would be dangerous.

Barb said "Aren't there some roads in Beacon Hill Park that are blocked off?"

Angela replied "That's a good idea, but we'd need to walk our bikes part of the way at least, though maybe just to the park side of Douglas Street. And there's a pathway alongside Dallas Road where a lot of people cycle. Have to watch for pedestrians, though."

After they got to the Lodge and had unloaded the bike and put it in the garage, Angela asked "Are you heading back right away?"

"Like I said, I thought we might have a bit of girl talk if you've a few minutes," Barb answered.

"Sure. Let's have some soup for lunch. Julia has some videos about tigers to watch."

The soup was served, with Julia was watching her videos, but using headphones so the video sound did not cause any disturbance and, moreover, allowed Angela and Barb to talk without Julia intervening.

"So, Angela, what d'ya think about Mom's boyfriend?"

"He seemed a nice man, and the important thing is that he treats Mom well."

"I've not met him yet. I hope when I do I don't come across as horribly protective daughter."

"I hope not too. Charlie is a nice guy. Mom likes him and he seems to treat her well. But she's pretty awkward with rediscovering the ... er... physical side of things. Liking it a lot, but not sure how that aligns with how she thinks of herself as Mom and Grandma."

"You mean, grandmas aren't supposed to have orgasms?" Barb whispered.

"I'm glad you said that quietly. Julia sometimes takes off the headphones. I'm not quite ready to explain what you just asked yet."

"Yeah. Been there. Done that. VERY awkward and embarrassing all round, especially when your daughter wants to know how you like to get off."

"Probably even worse with Tony," Angela giggled.

"I told George it was his job to talk to Tony."

"Did he?"

"They went fishing for a weekend. I decided to keep diplomatically quiet. And hope!"

"Do you think it worked?" Angela asked.

"Yeah. George told me Tony was well-informed. I didn't have the nerve to ask for more explanation.

"Then there's you and Joe to talk about."

"I'm afraid you'll not get much out of me on that. Mostly because though I'd like to be able tell you lots, our situation means not much has happened."

"I kinda got the feeling you had a good time together when Julia slept over at our place."

"Yes. We did. But so far that's the only occasion. And I'll admit that it's not for lack of interest, because we had a nice time. But with Julia and then Joe's role as minister in the church, we've been kept rather ... er ... dignified."

"One way to put it. Not much fun. How do you think you'll sort things out?"

"We've talked, and both of us want to go forward together, but we've not known each other long. Joe points out that his role as minister means acceptance of us being together probably means being married. If our feelings evolve as they have so far, then that'll happen, but I don't think either of us feel we're quite ready yet. There's a lot of practical issues too, like where to live and so on. I've no idea what the Company policy is on a couple living in. Or if Joe wants that."

"Angela. I heard recently of a couple who married a bit later than most who decided to keep their own apartments. They wanted to be together, but couldn't quite see – at least for a while – giving up their own places, even if they wanted to share those places and sleep together a lot of the time."

“That might be worth keeping in mind when we get a bit further along. It would be awful to jump in with both feet and then have to try to extricate ourselves, and that includes Julia.”

The person just mentioned was now taking off the headset. This provided the impetus for Barb to make her farewell.

Another late telephone call

“Hi Joe. Long shift again?”

“Yeah. But it does give some income. I’d better try to get some money put aside so we have some flexibility for the future.”

“Are you referring to us?”

“Of course.”

“We’ve not had a lot of chance to ... er ... get to know each other. And I’m not just referring to ... artichoke hearts. By the way, my Mom thought that was a great euphemism. She and I had a very awkward conversation – well, it started awkwardly, but perhaps we’ve managed to get beyond a lot of the obstacles.”

“You mentioned your mother had a male friend. Has the friendship advanced?”

“I believe so,” Angela bent the truth, not wanting to confirm details of her mother’s private life. “I’m afraid I admitted ours had too, hence the artichoke expression. I think Mom has been having a tough time reconciling her image of herself as mother and grandmother with her physical feelings. Charlie seems a good companion and friend for her.”

“Can we talk more about us? I’d like to build our understanding of each other. While there’s the obvious ... er ... artichokes,” Joe said, at this point causing laughter for both of them, “we need to become more familiar with how we both grew up, the things we like and dislike, what we prefer as a daily rhythm.

“I hope that isn’t too heavy a sentiment.”

“No. I agree. As long as there’s some of the obvious from time to time. That’s a source of some frustration. Not overwhelming, just annoying.”

“I fear the frustration is moving from annoying to overwhelming, unfortunately. And today, the frustration got an added poke in the eye.”

“Oh. What happened?”

“Two of the congregation were in Home Depot shopping for something and happened to see me and said hello. The wife is one of our more conservative members. Apparently they saw us parking the bikes outside the Shoppers’ Drug Mart when we were out cycling.”

“Oops. Did she see what we were getting?”

“I don’t know. I suppose we might as well assume so, so we’re ready to deal with what might come out of it.”

“How do you want to handle the situation, if we can call it a situation?”

“Angela. I really, really don’t want gossip about us. It can only be harmful to our friendship as well as damaging to my ministry. I’m not so worried for me, but gossip erodes the confidence others have in me and can reduce my ability to help people.”

“Joe. Would you think of introducing me – and I’d guess Julia too – to the congregation. Make a declaration that you and I are exploring a possible future together. That’s the truth, after all. You needn’t say girlfriend or any such category. We’re not really ready for that yet.”

“If you’re OK with me introducing you, I’ll do it. Will you be at service in the morning?”

“I was waiting for your call to figure out what we’re doing. But this decides it. We’ll be there.”

“To limit discussion, since people will wonder with Julia introduced, shall I mention that Julia’s father died in a construction accident before she was born? I’ll leave unsaid anything about that being before the wedding date.”

“Should be OK. Let’s hope it quiets any gossiping,” Angela said.

“Getting things out in the open might allow us a bit of flexibility to be together.”

“Let’s hope so.”

Special Sermon for Fifth Sunday of Lent

“Dear friends. Today’s readings are about trusting in God to bring us life. To bring us back to life even when there’s just bones, or when decomposition has set in, as in the example of Lazarus. I’ll be honest. I’m not sure whether we’re supposed to understand these readings literally or figuratively. I lean toward figuratively.

The main message, of course, is that we should have hope, even in extremity. In the readings, this is linked to faith in God. In our modern world, we generally see bodies rising from the grave in Hollywood horror stories. In the time when our readings were copied onto papyrus or parchment, people didn’t have photos and videos. Of course, they didn’t have deep fakes either.

What they could have was hope, bolstered by faith in a powerful God.

For perspective, biblical societies were fractious and tribal. It was important to promote your deity, your team, your warlord. That leads to strong demands for loyalty to the true God. Today we’re more inclined to extreme partisan feelings about sports teams rather than deities. Sadly though, we must note that even those claiming belief in similar views of God can exercise hateful animosity, as in Ireland, the Middle East, in parts of Africa or Asia.

Fortunately, while hope is supported by faith in God, it can exist without that faith.

In Graham Greene’s *Honorary Consul*, the lead protagonist, a cynical physician in a provincial backwater town, advises a friend

“Life is absurd. Because it’s absurd there is always hope.”

Hope is important, no matter whether it comes from faith or absurdity. It allows us to keep going through the tough times, the dark times, the hungry times, the lonely times, so we can come out the other side ready to contribute to the life and happiness of our community and ourselves.

Now I've a small note to add to this homily about hope in my own life. Earlier this year I met Angela and her daughter Julia. We've been getting to know each other, and you may have seen us together out and about, or indeed here in the church. Julia's father died in an industrial accident before she was born. Several years ago I had a girlfriend, but my choice to seek ordination and a frugal life led to a breakup. Thus all three of us have some living to do as we go forward. Your prayers and good wishes will be welcome."

Sunday Lunch

Angela and Julia stood with Joe during the coffee and cookie time after service. Several of the congregation offered best wishes. Barb was one of the first to do so, and invited them for lunch. George was going to initiate his barbeque for the year with some lamb chops, and left right away. The others waited until the crowd diminished then walked to Barb's house.

"This is really special," Joe said. "Thank you very much."

"Couldn't let your announcement go unsupported," George answered. "Besides, those ungrateful children of ours both excused themselves, and we had all these chops."

Angela was fairly certain half the chops had been quickly thawed in the microwave, and that the Sunday plans of Tony and Samantha were announced the night before. The lunch invite was still welcome.

As they ate, Barb said "I think your announcement was well-timed."

"Why so?" Angela asked.

"I came across a splinter Facebook group of some congregation members with some comments that you'd been seen on bicycles. Nothing nasty, but I got a subtext that was disapproving. I think there are some of the congregation who want a traditional vicar and back to the Bible messages. That's not you, Joe. Thankfully, I might add."

"The support is appreciated. I know I'm not a conventional minister."

George jumped in "But if the church wants that, they'd better come up with a couple of million bucks to build a church and add a half million at least for a vicarage. Oh. And money for a full-time salary so the minister doesn't have to work at Home Depot."

Joe replied "Actually, I may have a difficult decision to make. Home Depot has suggested they would like me to apply for a management role."

"Are you going to do that?" Angela asked, somewhat shocked.

"It may be that I should follow that path so I can have a reasonable chance at financial security. I think I'd still like to have some role in the ministry, perhaps as a volunteer preacher or counsellor. But it would certainly change

my identity. On the other hand, I can't see myself in ten years doing part time shifts to pay for a small apartment."

