



AUGUST # 7—Babysitting Noel with Sandy

Visuals: photographs of Lumberman's Arch Water Park, nearby waterfront, mermaid sculpture, and view from British Properties

When Sandy and I talked on the phone, he told me couldn't see me over the weekend because he would be looking after his nephew Noel while his brother and sister-in-law and his parents are in Whistler. I pressed to get together anyway telling him I could help him with Noel.

"Is Noel the youngest of your three nephews?"

"Yes. Good memory. He's two."

"If you take Noel to the water park at Lumberman's Arch in Stanley Park, I can meet you both there at whatever time you say."

"I haven't thought of looking after Noel together, but I'd like to, if you don't mind spending your free day with a small child."

"A small child and you," I reminded him. "If we have time, we could also take Noel to the Petting Zoo or go on the miniature train there."

"Wow. Then would you come back to the house and have supper with us?"

"I'd love to."

"Okay then. Bring your flute. We might need to serenade Noel to get him to sleep."

When we met at the water park, Noel was having a great time splashing around. Sandy had his shirt tied around his waist and was in knee-length shorts with bare feet, responding

to Noel's requests to have the waterspouts activated for him. I liked seeing Sandy without a shirt again. Fit, but not muscular.

"This one, Uncle Sandford, this one!" (Actually it sounds more like Thamford than Sandford when Noel says it.)

"Just a minute then."

Sandy directed the water at Noel; he shrieked delightedly.

"Now I need to rest awhile, Noel. Try this instead."

Sandy lifted Noel onto a simple horse-shape apparatus supported on large bouncy springs. Noel proceeded to activate this "horse" rocking back and forth and up and down.



Draping his shirt over one shoulder, Sandy walked toward me and he gave me a quick kiss on the cheek.

"Hi, Uncle Thamford," I mimicked. "How are you?"

"Pretty much exhausted already. Thanks for coming. I can use the support as well as some adult company."

He sat beside me on a waist-high stonewall and put on his shirt doing up a couple of buttons.

"So he calls you Sandford too?"

"Yeah, difficult as it is for him. He gets that from his dad."

"Whereas the women in your life...."

"Not just...."

"But for your father...."

"To him I've always been Sandford."

"Does your dad mind that your mom calls you Sandy?"

"No. Not at all. Sandford is Mom's maiden name. I have never felt any concern between them over what they call me."

"Did I ever tell you about my name?"

"Your name?"

"About how my parents had agreed, before I was born, to call me Erika, after mom's best friend in London when she went to university there."

"Oh, I do remember being struck, when I first met you, that Erika is not a common Japanese name, is it?"

"You're right. Which is why my dad, at the last moment, without consulting my mom, decided to spell my name as Erico on my birth certificate, as that is a common Japanese name."

"Your mom objected to changing what they'd agreed on?"

"Absolutely. She was furious. In fact she has never forgiven him for this, which is why she calls me Erika, as do my sisters."

"So your name is a source of divisiveness in the family...."

"Yes. To my mother, 'Erika' is a reminder of how much she changed during her time in England. She hopes my name is for me, as it is for her, a reminder to remain responsible for my own/her own development and to challenge unthinking tradition, as she learned to do during her time in the UK."

"And your father?"

"Well, Dad, who has never spent any time outside of Asia, does not want to be reminded of how 'westernized' Mom became, how she turned into something other than an accommodating, conventional Japanese woman."

"Wow. So your name is something of a battleground between them."

"Yes, that's why I prefer Erika. I also don't want to be the Japanese woman Dad hoped my mom would return to being."

"Well, then I'm glad to call you Erika too."

"By the time Mom returned from England, she had even decided against marrying my dad, but the families did convince them to wed, as they had been dating in high school."

At that moment, Sandy jumped up to rescue Noel who looked like he was about to fall off the horse in trying to get off.

When I could see that Noel was demanding more of Sandy's attention, I told Sandy I would go and photograph the mermaid sculpture within sight of the water park.

"Good idea. Since it is such a low tide, you will be able to get closer than usual and even see it from the back. And while you are doing that, I will try to get Noel ready to go home."



Because Noel hadn't wanted to leave the water park, there was no time to do any of the other activities that I had mentioned to Sandy on the phone. As it was, Noel cried when Sandy tried to convince him that we had to leave.

In anticipating Noel's reluctance, Sandy had brought Noel's favourite teddy bear, which he brought out of his backpack to comfort Noel as he changed him into dry shorts and a shirt. Rather than struggling to get Noel into his shoes, Sandy carried him on his shoulders back to the car, which Noel, teddy bear, and Sandy all seemed to enjoy.



When we got to the house Sandy went out onto the deck to start the barbecue that was already set up. Then in the kitchen we made Noel macaroni dinner with wieners. Noel is a picky eater as Sandy had been as a kid. We agreed to keep the "menu" a secret.

Both Sandy and Noel had a spoon each, so they made quite a mess, especially as Noel smeared sauce on the tabletop with his free hand. But the fact that Sandy got Noel to eat anything at all was apparently was an achievement.

After Noel made it clear that he was finished eating (threw his spoon on the floor), Sandy and I decided to give him a bath. Kneeling on the bathroom floor together, I guided Noel's tugboat, plastic barge, and yellow duck around in the tub to keep Noel entertained while Sandy washed him. We then "helped" him into his pyjamas.

We put Noel into bed in the room that originally had belonged to Grant, his dad. Then we read him his favourite bedtime story, not one that we would have chosen.

I lay on one side of Noel and took on the female talking roles including that of the witch and the fairy princess. Sandy,

on the other side of him, spoke the parts of the villain (low voice with a thick accent) and the prince (high voice sounding somewhat gay). I had to suppress giggles. After Noel's eyelids fluttered into sleep, we left quietly and shut the door behind us.

"Wow, looking after a little kid can be exhausting," Sandy admitted as we headed for the kitchen.

"But this is not your first experience of looking after Noel, is it?"

"No, not my first. Several times I've had him on my own for most of a day, as his parents have been out here for various work-related events."

"What about your mom?"

"Oh, she loves every moment she spends with him, reliving some of the time she had with us three boys. But maybe she thinks it provides good insight for me to be with him, as she comes up with some pretty thin excuses that ensure that I am the one looking after him."

"More of your mom's attempt at training to make you so nicely domesticated."

"Maybe so," he smiled.

We cleaned up Noel's mess and then started making dinner for ourselves— shish kebabs and pasta salad. Sandy admitted that Lynn, his sister-in-law, had made the salad the previous evening while he cut up the vegetables and meat.

I stood at the fridge bringing out bowls of precut items on Sandy's request. The process sounded something like this: "Beef." "Check." "Tomatoes." "Check." "Red peppers." "Check." "Cauliflower." "Check." "Broccoli." "Check." "And anything else in a similar bowl." "More meat?" "Oh, yes. The lamb."

Standing beside Sandy and being domestic together, I was again feeling close to him. But I was also remembering our awkward first attempted kiss at the fridge. Obviously Sandy was thinking of this too. He smiled, took a bowl from my hands, and set it aside. Then we indulged in an unhurried, uninterrupted kiss leaning against the counter.

As we drew apart, with a smile, he asked "Better?"

"Yes, definitely better."

Sandy wheeled the trolley of food out onto the deck beside the brick barbecue and adjusted the coals. We arranged the ingredients around the sides of the barbecue and put some of the vegetables and meat on the skewers. We set the table. Soon the shish kebabs started to sizzle on the grill. We continued to make up all the shish kebabs we could, rather than having uncooked vegetables and meat left over.

"Did you say that Grant and Lynn are here for a conference?"

"Yes, an engineering conference at UBC this week."

"Are they both engineers?"

"Yes. They have their own small engineering firm."

"What kind?"

"Planning secondary roads to highways, overpasses, projects like that."

"Really? How did they meet?"

"At university."

"So they've known each other a long time."

"Fairly long. They married relatively young, in their early-twenties but, because of their business, they held off starting a family."

"Would they like to have another child?"

"If they can."

"And are they committed to staying in Toronto?"

"Yes, I think so. Lynn's family is all there. And so are my other brother and his family."

Sandy laughed. "Enough questions, Erika?"

"Yes, for now." I smiled too but added, "It's just that it's fascinating to me that they have a business together."

"Yes, but so does your sister."

"Oh, right. I need to see Yoko and Andrew working together."

"You mean to make their bond and their work seem more real to you."

"Exactly."

"But there are also my parents. They're both involved in the studio, even if they do not have two equal positions."

"Wow, I hadn't thought of them either."

"Hopefully couples working together will become more common. Especially for those who might otherwise feel so pressed by the demands of their work that..."

"It would be difficult for them to find personal time for each other."

"Exactly and..."

This conversation was interrupted as Sandy rushed into the house to answer the telephone so Noel wouldn't be disturbed.

Returning, he said, "Just Lynn checking to see if we've managed to get Noel to sleep. She's amazed. Noel hasn't had to settle down very often without one of them being with him."

"And he's in a new environment..."

"Yes, that could be disturbing for him too. Anyway, Lynn's very relieved."

After a few minutes of eating shish kebabs and pasta we got up and carried some food and dishes inside before returning to the deck to start the strawberries. Sitting there relaxing with

some chai tea, we were surprised when Noel silently appeared at the deck door in his sleepers.

"Uncle Thamford, I need my teddy bear."

"Okay. Let me help you find him."

Sandy went back inside with Noel. I gathered up dishes and remaining leftovers and took them back into the kitchen. I could hear the murmur of Sandy talking to Noel in the bedroom, so I loaded the dishwasher before I returned to the deck.

When Sandy joined me there, I asked, "Is he okay?"

"Seems to be. He's gone back to sleep."

"So, you found his teddy bear?"

"Yes. Just under the side of the bed. I don't think he has ever gone to sleep without him. He should be settled now."

Sandy finished eating his strawberries and started to pour more tea but asked, "Or would you prefer some wine?"

"No, thank you. I like the taste of wine but if I drink more than half a glass I get a headache."

"So you have a built in control system...."

"Exactly."

Despite the still warm evening air, Sandy said, "Shall we go in and see if we can make some music together?"

For an instant I was confused until he added, "Did you bring your flute in from the car?"

"Yes, I have it in my bag. Will it bother Noel?"

"No, I don't think so. Grant and Lynn have classical music on at home much of the time."

We gathered up the rest of the dishes, took them in with us to the dishwasher, and pressed the "on" button to hear the reassuring, quiet hum of the machine.

Then we went into the still-sunlit living room and sat at the piano. Sandy looked through some sheet music. Classical music.

"Could we try this? We listened to this on a CD the first time you came here, and you said you like it."

"Well, I'm out of practice, but I used to play this Chopin Nocturne."

"Well, that makes two of us then. Admitting you have a classical background and saying you like it made me think you have probably played it."

"Good guess."

We started off tentatively and after a couple of real blunders we realized how bad we sounded and we stopped and laughed and started again and then laughed some more.

Finally Sandy said, "Getting better. Now, how 'bout trying to pick up the tempo just a bit."

"Okay."

We went through this piece a couple of times starting in a faltering way but carrying on until we were able to play it fairly

smoothly. I realized how absorbed we had become when, totally unexpectedly, the front door opened. We hadn't heard the car drive into the carport. It seems that in hearing Sandy and I playing together, Sandy's parents were as surprised as we were in seeing them enter.