George said "I think you should follow up the Home Depot chance to see what's on offer. You can and should be honest with them about your current situation. And the same with the church. You should ask what their plans are for Holy Spirit. That is, do they intend it to become a United Church parish. It's not right that someone should have to forego a reasonable personal life to serve others. It could be better to have a model like the one I think the Quakers use where there isn't a minister as such. Some of the Friends speak at their meetings."

"It is one approach, but I fear it doesn't provide a clear focus or contact point for people seeking advice or help. I'm inclined to think that the ministry is more important for that. Many lay members of the congregation could handle the preaching."

"And some regular ministers are bloody awful in the pulpit," Barb said. "Sorry. I've sat through some where I had to bite my tongue not to scream."

"That would hurt, Aunty Barb," Julia said.

"Indeed it would," Barb answered. "'Bite my tongue' is an expression that means you have to try exceptionally hard to keep quiet."

"Yes, I guess so," Julia said rather quietly. The two familiar shades were on the branch of a tree outside. Julia saw Joe glance there too, then he smiled at her and she smiled back.

Barb asked "Angela. How did the dinner go at The Lodge last night?"

Joe said "Oh. You were working. I don't feel so guilty that I took a shift."

"Yes. Company President in town. A few business people. These days the politicians generally won't accept invites to private dinners from anyone who might be in line for a contract, though on Friday there was a session at the Legislature where some forthcoming projects were presented so letters of intent could be prepared. The dinner last night was a follow-up to that with some associates."

"Hope there's not a lot of collusion to raise the prices," George said.

"I suppose that's always a possibility. For some of the projects there's only a few outfits big enough to bring everything together."

Joe asked "Did you do any of the cooking?"

"I prepared some backup hors d'oeuvres that could be frozen or otherwise used over the next few days in case what the caterers brought wasn't up to scratch. Or there was an accident and something dropped on the ground. And of course, I made sure there were plenty of odds and ends like ice, crackers, and so on. I also plan the drink, though we maintain what might be called a cellar, so purchases for that are part of longer term planning. I just had to get out supplies for the evening."

"Was it a big group?" Barb asked.

"Fourteen. We can handle twenty at a pinch. Well, if the caterers bring enough staff. The people we hired last night are reliable, so I didn't arrange anyone extra except for a pair of security people who also help park the cars

in the yard. They also make sure the caterers van has enough room for easy access. Don't want stuff on the ground."

"Mix might like that," Joe quipped.

There was laughter, but Julia said "Mix stayed with me and we watched a movie and went to bed. Mix got to sleep in a basket at the bottom of my bed."

"That meant both Julia and Mix wouldn't be in the way. But the caterers did give us some of the dinner. It was very nice."

"What was served?" George asked.

"There was a vichysoise to start, then a salad with hearts of palm, then a main course of venison – which Julia knows is a special kind of beef." Here Angela gave the others a knowing look. Julia's knowledge of deer came from cartoons of the Bambi variety. "The main had croquette potatoes, and a medley of vegetables including asparagus and broccoli and shitake mushrooms. All very nice. Then they did a dessert medley so people could choose from a syllabub, a cheesecake, or a fruit pie. There was a cheese board and coffee to finish."

"Good job we're eating some very nice chops just now," Joe said, carefully avoiding mentioning lamb in case Julia was sensitive to the source.

"Did the caterers help clear away too?" Barb asked.

"I always include that in our contracts. We have an industrial dishwasher, and do dishes as they return from the table, so at the end there's just the cheese plates and coffee cups, which the catering staff brought back – well, they sent them down the dumb-waiter from what is pretentiously called the buttery. Last people away were the security guys. The two we had were ones who are regular with us. It helps that they know the drill and the layout, as they park the vehicles, though last night there were just two cars, and one of those had a driver. There's a small room near the kitchen with a TV for drivers and others, next to a powder room. These days people coming to a dinner don't want issues with drink and drive, but one of the guests is teetotal. Others at the dinner were staying in The Lodge or took taxis. We knew about the teetotal guest in advance, and I always make sure there's plenty of options. Nowadays the non-alcoholic wine gives us choices. Either I or one of the caterer's serving people discretely ask guests what they want to drink with their meal, and we always mention that we have non-alcoholic options. The server simply shows the bottle to the guest before pouring. No fuss or bother or any 'Oh you really must have some ...'."

"Are you on duty at all today," Barb asked.

"A couple of the Company people have meetings tomorrow morning, so I'm going back tonight to give them dinner. I'll actually be wearing the cook's hat. Breakfast was set up for them before I left. Things that they can toast or microwave. We've one of the fancy pod coffee makers, and I give guests a run-down on what can be offered. If they want a big breakfast, they have to go out, but the two who are staying over, Mr. Watson and Mrs. Sanderson, both like fruit and cereal, though I always have some croissants and pastry, and I notice one or two always disappear, possibly for a snack later."

"What'll you serve tonight?" Joe asked.

"I'll do a fairly simple pasta with salmon, and a side salad. They can then take as much as they want. The caterers left some of the desserts, but I already confirmed my guests won't be offended by those as leftovers, and there's also fruit available. I know the two guests well enough that they've told me they don't like waste, so to leave fruit unprepared until they decide if they want some."

"I'm going to eat too much lunch," George said. "All that description makes me hungry again."

After lunch, Julia said she wanted to read a book. In fact she fell asleep. George and Barb were going to do a little garden work if they felt like it. Joe and Angela went for a walk.

"Joe, I'm going to ask Mr. Watson about what would happen if you and I ... er ... married and moved in together. I don't know what the thinking is about that. There's enough room in The Lodge in the space Julia and I have now, though not huge."

"You think we should be there, rather than our own place?"

"I'd love our own place, but doubt we can afford it. Well, afford somewhere that isn't just an apartment with no outdoor space. And we could do a lot worse than The Lodge, even with it treated as a taxable benefit."

"Yeah. That's one of the reasons I need to follow George's advice and find out what Home Depot's prepared to offer. And also perhaps prod the church hierarchy to find out how they view my future with them."

"In Britain I guess you'd be seeking what I think is called a living," Angela said. "You know, I've no idea where I learned that. Different nobles or institutions like colleges had or have the right to name – and pay the salary of – the vicar of a particular parish."

"So you fancy being a vicar's wife?" Joe teased.

"Only if Joe Douglas is the vicar."

"Will we scandalize a goodly portion of Langford if I kiss you?"

"Probably. But I don't care."

Employer - employee discussion

"Mr. Watson, might I talk to you for a few minutes?"

"Certainly. I was taking a few minutes pretending to read this book so I could do nothing for a while before dinner."

"Oh. Then I'm sorry I disturbed you."

"Not to worry. I was starting to feel guilty. What can I do for you?"

"I wanted to make sure I understood the Company's expectations of me and that I was fulfilling them adequately."

"Oh. I think we're very pleased. Last night went extremely smoothly. The service was very sharp but almost unnoticeable. That probably sounds odd. I mean that things got done very efficiently but the people were unobtrusive. They didn't interrupt conversations, but glasses were filled, plates appeared and were removed. Very slick. Congratulations."

“Thank you. I like those caterers for precisely that type of service. Plus they seem to provide meals that are very good without being pretentious. I just hope they stay in business. People often wear out in the food service trade.”

“I hope you’re not going to, Mrs. Jenkins.”

“No. But there are some things that have been developing for Julia and I that might need clarification with the Company.”

“Go on.”

“Through my sister, Julia and I met a church minister – well, he’s part time as minister of a new church in Langford, and part-time at Home Depot.”

“Interesting.”

“Reverend Douglas – Joe – and I find we like each other’s company. Joe and Julia seem to get along particularly well too. At the moment, it’s a bit early to say where this will lead, but I thought I should find out what the thinking might be if we were to form a family. For example, would the Company think it inappropriate for us to live here, or could the arrangement be adjusted so Joe would join us? I don’t expect an immediate answer to that, but wanted to make sure that there was plenty of time for everyone to think about things.”

“The heads-up is appreciated. On one hand, I can see we might lose an excellent housekeeper and manager of this place. But also you’ve had a difficult time since Robert died.

“I’ll tell you right now that my own reaction is that we can work something out. But also I know there are people who somehow think that giving someone a job means that they have a 24 7 responsibility to the Company.”

“If Joe and I end up together – and given he’s a minister, that will mean marriage – we’ve got a lot of things to figure out.”

Watson suddenly noticed that Mix was lying a few feet from him.

“My goodness. I hadn’t noticed the dog. Does he belong here?”

“He was a pet whose owner died and Mix – that’s his name – became a stray. One day he walked with us and barked when a cyclist was about to run into us. Then he came home with us even though we didn’t try to encourage him, and he sort of stayed. I realize I should have informed you when we decided to keep him. That was after we took him to the vet and they read his microchip. You’ll find him very quiet unless there’s someone coming in who he doesn’t know is supposed to be here. If Julia or I greet someone, he stays quiet and friendly. I like it when we are getting deliveries and the door is open or unlocked, since he definitely keeps a discreet watch. He’s brought a measure of company and security to Julia and to me. Sometimes he goes for walks with my mother and one of her friends who lost his dog last year. For what it’s worth, he’s actually been lying there for the past half hour.”

“Wow. Very quiet. I hadn’t noticed him.”

“Yes. He’s like that. Unobtrusive, like the caterers’ service. He’ll get a bit more noisy if you toss a ball for him to fetch, but we do that over in the off-leash area on Dallas Road.”

“Thank you, Angela – Mrs. Jenkins – for touching base. Do you know if Mrs. Sanderson is back yet?”