Sandy's dad just said, "Now, that's what we like to hear. Don't let us interrupt you."

So we returned to the beginning of the piece and went through it until we finished it. By the end we were sounding pretty good. I could tell his mom and dad were pleased to hear Sandy playing classical music again.

"Isn't that a piece you played in your very last competition, Sandy?" Robyn asked. "In a group of Chopin Nocturnes?"

"Yes, it is, but a judge would sure never know it now."

"You played in competitions?"

"Only with a very talented violinist, who is daughter of Simon and Sue, Mom and Dad's best friends."

"And why did you stop competing?"

"She left to study in the States. In her absence I realized I didn't like playing alone. That's when I got involved with band."

"Maybe we can practise together some other times," I suggested.

"Yes, I'd like that, if we could learn to play together."

In hearing this and realizing that Grant and his wife were at the entrance, Sandy's parents turned away to talk to them. Apparently Grant and his wife had been moving some of their belongings to the trunk of Sandy's car.

His mom said to them, "You've just missed some very promising classical piano and flute."

"Really? Classical," Grant commented, seeming to be pleased.

Hadn't Sandy played classical pieces around his family for a while? I guess not, otherwise this would not seem so notable.

Sandy and I set aside the music, as there were introductions to be made.

"Erika, these are Noel's parents, Lynn, my sister-in-law, and Grant, my brother."

"Hello, Lynn. Grant."

I noted that Grant doesn't resemble Sandy, but rather is a slightly taller and thinner version of their dad, except that he looks convincingly like someone who would be interested in technical things. Or is this just his glasses that suggest this?

Lynn has soft, fluffy hair, slightly lighter than Sandy's, and she was wearing a tasteful cream blouse and sweater with beige pants. I would not have guessed her to be an engineer.

"So glad to meet you."

Sandy's Mom said, "It was wonderful that you could keep Noel and Sandy company today, Erika."

"Oh. It was fun."

"How did you make out with him, Godfather?" Grant asked.

Sandy said, "We had trouble getting him away from the water park but, except for that, all went well."

"You took him to a water park?!" Lynn exclaimed.

"That was Erika's suggestion."

"What a nice idea!"

"He did enjoy it."

"Could you get him to eat any supper?"

"A little."

"So what did you feed him, Sandford?" Grant said, laughing. "Kraft dinner?"

Sandy paused a moment wondering whether he needed to admit this.

"Why would you suggest this?"

"Well, that was all you would eat as a kid."

"With wieners?" his mom smiled quizzically.

"So you gave him wieners too?" Lynn laughed.

Somewhat embarrassed, Sandy laughed with the rest of them without actually admitting to anything.

"So are the two of you up for next weekend?" Grant asked.

"Grant, that's not fair to include Erika in that question. You know I said I would look after Noel next weekend."

"It's okay, Sandy, I'd love to do something with you and Noel again."

The phone rang. It was apparent from overhearing Grant's part of the conversation that it was someone who they would be driving to UBC tonight.

Grant paused and yelled from the open kitchen door, "Sandford, what time will we be picking them up?"

"We can leave as soon as you are ready and it shouldn't take much more than twenty minutes to reach them."

Grant and Lynn went downstairs to get the rest of their luggage for their stay in a dorm at UBC while attending the conference. To wait for them, Sandy and I went out and leaned on the balcony railing looking at the sunset over the city and west toward Vancouver Island.

Sandy started to say something, but my curiosity needed an immediate answer.

"So are you Noel's Godfather?"

"Yeah."

"That's so nice."

"Yes. I admit I like the idea. The recognized role."

But Sandy returned to what he had intended to say,
"What about our agreement that you not make plans around some guy?"

"What about two guys," I laughed, "even if one is little?"

"I don't want you to let my family lead you into something before you have a chance to consider what else you might be doing next weekend."

"Sandy, I want us to do things together and not just dates."

"But we've never even been on a date," he commented quietly, with something like the sound of regret.

"Yes, we have."

"We have?" he brightened.

"Yes, dinners at the Thai restaurant and in Victoria."

"They count?"

"Of course."

"Well, I'm glad because they should come first."

"Anyway, relax, Sandy. Your family can see better than you can that I want to spend time with you."

I mentioned the Lynn Valley Suspension Bridge and the Jazz Festival that my friends planned to attend next weekend, and we discussed ways that we could work around those events or attend them together.

"So we are packed," Lynn said, coming out on the deck and casually putting her arm across Sandy's shoulders as he leaned over the railing. Her gesture surprised me a little as it seemed so loving yet taken for granted by both of them.

"What a gorgeous view. I'm afraid if we lived here now I'd spend most of my day just looking out over the city."

"Did you and Grant live here?"

"Yes, in the suite downstairs where the view isn't quite this spectacular, as you look out from under the overhang of this deck. Also I appreciate this view more now because we don't have anything like this in Toronto."

"Did you live here when you were students?"

"Yes. During our last two years of engineering at UBC."

"And did your older brother live here then too, Sandy?"

"No, Lauren had already left home."

Lynn added, "So it was just Grant and me and baby Sandy." She reached to ruffle Sandy's hair.

Laughing and deflecting her hand, Sandy responded,
"Lynn, I was at least thirteen or fourteen years old."

"You were so cute."

"Lynn likes to think she is my big sister," Sandy explained.

"And advisor as needed," she added.

I would have liked to hear about this role, but Grant came out onto the deck. We all turned toward him. Putting his arm around Lynn's waist he said, "I think we should be going, Babe."

I had enjoyed seeing Sandy and Lynn interact, but I wished he and I could be driving alone to my place. Instead the four of us were in the car. They were to drop me off before picking up Grant and Lynn's two colleagues.

When we stopped in front of the apartment, Sandy walked with me to the door. I knew Lynn and Grant could see us, yet Sandy put his arm around my shoulder and kissed me warmly.

"I really do hope we can play some more classical music together," he said.

"Well, we will then."

"I've neglected that for such a long time now. I didn't know I'd been missing that until playing with you."

"And I'd love us to play together. You can keep me from getting rusty."

Sandy smiled in hearing me use that word that he had recently taught me.

"Thanks for helping me with Noel. It's been a special day."

"Yes, it has, UncleThambordGodfatherBabySandy."

Sandy started to object but then just laughed with me.





AUGUST # 8—Hiking in Lynn Canyon

Visuals: photographs of Lynn Canyon area

An interesting day of integrating Sandy with my classmates....

After some discussion, our group decided to go to Lynn Canyon Suspension Bridge rather than Capilano Suspension Bridge. Lynn Canyon is free and natural whereas Capilano is quite expensive and is rather commercialized. We planned to have a picnic lunch in the Canyon and hike around. Later Sandy would meet us at the entrance and join us all for an early supper.

To get to the Canyon, Daniel drove Song, Sumi, Bae, and Nicole in the car of his homestay brother. Fernando apparently had a prior commitment and Noboru had decided not join us for the day. Claudia later confirmed my suspicion saying that Noboru might have declined participating in order to avoid seeing Sandy and I together.

Claudia and I travelled to Lynn Valley by bus and then Daniel met us and drove us to the canyon where we rejoined the rest of the group. The route had sounded difficult but it actually wasn't. Still everyone was delighted when we all met up at the picnic tables by the sign, just beyond the parking lot.



We headed toward the surprisingly narrow, sagging suspension bridge. I was surprised at how nervous I was crossing the wooden slatted bridge, mainly because it swings and the railings formed by the upper support cables are low (below my waist). Also the river, so far below, swirls with white rapids churning through cliffs. It was beyond me to stand to one side on the narrow drooping cable bridge in order to look below to take photos. All I could do was hold my hand over the railing and point my camera downward.



Still, crossing it was worthwhile, as it was wonderful walking around on the other side in the deep forest, climbing over bare rock formations and protruding roots, and going down trails with soft earth underfoot. The appearance of occasional burnt stumps suggests past lightening strikes or forest fires while downed tree trunks with huge, upturned roots provide ancient evidence of former windstorms.

I was amazed that the water, so far below, looked crystal clear. One sign close to a dramatic, sheer cliff stated: "Do not to go beyond this fence. This area has already claimed several lives."

We followed the path downward and eventually arrived on a flat area at the side of the river. There were turquoise-green pools in cool solid rock. One place was called Thirty-Foot Pool suggesting the depth of the water.

Beyond this there was also a high, winding stairway above the river. Of course Bae thought we should climb that, which we did, with a couple of stops part way up to catch our breath. From the top there is an even better view overlooking the pools.

After resting there, we descended to the river again to eat our lunch. We chose to sit on a large rock formation where the water was rushing down through cliffs on one side of us and on the other side, it gathered in clear, light pools.

Bae purposely scared us by jumping, with his long legs, from one rock to another. Song and Sumi stayed pretty close to Daniel, while Claudia and Nicole and I sat together breathing in the cool air produced by the swirling water. Some of us walked around the safe areas and took photographs. Eventually we all realized we needed to pack up our things and start back.



I wasn't looking forward to crossing the bridge again, especially if there was anyone else coming the other way or wanted to pass on the narrow, wooden slats over the metal-grid surface. So I took the lead to set my own pace and not be held up by someone ahead of me purposely shaking the bridge.

Eventually I was on firm ground on the other side and was able look back and watch the others make their way across, some swaying the bridge and making a scene, laughing.

When we were all on the other side, we walked back through the forest toward the treed parking area.

I was excited to see Sandy again, standing with Noel in his arms, smiling and resting against his car. I am so glad that Sandy is punctual and dependable. So much to like about him! I leaned against Sandy in hugging him and Noel, and Sandy kissed me.

In heading off to the White Spot restaurant, Song drove with Daniel along with Sumi and Bae. Claudia and Nicole came with Sandy, Noel, and me. I was somewhat on alert having Nicole with us in Sandy's car, but she didn't say anything that embarrassed me.

Both cars arrived at the restaurant at approximately the same time. Noel had fallen asleep, so we got him inside the restaurant and into a highchair before he was fully awake. We ordered him a Pirate Pack and when it arrived at the table, he was so pleased with the boat-shape packaging that he was even

willing to eat some of the miniature hamburger, chips, juice, and ice cream thanks to Nicole's encouragement.

She made up stories around each character pictured on the Pirate Pack.

"This pirate will only eat meat, no chips for him, only hamburger, hamburger, hamburger! Umm, yum."

Noel, somewhat taken aback opened his mouth for the small hamburger pieces that she offered him on the fork, and then he chewed and swallowed, still responding as if he didn't know what was happening.

Then it was the same with the chips.

"This pirate eats only chips. Yep. Only chips. Chips with ketchup and more chips"....

Then Nicole picked up the glass of juice and offered it to Noel.

"And this pirate has been fighting off other pirates all day, keeping them from taking over the ship, so he is thirsty, thirsty. Boy, does he want juice...."

I think Sandy was actually fascinated by Nicole's approach. Picky eater that Noel is, he was eating a lot more than he otherwise would without Nicole's help.

When there was a natural calm in the conversation, Sandy commented, "So I never did hear about the suspension bridge adventure. How did that go?"

"Pretty scary," Bae said.

"Really?"