At this moment, they heard a door open and someone come in. Angela went to the hallway to investigate, with Mix following quietly.

“Good afternoon Mrs. Sanderson. We heard the door. Can I ask if 6:30 is suitable for dinner?”

“Thank you, Mrs. Jenkins. Yes. That’s fine.”

“Will you join Mr. Watson for an aperitif before dinner at 6:15?”

“Oh. Yes. Thank you. That’ll be very nice.”

Nighttime conversation

Late that evening, Gamma and 41 were perched on the ridge of the roof of a house across the street from The Lodge.

“Gamma. It seems to me that Joe and Angela have made their decision to be together, but are in a quandary of how to achieve that.”

“They have both been alone for what to them is a long time, though for us hardly more than a moment. Aside from wartime I have rarely seen couples marry as soon as this after meeting. Indeed, recently the time of courtship and betrothal is often the better part of a decade. Sometimes there are already children.”

“In some rural societies in Europe a hundred and more years ago it was not uncommon for couples to only marry if there was a child. ‘Night courting’ allowed the couple to ensure they were fertile. The couple might break up if there were no child.”

“Well 41, those societies were quite closed. Both parties would almost certainly know each others’ families. Today people are mobile. We have these online romance scams.”

“Surely only the mechanisms of deceit have changed, Gamma. There have always been men and women, often pushed by their families or others, who will seek riches by gaining the affections of another by falsehood. Such miscreants steal more than the worldly riches. They kill the capacity to give love openly, foster generalized suspicion, and increase the isolation of those who should and could love and be loved.”

“You are correct, 41. I fear it is the very mechanical nature of the fraud conducted by electronic communications, sometimes using programmed voices and scripts, that is so disquieting to me.”

“That aspect of modern instances of romantic fraud distresses me greatly too. I find it frustrating that our influence on human events is so ethereal and limited.”

“Yes. Our influence is very, very subtle, except with some few beings who are receptive to our suggestions. But, 41, I took the trouble to ponder Nancy and Adrian, and must report that Adrian has not been fully honest with Nancy.”

“That is most distressing, Gamma. What fraud is he executing?”

“No direct fraud. More a sin of omission. Some years ago, Adrian was in a relationship with a young woman who was addicted to Oxycontin thanks to the criminal activities of Purdue Pharma. He was unaware of her addiction, and

they had plans to marry when he realized she was buying the drug to increase her dose. He also discovered, but almost two years after the breakup, that she had become pregnant, either through being unreliable in taking her contraceptive pill, or perhaps through the illegal drugs interfering with its process. In any event, Adrian pays about a hundred dollars a month into a registered educational savings account for the child, who lives with her mother and her mother's parents. Both Adrian and the child are, in one view, also victims of the Oxycontin. However, the poison is now flowing onward and will likely hurt Nancy."

"And is Adrian listed as the father?"

"No. He learned about the child some months after the birth through a friend of the young woman. His status is that of a benefactor. But Adrian has been slow to tell Nancy, and as the delay increases so will the possibility of disappointment and suspicion."

"If we can, we should see if we have any way to encourage him to tell his story. His only failing has been that of silence about an honourable act of generosity."

"Unfortunately, 41, Adrian is not aware of us."

"Indeed. We will have to be creative."

Birthday party

Madeleine had offered the party room in her condo apartment building for a Saturday afternoon party for Julia. A couple of Julia's schoolfriends were invited along with a parent each, Charlie was there, and Angela had invited Nancy, who asked if Adrian could come too, since he would be visiting.

Julia got to wear one of her new outfits. There were several birthday presents. A package from Charlie turned out to have a watch, which was identical to one Madeleine was wearing. Angela realized this was what Madeleine had hung back in Canadian Tire to buy. Madeleine whispered "I saw them for ten bucks and figured I couldn't go wrong."

Angela whispered back "She'll love it. Especially as it's the same as yours."

"Yeah. My old watch wasn't keeping time, even with a new battery, and buying anything fancy doesn't make a lot of sense for every day. And these inexpensive watches seem to work well and look nice enough."

There was a package from Joe. It turned out to be a bike lock alongside a lanyard, which Joe explained was for one of the keys so it could be worn round Julia's neck or tied to a belt. There was some chocolate from one of the school friends, and a container of bubble solution and a wand from the other. Nancy and Adrian had brought a book of stories with both words and pictures. Barb, George, and Samantha, with excuses from Tony, added a pair of small LED lights, one white and the other red, that could be fastened to the handlebar or the back of the saddle. Angela made clear that the bicycle and the new clothing were also presents.

Joe whispered to Angela "Julia did very well."

“She certainly did. I’d better find a box or bag to put everything in.”

The party was only for an hour and a half. Children can soon become bored, so after presents, some sandwiches and chips, and the obligatory Happy Birthday singing and candle blowing, the chocolate brownies that were the birthday cake was consumed and the party dispersed. However, Nancy and Adrian would join Joe and Angela back at The Lodge. The plan was to have an evening of conversation and get some sort of take-out meal to allow everyone to get better acquainted.

However, none of the party returning to The Lodge had a car, and the Henley’s only had one seat free. This meant a party of five took the bus to James Bay from Oak Bay area. Adrian suggested a cab or an Uber, but five was an awkward number for those too on most occasions. Most of the Victoria cabs and Ubers were Toyota Prius models. They would not carry the driver and all of our little party.

Coming in to The Lodge, Mix welcomed them all, sniffing Adrian carefully.

“He’s due a walk,” Angela said.

“How about Julia and I take him up to Dallas Road?” Joe said. “Anyone interested could join us if they want.”

“Nancy and I can organize something to eat and drink,” Angela said, “but Adrian could go with you.”

“Sure. I’d like that,” Adrian said. “Joe and I can chat about guy stuff.” This last was said clearly tongue in cheek.

Julia already had Mix’ leash out and clipped to his collar, and Mix quickly moved to a corner by the door and picked up a tennis ball in his mouth.

“I’ll swear that dog understands everything we say,” Angela said.

Julia walked a bit ahead of Joe and Adrian as there wasn’t enough room for three abreast on the sidewalk, which was quite narrow here in James Bay.

Adrian said “Nancy told me you and Angela haven’t been going out long.”

“No. Very little time, and not much ‘out’ due to our schedules and where we live. I’m out in Langford and she’s here.

“I gather you and Nancy are fairly new to each other too.”

“Yes. A bit of a shock really. We’ve both been out of circulation for a while, I think for reasons of work and getting ourselves established. And now we are established, we’re in different cities.”

“Definitely worse than James Bay to Langford,” Joe agreed.

“Do you think you and Angela will stick?”

“Oh yes. I even announced that we were ... er ... keeping company is I think the right expression ... at the end of last Sunday’s sermon. Some parishioners saw us out bike riding together and there was the possibility of gossip.”

“Not good for a minister to be the subject of talk,” Adrian commented.

“No. And particularly I don’t want Angela and Julia to feel the ... I suppose sliminess is a word that fits for how gossip can do its damage.”

“Yes. I think that fits.

“Joe. Do you feel Julia will accept you? Do you feel comfortable accepting her?”

41 was watching our small group proceed to the off-leash area. He thought intensely about children, directing the thought to Joe.

"Absolutely. She's a bright, sensitive young woman. We get along really well. Asks a lot of good questions.

"Are there any children among your family or friends you have the opportunity to talk to. Some, of course, don't interact well with adults."

"Actually, talking to a minister might be the right thing to do. Several years ago I had a girlfriend who I discovered was addicted to Oxycontin and was using street drugs to augment her prescription. I didn't even know about the prescription. We broke up over it. Well, I couldn't find the strength to deal with the deceit and she was starting to go through money she didn't have.

"A couple of years after we broke up I learned she'd had a child. From the timing I could be the father, but with the addiction, who knows if that is the case, and I've not tried to find out. A little girl about a year younger than Julia. She's with her mother, who's back with her parents.

However, I set up a modest RESP account for her and put in about a thousand a year. Not a lot. Probably not enough, especially if she really is my daughter."

"Do I gather you've not told Nancy?"

"Yeah. Right. And the longer I wait, the harder it seems to get to doing so, but the worse the outcome could be."

Joe said "Maybe this evening is a good time. You can even do it with Angela and me present which might provide a buffer. If I'm not mistaken, being around Julia has brought the subject to the fore."

"Nancy could react badly." Adrian did not respond to the query about Julia.

"True. Though from the little I've learnt about her, I doubt that. She may be a bit miffed that you took so long, though truthfully, your time together has been a bit limited."

"I'd still bet we've had a good deal more private time together than you and Angela have been able to have."

"Touché! But I get the feeling the two of you, like us, plan to stick if you can."

"Yes. Of course. Otherwise I wouldn't be feeling so awkward about Gwyn. That's the little girl's name. But I don't have any contact with her. And I don't think either Heather or I want any contact. The breakup was ... er ... painful."

"Does Nancy know about Heather at all?"

"I mentioned that I'd had a girlfriend and that we'd had a breakup, but none of the details."

"Well, I'll leave it to you to bring up the subject, but one introduction is to mention you were talking to me about relationships and"

"You mean, by way of an opening?"

"Yes. It's the kind of subject people talk to their church minister about."

"Yeah. Guess you're right, though until now I didn't have a church."

"Or a minister!" Joe responded.

Home truths

Coming into the living room from the hallway to Julia's bedroom, Angela said "She fell asleep while I was reading her a story."