"Yeah, especially when Sumi and Song were cutting up and making the bridge sway and bounce," Bae said.

"Cutting up?" Sumi commented. "We weren't cutting up! You were!"

Bae then retracted saying, "It just sways on its own."

"That's definitely not true," Song stated. "You were doing it on purpose to make Sumi and me nervous."

"It's so pretty walking around in the trails on the other side," Claudia commented. "And the air smells so fresh."

"Several people have died in that canyon," Sandy said.

Daniel joined in saying, "My homestay mother said that a few years ago a small child dropped over the railing and the child lived—or was that from Capilano Suspension Bridge?"

"That was Capilano," Sandy said, "I remember hearing about the incident and people questioning if the baby was dropped accidentally or not."

"How awful!" declared Claudia.

"Apparently the baby's fall was softened by hitting the branches of the trees on the way down," Sandy stated.

Daniel said, "And a lot of people have died in both rivers."

"True, both Lynn Canyon and Capilano are dangerous and deceptive. Parts of the rivers look so calm on the surface even where they have significant undercurrents," Sandy added.

"So, Noel, you should stick to water parks," Nicole said to him. "I hear you liked the water park," she commented as she fed Noel the last bite of ice cream.

With his mouth full, Noel banged his spoon enthusiastically against the sticky tray of the highchair. When Noel finished eating, Sandy sat him on his knee, cleaned his hands with a wet wipe, cleared a spot in front of them, and gave Noel crayons and paper so he could draw.

When the conversation split into sections at the table, Claudia started talking to Sandy and me about the potential of doing an MBA in Vancouver. She asked what Sandy knew about UBC's program and admitted her contacts in Taiwan were trying to convince her that she should instead attend a branch of a US business college in Richmond.

"I didn't know you were planning to stay in the Vancouver area that much longer," I said somewhat surprised.

"My uncles have recently been giving me new advice. They think an MBA would be a good idea if I'm going to start my own school when I return to Taiwan permanently."

"Would there be any problem getting a visa to do that here?" Sandy asked.

"No. I became a landed immigrant last year."

"Claudia, I didn't know that!"

"Yes, actually I had applied before I came to study in Vancouver the first time. But my time here was cut short when my mother's health failed and I had to return to Taiwan."

"So you have that option of staying without making a lot of arrangements. You're so lucky!" I said enviously.

"Yes, it should help everything go a lot smoother."

"When would you start the program?"

"Well, if I decide on the private college I could start in January. That would be one of the advantages, since UBC only starts in September, and I wouldn't be able to get arrangements made in time for this coming September—actually for either institution."

"I certainly hope you are not leaving that soon!" I said.

"Ah, thank you. But if I am going to start a year from this September, I will go back to Taiwan to get some things underway for the school. Like finding a location and engaging staff."

"I don't like to think about how different our lives could be a year from now," I commented, already imaging how I could be missing Sandy.

"I know. That's why we have to live the present thoroughly. Speaking of...are you coming to the jazz festival at Granville Island tomorrow?" Claudia asked.

"Yes, we hope to," I said.

"We will have Noel with us again, if that is okay," Sandy added.

"Of course. What about meeting at the Kid's Own Market at noon?"

"Oh, Noel would be begging us to buy him something," Sandy commented.

"That's okay," I said. "It would be fun trying to select something with him."

"Some of the others have specific nieces and nephews to get gifts for, whereas I really want to look at the range of educational toys. To see what might be good to have at the school."

"What ages will the kids be at your school?" Sandy asked.

"From six to eight."

"Primary."

"Yes. To start with at any rate, although if there are opportunities to expand later, we will retain the older children."

In the process of completing this conversation, the others had declined dessert on behalf of all of us and were gathering up their things to get ready to leave.

"So who are we driving back to the bus at Phibbs Exchange and who is coming with us toward Lynn Valley?" Daniel asked as we all headed toward the door.

"That goes for us as well. We can take two to Phibbs Exchange or drop off someone off on our way through to West Van," Sandy said.

"So you're not going back to the city now?" Claudia asked casually as we got back outside in the cool air.

"No. Sorry we're not," Sandy commented. "We'll drive over in the morning. We are staying on this side tonight."

I noticed that Nicole took note of this and smiled sheepishly at me. I tried not to look too pleased or encourage any further expression. Luckily Sandy was leaning over putting on Noel's sweater so he didn't see Nicole's revealing look. Trust Nicole, I was thinking, even though I had been so pleased with her magic in getting Noel to eat in the restaurant.

When we arrived at the house, Sandy, carrying Noel and the teddy bear, said to me, "Mom has made the bed up for you in the guest room if you want to put your things in there."

I went in and put my daypack down and used the adjoining bathroom.

As I came out the door, Sandy called out, "We're in here, Erika, in Grant's room.

As I walked past the open door of Sandy's room, I glanced in. I love his room. It says so much about him with its drafting table, rough drawings tacked up, and architectural books strewn around. I was struck by the sight of a hardhat on his bed with his guitar leaning against it.

Getting to Grant's bedroom door, I said, "I see you have a hardhat."

"Yeah, for visiting construction sites."

"A hardhat and a guitar. I guess they're not as incongruous as they appear."

"Just the two sides of my personality."

We put Noel to bed using pretty much the same routine as we had the previous weekend—including the same storybook. Noel had insisted. When he seemed to be asleep, we went back out onto the deck.

Appreciating the view, we each slowly drank a very small amount of wine.

Sandy said, "You know, you've never explained to me how you got interested in architecture."

"Well.... My mother has always been interested in beautiful houses. She subscribed to model house magazines for years. She used to plan and re-plan her ideal house and draw floor plans of it. I was fascinated in watching her draw, seeing her figure out something with pencil and paper."

"I remember feeling the same way. Watching my dad."