"She did very well today," Joe said. "We didn't have any tantrums from any of the girls."

"Nor the adults," Nancy said, causing a small wave of laughter.

"Where's Mix?" Joe asked.

"In his basket with Julia. I let him stay there as a birthday extra. He seemed tired too."

"He really chased the ball. I'd be tired," Adrian said.

"Did you ever have a dog, Adrian," Nancy asked. "That's something we've never talked about."

"No, we never had dogs. Partly I think because we had an apartment in English Bay. Not really good for a dog.

"What about you?"

"Cats. My mother liked Siamese, but they're not very friendly."

"Joe and I were talking about how many things get left out of conversations, simply because we don't have enough time to mention them."

"Do you feel that way, Joe?" Angela asked.

"Until Adrian brought it up when we took Mix to the dog area, I hadn't thought about it. But he's right that things get left unsaid, simply because there's not a good opportunity to say them."

"Were you thinking of anything in particular, Adrian?" Nancy asked.

"Actually yes. I've told you that I had a girlfriend a few years ago and that we broke up, but not the circumstances. The breakup was a result of Heather getting addicted to Oxycontin, then augmenting her prescription with street drugs. I couldn't deal with that, and the way she rationalized the disappearance of money to pay for the drugs, I'm afraid."

"From what I understand, few families or loved ones can," Angela said.

"I couldn't see how I could help, and I really didn't want to have to try to figure out when I was getting truth and when I was being lied to," Adrian continued. "However, I learned almost a couple of years later that Heather had had a child after we broke up that could have been mine. I don't know if she stopped taking her contraceptive pill or the drugs interfered with its operation. However, seeing Julia today brought home a reality that Nancy should know about, because she should hear about the story from me first. Also that I have set up a modest RESP for Gwyn. That's the little girl's name."

"I'm glad you're doing that, Adrian," Nancy said, though with an expression that was possibly unhappy.

"I learnt about Gwyn from a friend of Heather's who also helped set up the RESP. I don't think either Heather or I want to communicate. I'm not even sure I want to know if Gwyn is mine or not."

Joe said "Would you try to block communications from Gwyn when she gets a little older?"

“No, I don’t think so. That wouldn’t be right. Though the question of whether I am her father would probably be more important if she does.”

Nancy said “Adrian. As and when Gwyn approaches you, there are now genetic tests for paternity. If I know you at all, you’ll do what’s right by the girl when the time comes, if it does.”

“Thanks, Nancy. That vote of confidence means a lot to me.”

Getting late

Nancy and Adrian left a bit after 9 in an Uber. Joe said “I’d better be getting along too.”

“Would it be a risk if you stayed? I feel I want you to, and not for ...”

“Artichoke hearts?”

“That’d be nice too, but more just us – being together without others.”

“I’ll stay a while. Do you want ... er ...?”

“As long as we’re not noisy.”

“As I recall, Angela, you were the noisy one.”

“Mmm. I’ll have to learn how to enjoy things quietly. But tonight, anyway, I think I want more the connection and conversation.”

“We could just lie together if you want,” Joe said.

“But I don’t want to just lie together. I feel I want us ... plugged in, though I don’t mean that in any crude sense. More the connection than the pleasure. Sorry. That probably doesn’t make much sense.”

“It makes perfect sense. And if we are to become a family, being able to do that is important. I’m just a bit worried we’ll fall asleep and ... you know...”

“I don’t think Julia will be upset, though of course I can’t be one hundred percent sure. But we can’t dodge the matter forever, and perhaps it’s best now rather than later. I really doubt she cares whether we’re married – well, been through a ceremony – before you and I sleep in the same bed. It’s fortunate that the bed I have here is a double.”

“Yeah. Did The Lodge come with furniture?”

“Yes. And I’ve asked Mr. Watson what might be the Company view if we marry. He said he didn’t see it as an issue, but would check with his colleagues to be sure. I hadn’t thought about the fact the large bedroom has a double before, but it does rather suggest that they expected a couple. But maybe they thought it would be a joint employment, which wouldn’t be our case.”

“I’d not actually thought about living here, though I had figured my place wouldn’t work and been wondering about alternatives.”

“I had a weird thought, Joe. If your employment situation doesn’t really change, would it make sense to keep your apartment even if we are married? It could be that trying to live here would be very inconvenient for both your ministry and Home Depot work.”

“It’s something to think about. I guess I just assumed we’d be in one place.”

“Me too. But maybe we need to keep all options open. Except that I’m getting a bit ... er ... antsy. Let me get you a towel and face-cloth.”

Not far away, Gamma and 41 were on top of an apartment building on Douglas Street.

“You did well today, 41. I’m fairly certain you nudged Joe so he brought up the subject of children to Adrian.”

“Yes. I feel quite pleased at the outcome. Moreover, I suspect that a longer postponement of the inevitable revelation of Gwyn to Nancy would be harmful to the ... er ... understanding that has developed between Nancy and Adrian.”

“‘Understanding’ used to be more commonly employed by couples, though probably in a much more superficial sense. Essentially it could mean they had the intention of marrying, but were not going to make an announcement. But I think that you are talking of a much deeper comprehension of each others values and behaviour.”

“Indeed, Gamma. Sometimes I wonder if couples in other ages had that depth. So many marriages were arranged or contracted in unseemly haste.”

“The understanding of the type you envisage developed later for those, as the expression goes, ‘of good will’. The legal and social boundaries often forced others into an uneasy cohabitation, or even a protracted war of mental or physical violence. Nowadays in Western society those battles sometimes get revealed in the courts.”

“Gamma, I am now – as a wisp of consciousness observing as we do – aware how much of the essence of teamwork and loving is silent, encapsulated in the hint of a smile or a momentary touch. I now see an immense energy hidden by what is apparently ephemeral and banal.”

“You are a quick study, 41. That took me several centuries of observation to establish in my own understanding. Of course, you had the advantage, as you have reported, of a strong marriage.”

Sunday morning

Joe and Angela, despite their avowal of wanting quiet closeness and connection, had somehow managed to need two condoms in some vigorous if quiet sexual activity. They had, in fact, locked the bedroom door in case Julia discovered them in what was referred to as a compromising situation. That might have been the case, since Angela commented “I think I needed that, but it didn’t fit what one could call making love. We were, as Stompin’ Tom might say, ‘To it and at it’.”

“I’ll just say ‘Hmmm’ in agreement,” Joe said, as he drifted off to sleep. Angela, somewhat exhausted, was close behind.

Around 5:30 Sunday morning, Joe woke, for a moment disoriented. He soon realized where he was, naked and next to a naked Angela. Oops. He needed to use the toilet. Fortunately, there were bathrobes hanging on the back of the door, which he unlocked as he quietly slipped away to the toilet, noticing Mix eyeing him from the doorway to Julia’s room.

When he came out of the bathroom, Mix was lying down and didn’t make any movement as Joe returned to the bedroom. Slipping into bed, Angela

stirred. Joe offered his arm and she snuggled in.

“What time is it?” she asked.

“A bit after five-thirty. Should I slip away?”

“One: I like this. Two: It’s time to bite the bullet and see how Julia reacts.”

“Mix was watching from Julia’s doorway, so I guess he’s OK with us.”

Angela giggled. “We seem to take his opinion seriously.”

“I suppose we do. Though it would be awkward if he were hostile and barking.”

“Yeah. Hadn’t thought of it that way.”

“What time does Julia wake up?”

“Usually around quarter to seven.”

“Then let’s get up sometime soon. We don’t have PJs on, so it would be awkward if she came in.”

“Damn – sorry, darn – I hadn’t thought of that. It feels so nice in your arms.”

“Let’s put on the robes, or you can put on your night-dress or ... I just realized I don’t know what you usually wear in bed.”

“I’ve some nightgowns and some PJs. Former when it’s warm, latter when it’s cooler. I’ll put on some PJs, but I’m not sure what you’ll do.”

“I’ll put on my underpants at least, and have the robe handy. But we should try to be up before Julia is likely to come in, at least on this occasion. And for the future, maybe I should keep some PJs and a change of underwear or a bit more here.”

“Yes. That makes sense,” Angela said, now getting back into bed in a cotton top and shorts set of night wear decorated with moons and stars.

When Julia did wake and get up, she found Joe and Angela in the large kitchen, with Joe making notes about his sermon for this day, Palm Sunday, and Angela putting together some breakfast of French toast. There were no official guests, so the kitchen was for this morning free of activity other than their own.

“Hi there, Julia. Did you sleep well?” Joe asked.

“I was dreaming. Mix and I were chasing a ball but we could run across the water. I know when we go to the swimming pool I can’t do that.”

“Dreams let us do lots of things that we can’t do in real life.”

“Shall we get you washed and dressed,” Angela asked. “I’ve made French toast for breakfast. You can have it with banana and either jam or maple syrup.”

“Syrup!” Julia said as Angela took her towards the bathroom.

Another service

Joe left three quarters of an hour before Angela and Julia so he could get to his apartment and change. All three were present and accounted for when the service started at ten o’clock, though both Angela and Joe found they were somewhat distracted by thoughts of the previous night.

This day Joe actually presented a homily, as he explained the significance of Christ entering Jerusalem on the colt of a donkey as a way of fulfilling a prophesy. He spent some sentences outlining how riding a donkey compared to walking, being carried in a litter, or riding a horse would carry a message of Christ's status in society. All of this was standard material, and Joe did not find it particularly satisfying, even as it was perhaps necessary.