"Have I told you about the business my mom has with her brother?"

"Not much."

"Well, it's a retail and distribution business that sells mobility aids. Wheel chairs, scooters, special bathroom equipment, things to help people live independent lives when they have a physical disability."

"Really. And your dad's not in the same business?"

"No, he's never been part of it. He's manager of a large electronics company and he travels throughout Asia. So Mom actually spends a lot more time with her brother than she does with Dad."

"That's interesting."

"Anyway, when their business needed a larger warehouse, rather than leasing one, they decided to build a new building that would also house the retail outlet and office all together. Mom did the initial plans for it."

"That makes sense. She would know, better than anyone, exactly what the business needs."

"Yes, for sure. What it needs in terms of retail and office space, storage, and image."

"And how far did she take that?"

"An architect took over after she came up with the basic design, the look, and all the floor plans. I thought that was unfortunate, that she couldn't design all of it by herself and get the satisfaction of doing so—and the credit. Meanwhile, she and I discussed all the plans. That's when I decided to become an architect even though it means extending my education."

"How long have you now been in the new building?"

"About a year."

"Amazing. Hey, it's getting cool out," he said, touching my bare arm. "If we are going to stay outside we should put on sweaters."

"Good idea."

After crossing the living room and pulling a sweater over his head, Sandy asked, "So are you ready for your next lettering lesson?"

This suggestion was unexpected.

"All right, but if I'd known, I wouldn't have had that wine," I said, taking a sweater out of my daypack.

"It will keep you loosened up," he smiled.

So we did lettering on the table on the deck again. After penciling in light horizontal rules, Sandy instructed me on lettering blocks of solid text.

"Make down strokes thin, horizontal strokes angled up and thicker. Keep the pencil sharp to maintain the thick-thin difference...."

When it began to get dark, we moved inside.

"So shall we review some more architectural history?" he asked as Sandy closed the door to the deck.

I almost laughed because I felt exhausted and assumed he would too, as he had been looking after Noel from early in the morning. At that moment sitting on the sofa watching a video together would have been much more appealing to me.

I wondered: is Sandy purposely limiting physical contact with me still? Perhaps he wants to avoid seeming to take advantage of our being alone in the house. He wants me to know I can trust him.

So we sat side by side on the sofa our shoulders touching and, like previously, we went through a book making comparisons of styles of buildings and commenting on certain details of the architecture. From there we looked a current issue of an architecture magazine. However, distractions did become apparent in sitting there together. And Sandy felt them too.

So, yes, we kissed, slowly slipping down into the cushions on the sofa. Merging together. Breathing together. I

wished we could stay like that forever, but Sandy finally moved away from me slightly to see my face.

He smiled and quietly said, "Clearly, we're not lacking any attraction, are we, Erika?"

"No, definitely not."

"But I think we are getting ahead of ourselves. Right?"

"Probably. We're a long way from the fridge."

We laughed remembering that incident again, and in doing so we recovered from our intensity.

He commented, "For me, it could be so easy to go further than we intend to from here."

After discussing what seems right for us at our stage of knowing each other, Sandy extended his right hand toward me. We laughed at the formality of this handshake-like gesture, but then he took both of my hands and helped me into a sitting position beside him.

"Also, considering what time Noel will be waking me up in the morning, it's getting late."

"Too early and too late," I commented.

"Exactly," he said, understanding what I was meaning.

It was a struggle to go to our separate bedrooms.

Separate beds.

When I was under the covers alone in the guest room, I couldn't help thinking there was only one room between Sandy and me.

Sleep was a long time coming.





AUGUST # 9—Vancouver Jazz Festival

Visuals: photos of a couple of groups on stage, boats at docks, and bathhouses

Sunday morning... at Sandy's. I reassured myself when I woke up momentarily wondering where I was and, in realizing, I felt instantly happy.

Once in the kitchen, I could see that Sandy had been right about Noel getting him up early. The table was strewn with drawings and wet paintings that had been cast aside. Noel was standing on a chair beside Sandy, messily helping cook French toast. An egg had been cracked into a measuring cup that had apparently been abandoned for containing too much broken shell.

I walked in without diverting Noel's attention and put my arm around Sandy's waist.

"Good morning," he said quietly, kissing me on the side of my cheek.

Noel had never eaten French toast before. I worried about the amount of syrup he was helping himself to, smothering it all over the toast and his plate.

"Maybe we should help you with that big bottle."

Sandy realized what I wanted to do and, asking Noel for help in pouring the juice, he held Noel's attention for a moment as I dumped much of the syrup off Noel's plate into the sink.

The French toast was a hit with Noel. Sandy and I also enjoyed it along with grapefruit, bacon, and lemon slices.

Finally we were ready to set off for Granville Island with Noel and his teddy bear in the car seat in the back.

I commented on the lovely panorama of the city as we crossed Lion's Gate.

Sandy said, "Yes, I never tire of this scene. When I might otherwise be frustrated from being stuck in traffic, I am grateful for this uplifting view from the bridge, of the city there and toward the Strait of Georgia on the other side."



Sandy had arranged to use Larry and Leah's parking spot at the apartment. We loaded the stroller with Noel, some snacks, and other supplies from the car and then headed along the seawall. At Sunset Beach I asked Sandy about the sculpture of the giant lettered head/torso guarding the top of the hill near the Aquatic Centre. He said we should look at it up close as the sun goes down when it seems almost mystical.

We took the three-minute ride across False Creek on the little (12-seater) Granville Island ferry. We met some of our group as we approached the Kids Only Market. Noel was on Sandy's shoulders while I pushed the stroller into the store. Noel had his arms around Sandy's head, his small, pliable hands on Sandy's forehead.

When showing us toys according to Sandy's and Noel's requests, the sales lady, in retrieving some other boxes, said, "Would your son prefer"

That touched me—that she had mistaken Sandy as being Noel's dad. Despite Noel's blond hair and fair skin, did she assume one of us was his mother—Claudia, Nicole, me?

After buying Noel a colourful xylophone that he chose, Sandy and I left for the water park. We were to rejoin the group at the mound at 2:00 to catch a couple of acts of the jazz concert.

Noel totally enjoyed himself at the water park but again he was difficult to lead way when the time was up. And he cried when we changed his clothes. By then he was ready for a nap.

Song, Daniel, Sumi, Bae, and Claudia had held a place for us near the centre of the "mound." But to step around people to reach them would have been impossible with the stroller. Fernando, Nicole, Juliana, and Noboru were sitting on the other side. So we just waved to them all as we sat down.

Noel, soon asleep between Sandy and I, was snuggling into Sandy's side as we leaned back on the lawn of the sloped hill. Sandy's hand touched my arm above Noel's head.

After seeing two bands play, but before the rest of my classmates were ready to leave, Sandy and I got Noel, without totally waking him, back into the stroller and I waved goodbye to the others.

We walked along the edge of the water to see some innovative boathouses that Sandy wanted to show me.



Then we ambled through the narrow, congested streets of the island, and we went into the public market to buy some fish and chips. We carried them out on the dock where the seagulls were cruising around noisily overhead and the pigeons were strutting around our feet demanding to share our impromptu supper. Noel loved the chips (with lots of ketchup) but enjoyed feeding the seagulls and pigeons even more as we sat there on the benches.

We got the little ferry back to the West End at Sunset Beach. We climbed the hill by the Aquatic Centre to stand in and look at the delicate, intricate, but monumental metal head and torso sculpture made out of letters and symbols. Beautiful, Zen-like even.

From there we walked west on the sidewalk, still with a gorgeous view of the ocean. Noel was on Sandy's shoulders as we approached the apartment and put the stroller in the back trunk of the car. We knocked on Leah and Larry's door and talked briefly with them but declined going in.

Sandy was clarifying details about the next, and last, gig he was to perform in with the band. It was to be an outdoor, end-of-summer, back-to-school concert at UBC on Labour Day weekend. So Sandy, Larry and Leah were discussing how the

set up was to be configured on the field close to the Memorial Gym and Student Union Building.

"Do you have a pencil and paper in your bag, Erika? I left mine in the car."

I brought out of my daypack a thin, coil notebook and turned to a blank page.

"Thanks," he said, as he started sketching the boundaries of the field near the buildings and, looking very much like a future architect, drawing in where he thought the stage should go, the standing viewers' area, the seating, and the adjoining beer garden. Larry and Leah responded with some comments, but basically agreed to what Sandy was proposing.

Sandy tore out the page and handed it to Larry.

As we stood there with them, Noel's flexible little hands again played with Sandy's hair, stretching a curl. Imaging how that felt to both of them, the gesture struck me as being sensuous.

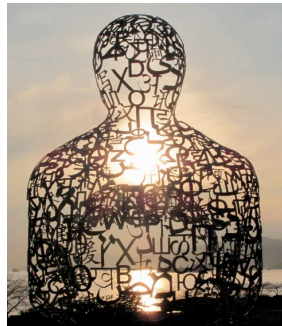
In talking further it became apparent to Leah and Larry that I had stayed overnight at Sandy's house. They seemed pleased. Is this just because they want Sandy to feel comfortable with and close to me or at least to some female whom he can trust? Or could they even be making the same assumption that some of my classmates might be making? Will their assumption ever be true? Do I want that assumption to be true? If so, when?

We said goodbye to Leah and Larry. Before starting up the apartment stairs to my place, Sandy and I considered going to get something more to eat but realized Noel was too tired. At my door, Noel was in Sandy's arms when Sandy said to him, "Say goodnight to Erika."

Unprompted, Noel leaned over and placed a damp little kiss on my cheek. I was moved. I gave him and Sandy a combined hug and kissed Sandy.

"Have a good week, and stay safe."

I was very sorry to have to part with them, close the door, and try to remember what my normal life is.





AUGUST # 10—Spanish Banks Picnic

Visuals: photographs of beach in afternoon and evening, silhouettes of picnickers at sunset

As the time came closer for Claudia to return to Taiwan, her homestay mother, Helen, and homestay sister, Carlie, invited our class to a going-away picnic at Spanish Banks Beach. Most of us went directly from school. As we arrived we saw a large sign at the end of the beach saying “Claudia!”

Having unpacked the food on a picnic table, Helen and Carlie had spread out blankets and hibachi barbecues beside it on the grass. This was at the top of the long stretch of sandy beach that has a wonderful view of English Bay, in one direction, the city and, in another, the mountains.

As Helen and Carlie declined any help, Sumi, Noboru, Bae, and I went down to the water’s edge with a small beach ball. We started playing informal volleyball, without a net, while standing in knee-high water. As we lunged for the ball, we often scrambled in the water or fell in, so that the game was as much about frolicking in the ocean as actually demonstrating volleyball expertise.

Given that Noboru was in a pair of tailored, knee-length golfers’ shorts, this may not have been what he was expecting, although he stayed on his feet more than the rest of us. Again Sumi revealed she is as good at volleyball as Noboru is, but she was really enjoying fooling around in the water too. At the same time Barry, Se-Eun, and Claudia played badminton on the sand up the beach from where we were, while Fernando and Nicole chased a Frisbee in the light breeze.