He finished by saying "We've talked about donkeys and horses, and for the younger members of our congregation I'll have to note that the Bible doesn't mention the Easter bunny, who strangely for a rabbit distributes eggs. Nevertheless, I hope he is kind to well-behaved children. What I can tell you is that the Wikipedia article on the Easter Bunny is quite interesting and entertaining, but I'll let you discover that for yourselves."

A visitor from on high

After the service and a rather extended coffee session, a couple of volunteers were clearing away. Joe beckoned Angela and Julia over to where he was standing with a man of perhaps 60.

"Angela, Julia, this is Reverend Stephen Carmichael. He's one of the core members of the LeaderSHIFT program. Rev. Carmichael, Angela and Julia and I have been seeing a bit of each other lately, as I informed the congregation last Sunday."

"Nice to meet you Angela, and you too Julia. And I applaud your directness in telling people that you may be observed together. Congregations can be – sadly I fear – a bit gossipy. Being open will scotch some of it, though I'm sure you'll have some busybodies make a nuisance of themselves.

"But your situation means my visit today is timely. The Holy Spirit venture here is at a point where we need to decide how to take it forward. We're aware Joe is working part time outside the church."

Angela said "Perhaps I'd better leave you and Joe to talk. We saw each other yesterday for Julia's birthday party, and I have some arrangements to make for my work this coming week."

"I'll phone you later," Joe said. "I've an afternoon shift at Home Depot, so it'll be this evening."

"OK. Goodbye Rev. Carmichael."

After the farewells, Carmichael asked "Unless I'm mistaken, from the way you and Angela look at each other, the relationship is a serious one."

"Definitely. The key elements are how and when, not if, even though we've not known each other long."

"As far as LeaderSHIFT can determine, you're doing an excellent job here. There's some of the usual complaints that you're not as ... er ... 'vicarly' as some of the more conservative congregationalists would like. However, in the cold, hard realities of parish success, as far as we can see you're drawing in some teenagers, plenty of young and middle-years families, while the complaints are from those who'll be soon pushing up daisies, as they say."

“I try, Rev. Carmichael, to give people some encouragement to goodness. Not in any high-flown fairytale way, but as much as possible with examples and suggestions that they can take away, think about, and hopefully put to use in everyday situations.”

“Call me Stephen. Titles, as you know, get in the way of being the friend and confidant of our flock. My contacts – some would say spies – here are telling me you give down-to-earth sermons. Not a lot of dogma. Possibly a bit loose on face-value biblical stuff. That’s likely right for this area.”

“I’m afraid I feel a lot of the Bible is about times and places that don’t match Langford today. To me that means translating or adapting the message to here and now. Or, in some cases, recognizing it as part of a historical culture mostly disconnected from the congregation. Sometimes I fear I may step on some toes.”

“Impossible not to. And you’d be in good company.

“Now, I’m thinking we should find some place to sit and talk and, if you have to work, for you to get something to eat. We need to work out what might be possible for Holy Spirit and for you and your potential family. I understand Angela’s partner died before Julia was born.”

“You’re well-informed.”

“One of the people I referred to as spies is Angela’s sister, actually. But don’t mention I told you.”

“Barbara and George don’t make a lot of fuss, but are pillars of strength for the church here,” Joe said with meaning.

“Hopefully that support will continue. Holy Spirit is at the point where it should become a full Community of Faith rather than a project of LeaderShift.”

Palm Sunday Conversation

“Have a good afternoon,” Joe asked after Angela picked up the phone that evening.

“Yes. We walked our bikes across Douglas Street and then rode the closed roads in Beacon Hill. Julia’s managing fine, though I did put on the elbow and knee pads.”

“Were they needed?”

“No. She had a couple of wobbles, but no crashes or tumbles. So now it’s a matter of practise and learning how to keep out of trouble and traffic.

“Tell me what Reverend Carmichael had to say.”

“There’s good news. They want Holy Spirit to become a Community of Faith, that is, a proper parish, which will mean they have to offer me a salary. There’s a schedule, so I know the level. Not fantastic, but not poverty either. First, however, the congregation has to confirm a Board and then they have to work out what’s called a Covenant with the regional council.”

“Would you automatically be offered the job of minister, and would you accept?”

“Well, first I told Stephen that Home Depot also was in process of making an offer, and that I at least wanted to consider if working in that line and being a part-time preacher and counsellor, possibly unpaid, might be more appropriate for me and my family, meaning you and Julia. I told him I didn’t know what was on the table there, nor what would be expected of me. But I also said that I wanted the Holy Spirit project to succeed and to be a continuing part of that success if I could.”

“Could LeaderShift assign you elsewhere if you took the church salary?”

“Technically the Manual, which is the 200 page document all United Churches use as their rule-book, requires the local church to cooperate with the Regional Council. So there’s definitely some influence there. Though these days there’s reluctance to push people into jobs they don’t want or are less enthusiastic about. I think there may be some details that need to be settled on how the Holy Trinity Board becomes the Board of the Community of Faith and how the minister is appointed.”

“Joe. From what I know of you, I think you’re a natural to stay on as minister in the church.”

“Nice to have my favourite lady so positive about me.”

“Joe. I’m glad I’m your favourite lady. After last night, I think I’m going to see my doctor to ask to go on the Pill of some sort. I really, really didn’t want us to pull apart after the second time.”

“Yeah. I felt the same way. It took me some effort to actually do so and to hold the condom to avoid any spill.

“We talked briefly before about children, Angela, and I tend to agree with you that we should have some time without a baby or babies around. Sounds a bit selfish, but also good for solidifying the partnership and getting to know and understand each other before, as I think you put it, a baby would suck away all our energy. And that at a time when not only will we be building a personal relationship, but also sorting out employment, at least on my side.”

“Yeah. That’s my thinking. And it’d be nice if we could just ... er ... the words that come to mind are rather crude, but what I want is really quite the opposite.”

“Hard not to love you when you talk that way.”

“Do you think that very physical sex like last night is a form of love, Joe?”

“Not directly. Nor is this conversation. Nor holding hands on the bus. Or riding our bikes around the shoreline to the coffee shop. But each shared experience is a building block for a house filled with love. I think people make a mistake in tying sex to love so tightly. It’s the ensemble of shared experiences and emotions that to me make love alive. But I’ll not deny there are some choice moments we’ve had that we’re unlikely to tell others about that are very, very special.”

“You have a special gift with explaining emotional and spiritual things, Joe. I feel my emotional panties are wet, and my actual ones aren’t dry recalling last night.”

“Let’s aim to find time after Easter – I think I’ll be taking Easter Monday off from any church or Home Depot work – and figure out what we want together

and how we might make it happen.”

“Yeah. I’d like that. I’ll see if my mother can take Julia for some of the time. Partly for fun, and partly to plan. Do you think you’ll have any information on Home Depot’s ideas by then.”

“Possibly. One of the things that concerns me there is that they can be quick or slow and leave you wondering. The LeaderSHIFT sent Stephen to talk to me, so I’ve a pretty good idea where I – we – stand with them, and I think they are pretty much in tune with the Regional Council.”

“Joe, to shift subjects, I also was thinking that I don’t know any of your family. Somehow with what happened with Bob, I think I want to meet some of them.”

“Makes sense. Do you get any holiday? We could think of going to Saskatchewan for a visit.”

“How would we get there? It’s a long way, and planes are expensive.”

“Maybe take the ferry to Vancouver and rent a car and drive. No sense paying the car toll too. But we could do a video call to some of my folks to introduce everyone almost right away. And I don’t talk to my folks as often as I should, though I scan my sermon notes and email them to my mother.”

“You’ve not talked much about them.”

“Guilty as charged. Sort of like Adrian about Gwyn. Not trying to avoid the topic. Just not much chance to raise it.”

“Will Holy Week be busy for you, Joe?”

“A bit more than the usual week. If I were a Catholic priest then much more. But we don’t do a lot for Good Friday. I’ll have a simple service with readings then. Then Easter Sunday tends to be a bigger service than usual in most churches, though perhaps our congregation is already – I think I’ll say participatory rather than devout. They show up regularly, and I don’t think it’s devotion.”

“They don’t suffer from irregularity, then?”

“Oooh, Angela. That’s really bad, so, of course, really good. If there’s an appropriate occasion, I’ll have to use it as a way to pop the bubble of seriousness that can sometimes afflict church services.”

“Joe. You do an excellent job of keeping the serious message wrapped in a very human package. It’s why you’re a good minister. Keep it up.”

“Thanks. And now we’d better sign off. Love you, Angela.”

“You too, Joe. ’Night.”

Video call

On Good Friday afternoon, Joe arrived at The Lodge around half-past four. He kissed Angela and swung her in a hug. Then gave Julia a hug and swing around too. Mix gave a soft bark.

“Hello to you too, Mix,” Joe said, scratching Mix behind his ears.

“When are we doing the video call?” Angela asked.

“Five-thirty here. Should be six-thirty there. ”

“Where did you put your bike, Joe?”

“Just outside. Can you open one of the garage doors so I can put it inside?”

Angela pushed a button on a remote control that was hanging on a board by the kitchen door. Joe went out and put his bike beside those of Angela and Julia. When he returned, he pushed the button on the remote then said “I’ve some overnight things in the backpack. I left my helmet and stuff with the bike.”

“Why don’t you put the backpack in the bedroom. Then wash hands for early supper. I’ve a chicken stew. Call Julia to wash her hands when you’re done. Oh. But give me a kiss first.”

“Yes. Bossy!” Joe said, and kissed her.

When they were sitting at the table in the living dining room, Angela said “I thought to eat before we had the video call so it would not be too late for eating.”

“Yes. Some of us can get cranky if dinner is later than usual,” Joe said, recognizing the need for approximately regular meal times for Julia.

They had time to eat both the stew and some cookies and fruit and clear away before it was time for the video call, for which Angela moved her laptop to the dining table. Julia sat between Joe and Angela along the short end of the table so everyone was in the frame of the picture. Joe did the necessary setup with Google Meet – the link had already been worked out in advance.

We needn’t detail the video meeting. There was lots of greeting and introduction, some sharing of pictures and getting to know each other, though so many faces that Angela and Julia were unable to get names and faces straight by the end of the session that lasted a bit over half an hour.

“Too many names all at once,” Angela said.

“Joe’s mother is Helen, his father is James, his brother is Steve and his sister is Joan,” Julia said. “But I don’t remember all the rest.”

“Well done, Julia,” Joe said. “You got the important names. Well, the names it’s important to remember first.”

“Do you want to watch the program on kangaroos before you go to bed,” Angela asked Julia.

“Yes. Can Mix watch with me?”

“If he wants to. But if he wants to go off by himself, you should let him. I’ll set it up for you, but Joe and I will be in the kitchen. Do you want a glass of milk?”

“Yes please.”

When Julia was settled into the video, Angela made some coffee. “It’s decaf, in case you’re worried it’ll keep you awake.”

“I suspect other things will keep us awake.”

“Naughty!”

“Joe. I found your family welcoming. Can I assume that was genuine?”

“Yeah. They take folk more or less at face value, though with a bit of caution. There were plenty of snake oil salesmen touring the prairies in the past, and I think the echoes of that phenomenon are still present.”

"We haven't yet talked of ... er ... oh, I'm feeling awkward. I want to talk about ideas for how we would get married and sort things out, but I feel it's kind of too early for that."

"I would have thought so too, except that I can't for the life of me find reasons for a lot of delay. Just the opposite. I'm guessing I'll be here tonight, and trying to get Julia to not mention that I stay over might just bring attention to it. I've realized that for me, marrying you is when, not if."

"For me too."

They were quiet for a couple of minutes, and sipped their coffee to allow that time to pass without too much tension.

Angela said "Oh, Mr. Watson sent an email that there'd be no problems for you – well that wasn't how it was worded – to stay here. He said the main issues would be things like cars and furniture and activities that might impinge on the functioning of The Lodge."

"That's good. And we have no car at the moment. I've not much in the way of belongings – almost like a tumbleweed."

"All that could change over time."

"Of course. But we'll not have to make arrangements in a hurry. At least not for where to live. Like you suggested, we could even keep my apartment for a bit, though it's probably superfluous to need. I think, in fact, it might be possible to have a small cot in the church, or an air mattress, if it were necessary for me to be there early sometime."

"Are there any really early services?"

"I've not had any, though once there was a suggestion of a 9 o'clock funeral, but it got pushed to the afternoon. Getting there from here for 9 would not be super-difficult. 8 would be a stretch, but that's for the Catholics."

"You give the Catholics quite a bit of ragging, Joe. You mentioned their Bingo in one of your sermons."

"Actually, I get along well with the local priests. And the idea of early services each morning is rather attractive, though not a service like our usual United Church one. I think more a short set of prayers and a couple of hymns would be nice for people at, say, 7 for 15 minutes so they'd still be at work for 8. Though that's just my view. I'd probably be upsetting the mice in the church with my off-key singing."

"Are there mice? I hope not," Angela said.

"There are some rodent bait stations around the property, but I've seen no mice or rats myself. They might be drawn to the shawarma at the end of the strip, though."

"I think Julia's program's ending," Angela said. "Maybe you can tidy the dishes while I put her to bed."

Joe did as asked, then settled on the sofa in the living/dining room with his laptop and worked on some notes for an Easter sermon. About a quarter hour later Angela came back.

"So, wife in waiting, when do you want to get married?"

"I wish it were yesterday," Angela said. "Then there'd be no worry about scandalizing your congregation."

"True. So sooner rather than later. I agree."

"But it will mean your folks will likely not be able to be here."

"I'm thinking we do a video link – it's popular now for funerals, and I've read about some couples using the technique for weddings. And I'll suggest we plan a holiday to Saskatchewan later in the year and have a party there."

"So what do we need to do, Joe? I mean if we want to marry soon."

"We need a license, then need to use it within 3 months. Oddly, the nearest place to here to get a license is, I think, the London Drugs at Tillicum. I don't think there's a single place that's strictly in the City of Victoria where you can get one. Odd that."

"Do you want to get married in your church?"

"Yes. It isn't very traditional looking, but it's where I've become a minister, or at least a version of a minister."

"Is that OK with you, Angela?"

"You're a great minister, Joe. Don't ever let anyone convince you otherwise."

"Well, we've only had a couple of weddings so far. We'll not have a problem finding a time slot."

"What about a minister?"

"Heidi Koschzeck over at Gordon United will no doubt be happy to oblige. Though in a couple of weeks Reverend Carmichael is coming to have a discussion with the church council and interested members after the service that Sunday. There'll be a lunch and round table that will finish about three. We could have a simple ceremony half an hour to an hour later and I'm pretty sure Carmichael would be honoured to officiate."

"That's not much time. But I guess we've said we don't want to wait."

"Would we have a reception?"

"Not much of a wedding without. I don't want fancy, but friendly. At a pinch, we could use the church space to avoid people having to move to another location. But that would require us to get liquor permits, I think."

"Some time ago we ran an event at the Six Mile Pub. That's not far away, and they have several different sized rooms. We could investigate if they have one the right size, so we need to work out who we'd invite to get the numbers."

"Angela. Write down a list. I'll do one too."

"But you know, I've read about couples having several receptions in different places to make sure different family members and friends get to celebrate with them. Sometimes the bride wears her wedding dress, sometimes not. One couple a parishioner mentioned had receptions in Tofino, where they actually had the formal marriage ceremony, then in San Francisco, Vancouver and Edmonton."

"Joe. It would take a lot of pressure off organizing if we just got married in a couple of weeks with receptions here and in – would it be Prince Albert? – later in the year."

"I'm fine with that, Angela. It would let us have the time to ensure we invite all the people important to us."

"We should still make those lists of people, or at least start them. Though for here I'm sure Barb and Mom will want to organize things, and they may think of people I may overlook. Some parents want to invite their friends to

somehow show off their offspring marrying, but I don't have concerns that way with Mom or Barb. But because I'm a decade younger than Barb there could be some people who I knew when quite young who I would like at a reception but have lost touch with."

"That makes sense, and is another reason not to rush the reception. I'd thought to ask my folks to invite who they'd like in PA anyway."

"Rush the reception' has an interesting sound to it," Angela laughed.

"Do we need to get a ring or rings?" Joe said.

"Actually, I've still got the rings Bob and I bought. Also the engagement ring. I thought of selling them, but never got around to it. We could use those rings, though the one for you may need to be resized."

"Can I see?" Joe asked.

"They're in my fire safe with my documents. I'll go get them."

It took Angela a few minutes to locate the key, get out the fire safe, open it and find the rings and her birth certificate.

"Does the wedding ring for you fit?" Joe asked.

"It did, but that was over six years ago. ... Yes. Look. Fits fine. Try the men's ring."

"Interesting. Fits fine also. Very helpful assuming we use it, and I've no objection unless you do."

"Should we go shopping tomorrow for an engagement ring for you? It is traditional that the man offers one to the woman."

"Actually, I chose the engagement ring, then Bob met me at the jeweller. Though he did insist on paying for it. So it's one I liked – still like, actually, but don't wear."

"I could pay you for it, so if anything happens you have the value of it."

"Joe. That seems a bit mercenary."

"I presume you know how much it cost."

"It wasn't particularly pricey. We paid \$1500."

"Can I suggest I give you that amount to put in your bank, just in case anything happens to me? You've already lost one fiancé. When we're married, it'll be part of our joint wealth unless we have a humungous quarrel. I can't see us not discussing any major expenditure."

"I suppose put that way it makes sense, though the possibility of anything happening to you gives me shivers."

"Do you want to wear it?"

"Yes Yes! Definitely." Angela gave him a kiss. This slid into a very long set of kisses, then Angela put on the ring. Joe took out his phone.

"Why are you fiddling with your phone?" Angela asked.

"Interac of \$1500 to your email. I assume your regular email is the one for your bank account."

"Oh. Yes, it's the email for e-transfers like that. This is all very quick."

"Yeah. It is a bit sudden, but it feels right being with you. Sharing things with you, and Julia. And Mix." The dog was lying quietly nearby.

"Yes. He sometimes seems to be pretending not to watch."

"Angela. Do you want to get a wedding dress?"

“Oh dear. I still have the one I got for What with the rings, and Julia, and if I use the dress, you’ll be Second Hand Joe, like the song Barbara Streisand made popular years ago. Second Hand Rose.”

“Show me the dress,” Joe said quietly.

“Make us a cup of tea while I dig it out. It’s in a garment bag with cedar chips.”

When Angela came back, Joe had the teapot steaming, a plate of chocolate chip cookies, and a small jug of milk.

“I don’t know how you take your tea yet,” he said.

“Splash of milk.”

“Oh. Me too. In future I’ll just put it in and save the fuss of the jug.”

Angela said “I don’t know if this dress’ll still fit me.”

“Try it on.”

“OK. I’ll just go in the bedroom. Oh. How silly, after ...”

“Artichokes!” Joe said, and they both laughed as Angela was taking off her slacks and top.

The dress was a little tight. It was quite plain in style, high neckline with a lace collar, short sleeves, and an A-line skirt to just above the ankle.

“Mom and Barb helped me choose it so it could be modified to be worn later as a regular outfit for formal or semi-formal occasions. Not that there’ve been any.”

“You know, I’ve no idea if you sew. Or knit. We’ve plenty of learning to do.”

“I guess, Joe, that because you work in Home Depot, I can anticipate you know something of practical guy stuff. That’s sort of important. Bobby was, of course, a construction worker. Actually no real intellectual interests. I like the ideas you bring out in your sermons. Thinking about good and evil, about the ... shades. Funny, I’ve not thought about them much today. Are they about?”

“Probably. I’ve not noticed either. It would be troubling if they were ever-present. Far too distracting.”

“To answer you about sewing, Joe. I’m not a great seamstress, but Mom had – has – a sewing machine and I’ve made a couple of simple skirts and one top – some of the fiddly bits were tricky. Things like darts to get the fit under the arms and so forth. This dress actually has plenty of extra material at the seams, so it can be let out a bit, which would be a good idea to fit me a bit better now.”

“Would a belt and some trim on the cuffs of the short sleeves, and maybe the skirt hem too, make it more generally suitable for different occasions?”

“Yes. And Julia would love it if that trim were in a light blue.”

“You know, Angela, I think it would look terrific like that.”

“Not many men would have such a style sense. We’ll look for some suitable ribbon.”

“Light blue velvet would be nice. And a buckle for the belt. Probably not a functional one, but to provide an accent. Actually, I think we’ve something that would make a nice buckle at work. For example, if I know the belt is 2 inches wide, I can make something that’ll fit that size so we can try it out.”

“Joe. You’re full of ideas. Is there time?”

“Let’s simply decide that there’s time. Where could we get, say, some velvet ribbon?”

“Fabricland, Michaels, maybe Walmart,” Angela said.

Joe picked up his laptop. After a minute, he said “I don’t find velvet ribbon at Fabricland, but Michaels has some 2 inch velvet ribbon even in light blue. They’ve a store in the Uptown Centre. We could go there tomorrow – Easter Saturday.”

“Pity that’s such a messy shopping centre. All higgledy piggledy.”

“Designed for cars, not people,” Joe responded.

“Still, we could get the ribbon and maybe a box of pins and see how the trim looks. Let me get a tape measure so we know how much ribbon we’ll need.”

Measuring showed that the length of ribbon was surprisingly longer than expected, as even each sleeve cuff would require nearly a foot.

“You know,” Joe said, “If I went home in the morning I could get my birth certificate and passport and meet you at Tillicum London Drugs and get the license. Then go to Uptown and get the ribbon. Maybe find somewhere we can all have lunch together. I can also take a brief trip to the Depot to see if the materials for the buckle are in stock still.”

“Are you going to tell me what it’ll look like?” Angela asked.

“Let me put together something first. If it doesn’t work, we can try something else.”

“I’ll phone Mom and Barb in the morning and enlist some sewing assistance. Probably think of something for Julia too. If the trim is blue, she’ll love that, and we can put some on whatever she wears.”

“She should be your bridesmaid.”

“I was thinking of Nancy, but perhaps you’re right. Nancy can still be the official witness. Who will you have for Best Man or witness, Joe?”

“Henry McIntyre was one of the first people to greet me when we started Holy Spirit. He used to work at Home Depot but now runs the Sooke Home Hardware. I did actually introduce you to him at one of the coffee sessions, but there were lots of greetings that day. I’ll email him right away.”

“Tallish, with a mustache?”

“Yes. Good memory.”

“He was the only one with a mustache,” Angela said. “I simply guessed.”

“While I’ve got the computer on I’ll email Carmichael too.”

“I’ll clear away while you do. Then check Julia and maybe we can get ready for bed.”

“Shower?” Joe asked.

“Sure!”

Joe had been truthful in that he hadn’t consciously noted the shades about. However, they had discreetly been observing. 41 said “Gamma, I get the distinct feeling you were suggesting things about the wedding dress to Joe.”

“Indeed. I’ve always been fascinated by clothes that look nice. However, I’m rather ... er ... un-nerved is the word I think ... when garments are overly

decorative or frilly. Don't let me be the judge of fancy garments for celebrations in India. Too much colour and decoration."

"Your Greek background, perhaps. If my understanding is correct, there was not a lot of colour or decoration in Greek clothing."

"True, 41. And really not a lot of style. You could say we weren't much for sewing."

"From paintings and sculptures, perhaps not much for clothing at all."

"As in many but not all periods, art can have a bias to particular images and subjects. And the weather in Greece is not forever sunny and warm."

"To change the subject, do you feel Angela and Joe are proceeding as they should, Gamma."

"They are moving quickly to marry, but I believe they are correct that their need to be together will cause at least minor scandal if they are not married. For themselves, I think the anxiety about scandal or gossip is pushing them forward. Though in their conversation tonight we saw how much they each must learn about the other."

"From my own life and marriage, I can, however, argue that the process of learning about each other can be very rewarding as long as there is tolerance and charity. They will discover differences, but if they are kind, those differences will become part of their shared love."

"It is encouraging to hear that from you, 41."

Easter Saturday morning

Joe woke around 7. The Lodge was quiet. Angela was sleeping on her side faced away from him, just a mop of hair above the covers on the pillow. He slipped out of bed and went to the bathroom, washed and shaved. As he was returning to the bedroom he saw Mix come out of Julia's room and go through to the kitchen. Guessing the reason, Joe followed and let him out to the yard. Then he went back to the bedroom and dressed in casual clothes.

"You're up!" Angela whispered, seeming surprised.

Joe kept his voice low too. "Want to get a bit of a start to get my documents and the buckle material in time to meet you and Julia. What time should we do so?"

"I'd say 10, but 10:30 or 11 is more sensible."

"Let's aim for 10, but text me if there's a problem. I'll do the same. There's a Starbuck's where we could meet so we're not chasing around looking for each other.

"By the way, I let Mix out just now."

"He'll probably want back in soon. Will you eat anything before you go?"

"I thought a couple of those hot cross buns I saw. They're the supermarket kind, but I like them toasted."

"Put on a kettle and I'll join you. I'll check if Julia's awake after I visit the bathroom."

This gentle domestic scene was the prelude to a day of some consequence, though nothing transpired that was either momentous or catastrophic. Julia woke as Angela checked on her, and all three people had one or more toasted buns and either instant coffee or milk. Joe then left around 7:30 by bike to take the bus to Langford, where he went immediately to Home Depot and purchased a piece of oak hobby board, nominally 1 inch by 3 inches by 4 feet, though actually of that length but only $\frac{3}{4}$ by $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches. He also purchased some 22 gauge brass wire. He picked up some 220 grit and 400 grit sandpaper for polishing. At his apartment he had a modest collection of tools and a Workmate folding bench. His plan was to make a buckle of polished oak decorated with the brass wire, then lacquered to maintain the shine.

It was 9:30 by the time he got to his apartment, so he texted Angela that he'd probably get to Tilicum about 10:30. She was obviously paying attention to her phone, as he got a thumbs up emoji in a return text.

In the apartment, Joe had a moment of panic when he couldn't find his documents. Then he remembered he'd put them in an envelope taped to the back of a drawer of the filing cabinet. He didn't have a chest of drawers. There were some shelves in the modest closet – 4 feet wide with $\frac{1}{3}$ of the width used for the shelves.

With the oak and wire stashed under the bed and the documents in his backpack, Joe headed out, this time on foot, for the bus.

At Tilicum

"Well met," Joe said, seeing Angela and Julia approaching the entrance to the London Drugs which had Starbucks on one side. "I just got here."

"So did we. Well, we had to ask where the Starbucks was. For some reason I had in my mind that it was on the other side of the building."

"Julia, would you like to share my coffee," Joe asked. "I'm going to have a latte – it has a lot of milk."

"Can I, Mommy?"

"If Joe's willing to share, then yes. But better make sure it's not too hot. And I'll have a small one too."

"In the ever-slippery world of marketing, they call that a Tall one. Find a place to sit if you can, else we'll have to go outside."

"Actually, Joe. Why don't we go and sort out the license, as I think there's a wait for it to be printed, so we could have coffee then?"

"Good idea. Julia, I hope you don't mind waiting."

"What's the license?" Julia asked.

"It's to give permission for your Mom and I to get married, and to make sure we're who we say we are. That's why I had to go to my apartment to get some documents."

"Mommy asked if I'll be her bridesmaid! I said YES!"

"And after we get the license, we'll go looking for some ribbon to decorate my dress and your dress too. I'll also see if I can get some white material for a

dress for you. Grandma says she'll help make it."

Getting the license was straightforward, but afterwards Starbuck's had a lineup to order, so our trio found the number 26 bus stop and made their way to the Uptown centre.

"It's nearly noon. Shall we eat then shop or shop then eat?" Joe asked.

"May be safest to eat first."

"How about sushi? There's a quite nice one I tried last year. They have bento boxes that are not too large. You and I can finish up if Julia leaves any."

"It's not something we've tried before. Julia. Shall we try the sushi?"

"What is it?" Julia asked.

Joe said "Food prepared in Japanese style. If we order what is called a Bento box, a sort of lunch box, we get a variety of small things. Some rice, some vegetables, some meat or fish. Possibly some soup too."

"I like a lunch box." Julia said.

Joe was careful to order three different bento boxes, and to ensure he got forks rather than chopsticks. Julia chose the tempura box and proceeded to empty it efficiently.

Angela said "That all disappeared. You must like it, Julia."

"It was nice. I like sushi."

In actuality, the box had no sushi, being tempura.

Joe and Angela had shared the gyoza and California boxes. Angela said "I've only had sushi once before. Those California rolls were nice, but not much food in each. I liked the dumplings – gyoza. Nice. We've only once offered anything like that at The Lodge. The caterers we've used haven't generally proposed anything Japanese. Nor Chinese or other asian for that matter, though we did once have one curry dish."

"I'm just really glad our restaurant critic was well-pleased," Joe said, and they all laughed, though Julia did not really understand the joke.

They found velvet ribbon in Michaels in a blue colour that Julia declared perfect. There was only 3 yards on a roll, so they bought 2 rolls of 2 inch and also 2 of 1 inch 'just in case'. Angela found a box of dressmaker pins suitable for trial attachment of the velvet ribbon.

"Joe. Should we go to Walmart to check if they're cheaper?" Angela asked.

"The prices here are not so high that we won't spend more in our time looking. Moreover, what if someone else likes blue velvet and it's gone when we come back?"

"You're right. That would be a bit of a disaster. Especially now we've got the license."

In Walmart they found some white silk-cotton material 55 inches wide. At that width, Angela thought a yard might be enough, but after some discussion, they bought 2 and a half yards, again on the 'just in case' principle. By the time the purchases were in Joe's backpack or Angela's unfolded shopping bag, it was clear Julia was starting to flag.

"Angela, if you can take the backpack as well as the shopping bag – or put the shopping bag in the backpack since we don't have a lot of stuff, I'll take Julia piggy-back if she'd like to ride."

“OK. Julia. Do you want to ride on Joe’s back?”
“Ride! Ride! Ride!”

Saturday evening

While Angela, Julia and Joe were on the bus Madeleine called to invite Angela and Julia to dinner and preliminary work on the dresses. When she learned Joe was with them, he was invited to dinner too. However, as he wanted to work on the buckle, as well as finish his sermon, it was decided that he’d head back by bus after a cup of tea and some discussion of any critical tasks for the next few days. Julia asked if she could watch a video with Mix after she’d let him out for a few minutes and given him some water. In the meanwhile, and Angela set up a video and the headphones. Joe made the tea.

“Your tea’s there.

“Oh. I mustn’t forget my laptop. In fact, I’ll check it now.”

“Joe. Where should we keep the license?”

“How about in your fire safe for now? I don’t have a good place for documents. This morning I had a bit of a panic until I remembered I’d taped an envelope to the back of a drawer of my little filing cabinet.”

“OK. I’ll put it away there in a few minutes, along with my documents. Do you what your birth certificate and passport there too?”

“Might as well. In two weeks, barring disaster, we’ll be official.

“Oh. Great news. Carmichael says he’ll be delighted to marry us. I’d better check our church events calendar in the morning and write in our wedding so we have the space and aren’t out on the street.”

“Maybe I’ll check my emails before I put documents and stuff away.”

“Did you send out some this morning too?”

“Yes. I asked Nancy if she, or she and Adrian would be able to come.

“She replied. And it’s a yes for them both. Good. And one here from Barb. She says Tony and Samantha can come, and that they’ll have Julia for the week following.”

Joe said “So far everything’s falling into place.”

“Yeah. Almost seems unreal. Though I’d better check the calendar for The Lodge. If we take any time off, I’ll need to pre-arrange security and also any catering.”

Joe took her in his arms for a hug, then a kiss.

“I’d better get going. Good luck with the sewing. How are you getting to your Mom’s?”

“I’m to give her a call when we’re ready and she’ll come get us. Or send Charlie.

“Oh. Don’t forget I’ve guests here at The Lodge tomorrow night, and I’m anticipating Mom and I will be sewing for at least part of the day. In fact, I’m going to take an overnight bag for Julia and I for tonight, and plan to be back here early Sunday afternoon. We’ll miss the Easter service, unfortunately.”

“My feeling is that Christmas and Easter make for poor sermons because there are too many traditions and expectations. The services too are victims of the same issue and end up ... er .. predestined. So I doubt you’ll miss anything ... fresh. I’ll call Monday night when I get in. I’ve an afternoon to closing shift.”

Monday night call

“Hi Joe. How’re things?”

“Good, but I’m pretty tired. Easter is always a bit hectic, though perhaps less for me than if I were a Catholic priest.

“How about you?”

“Pretty busy. We got the ribbon on my dress but not sewed the belt on. We tacked on some velcro tabs to hold the belt in place, and provided some hooks over the zipper at the back.”

“That’ll make the buckle easier to put on. I was going to make a sort of fastener, but will just leave some vertical bars that the belt goes over top of when you thread it through. Or we could put velcro tabs on it too, though I don’t think that would look as good.”

“When can you bring it over?”

“Let’s try for Wednesday evening. I’ve a Council meeting at 6:30, so I’ll probably be latish. Maybe around 9. We’ve got to prepare for the meeting the Sunday after next when we’re getting married about becoming a covenant church, though I think that’s pretty well in order. George has been very helpful in keeping the discussion on track.”

“Barb did well. And I’m thinking I’m doing well too in my choice of partner.”

“I think I’m going to do well too,” Joe said. “Will you be able to get away for a few days the week after next. I hesitate to say honeymoon. I thought we might rent a car and go up-island for at least a couple of days. Drive over to Tofino maybe.”

“I emailed Michael Watson that we were getting married that Sunday and asked if he wanted me to make any special arrangements, but he had already run into Adrian, who was asking if he could have a few days off so he could spend some time with Nancy. When he read my email, he talked to Adrian, then phoned me to say that Adrian is going to stay in The Lodge for the week to cover security and any communications or urgent matters. However, there’s a dinner meeting on the Thursday night. I said that I would take care of it, either personally or by getting the manager of the caterers we like. However, I’m guessing we could easily be home early afternoon Thursday, which would be time for me to handle things that I haven’t organized in advance this week.”

“Better make sure we pack the Bargain Bonk items,” Joe said laughingly.

“Not necessary. I’d made an appointment with my GP for today, as she decided to take some appointments this afternoon. And my period started yesterday, which means I can take the pills she’s prescribed and they are supposed

to be effective right away unless I get sick, like with vomiting or diarrhoea. So I guess we will want them along, just in case.”

“Did the doc have anything else to say?”

“Well, she did do a fairly thorough examination, including the dreaded pelvic poke, as I call it. Then congratulated me, asked about who I was marrying and said she’d heard good things about you from some patients, so she congratulated me again. Almost forgot to give me the prescription, which I got filled right away, discovering that it’s now free. Ta Da! I’d not noticed that change a couple of years ago in BC Pharmacare.”

“Things seem to be falling into place. I almost am looking over my shoulder to see what the shades are up to.”

“Julia’s not mentioned them lately. Nor have you until now,” Angela noted.

“I’ve not sensed anything in particular.”

Gamma and 41 were, in fact, watching from a distance.

“Gamma. As far as I am aware, no spirits have been trying to influence events in the last few days. The last attempt was your prompting Joe about the trim on Angela’s dress, as far as I know.”

“You are correct, 41. Things are happening because Joe and Angela have a large bank of goodwill credits among their family, friends and associates. Moreover, they have been very flexible in making arrangements to get married, and in other aspects of life. All of the results are pragmatic and, in the scheme of the world, very modest.”

“In other words, Gamma, human lives can proceed happily – or not – without spirit influence.”

“Obviously, 41. We’ve done nothing, and seen no other spirits involved. Yet Joe and Angela’s lives are evolving in directions they both want.”

“Books, movies and TV shows want the dramatic. Where people – the very special *et in terra pax hominibus bonæ voluntatis* – are considered too boring to include.

“Gamma. You already existed at the time of Christ. Were you aware of his life, his passion, and his death and resurrection?”

“Aware. Yes. But not fully conscious of the import. The Christian religions, of course, have Christ as one member of the Holy Trinity. Muslims describe him as the Messiah, born of virgin Mary. It all gets very confusing, even for those of us who have floated around for a couple of millenia.”

“Can all the stories be true in their own way?”

“I wouldn’t go that far, 41. But the stories in many religions could be taken as alternate viewpoints of the same eternal conflict of good and evil. There are some exceptions, of course, where the scriptures contradict each other, sadly due to malicious corruption or stupid mistakes of translation or transcription, compounded by left-to-right Latin and associated languages versus right-to-left Hebrew and Arabic. And lots of forced impositions of words where there is no precise translation.”

“Gamma. Does indigenous spirituality conflict with those views?”

“In places. And it is always a surprise to me that we see only a few ghosts of our kind locally who in life were members of those communities, now called First

Nations. Of course, the kingdoms mentioned in the Old Testament were often much smaller in size and possibly comprised fewer people than our American tribal nations.”

“I have much to learn still.”

“Actually, 41, it has been decided that you have learnt very well. You have been assigned a recent recruit to train in a locale in Glasgow, Scotland. She awaits you there.”

“A pity, Gamma. I have very much enjoyed our conversations. I wonder how we would have fared in human life had we met as a man and a woman of similar age.”

“A topic that could provide entertaining contemplation for several centuries, 41. I, too, have valued highly these exchanges, and our efforts to enlarge the good in some lives. Go in peace and grace.”

“You also, Gamma.”