As the tide was out, it was quite a long way from the water to the grass where Helen and Carlie were setting out the food. Daniel and Song arrived about a half hour after the rest of us. We saw them chatting with Helen and Carlie before they

walked down the beach toward the badminton players. Claudia, Se-Eun, and Barry began to laugh and point at Daniel's feet, but we didn't know what this was about until we walked up the beach to greet them. Daniel and Song were wearing matching, navy-blue Birkenstock sandals—a surprise because Daniel has not been willing to wear his other Birkenstocks outside the house—much too relaxed for him.

We teased them about their twin attire. Song looked secretly triumphant in influencing Daniel to this new level of casualness. He seemed somewhat embarrassed at this public viewing of his footwear.

Daniel and Song explained that they had missed a bus so they had walked rather than waiting for the next one. As a result, they were very hot. They headed for the water's edge and were soon wading in shin-high water. Seen almost in silhouette at that distance, we knew that Daniel must have had his pant legs rolled up, while Song daintily lifted the skirt of her cotton jumper to keep her hemline from getting wet. They were jumping waves to keep the water from getting beyond the bare part of their legs.

Nicole and Fernando joined us to play volleyball. A few minutes later Noboru drew our attention to the fact that Daniel had taken off his shirt and had tied it around his waist as they waded through the water.

"Daniel, our conservative, traditionally attired banker—is now shirtless!"

"But who are you to talk, Noboru?" Nicole commented in good humour in hearing Noboru make this comment.

"Me?" Noboru asked, pretending innocence.

"Yes, you seem to be in a continual, best-dressed contest rather than wearing something that is just comfortable and suitable for the activity," Nicole added.

"It's true, Noboru," Claudia added. "But you always look especially handsome because of this."

"Thank you," he responded, seeming pleased but acting somewhat sulky.

A few minutes later most of us had gravitated toward the top of the beach. Then we were even more amazed to see that Daniel and Song, in bare feet, had returned to where some of the others had laid out their towels. Song and Daniel proceeded to lie down on their towels too, eyes closed, with Song's head against Daniel's bare chest.

Noboru started to say something to tease Daniel, but Claudia clapped her hand over Noboru's mouth.

Of course Bae and Fernando were also shirtless, like most of the rest of the men on the beach.

Barry and Se-Eun walked further along the beach. I wondered if they wanted to avoid any detailed conversation with the rest of us.

So while others lay on their towels, Claudia and I set off to walk too. But we deliberately chose the opposite direction from Se-Eun and Barry. I know the circumstances between Claudia and me are going to radically change after her departure for Taiwan, even if she maintains contact with us once she returns to study business in Vancouver.

I was delighted and totally surprised when she alluded to the possibility of me, yes, me, studying in Vancouver too, specifically going into the architectural program at UBC.

"Claudia, you've thought of this on your own?"

"Yes."

"Are you a mind reader?"

"So you *have* thought about this?"

"Yes, for a while. But it is such a remote possibility... I know I mustn't dream my life away."

"Why remote?"

"Just because going to UBC is a possibility for you...."

"So why wouldn't it be possible for you too?"

I admitted that this is my most precious dream, to do architecture here.

"You're not the eldest child or the baby in the family...."

"No, I am in the middle."

"Perfect. Then your parents will let you study here."

"How can you be so sure?" I laughed.

"Well, they probably have big plans for the eldest...."

"True, they do, or should I say my father *did*? My parents assumed she would go into the same line of work as my dad."

"Which is?"

"Electronics. He's with a large electronics firm."

"Your older sister has the fashion design business with her boyfriend, right?"

"Yes. Luckily a slightly older, second cousin joined my Dad's firm, and Dad is pleased that she is doing well. So she kind of serves as his prodigy."

"Perfect, so that takes the pressure off the rest of you."

"To a certain extent I suppose."

"Well, your older sister and your cousin are still in business. So your parents should be satisfied with that."

"I'm not sure this...."

"And as for the youngest child, well, they'll never let the baby of the family leave."

I laughed again. "How can you seem so sure of all this?"

Claudia ignored this and asked, "Would they be able to help you financially to do architecture here instead of at home?"

"I think so."

"And would they consider visiting you here?"

"They are planning to. They are coming for a week in February."

"Perfect!"

"Perfect?"

"Yes, because if they see you with Sandy, they'll realize you need more time to determine if you have a future together."

"Oh, Claudia. You are capable of anything you want. All that exotic travel you do on a moment's notice. Being able to study wherever you choose. Being a landed immigrant here.... For the rest of us, it's not that easy...."

"Maybe not easy, but possible."

"You don't know my dad."

"No, but I am accustomed to dealing with my boyfriend's family."

"Which certainly isn't trouble-free."

"None of this is trouble-free, Erika."

"But you finally see that my attachment to Sandy deserves to be taken seriously?"

Laughingly she said, "I agree you are a hopeless case in that you can't see yourself ever feeling as fond of anyone as much as you are of Sandy. And attracted to anyone as much as you are to Sandy."

"Thank you for acknowledging that."

"So when your parents arrive you will talk to them about doing architecture here."

"Oh, I certainly want to try. However unpromising that might be."

"Good, then it's settled."

"Settled!" I laughed.

"Well, it's settled in that at least you'll have a rational discussion about studying here after they meet Sandy. And another thing...."

"Yes?"

"You and Sandy should start discussing the details of this too."

"Oh, Claudia. I love you!"

I gave her a hug with happy tears in my eyes.

As we approached the group, Nicole came up the beach holding a small boy's hand. He was crying.

"What's up?" Fernando asked her.

"This is Ben," Nicole said.

"Hi, Ben."

"His parents are lost. We've been walking along the beach looking for them, but they seem to be out of sight. He

hasn't been able to tell me what they look like or what clothes they are wearing."

Kneeling down to the little boy's height, Fernando asked, "Did you come in a car?"

The little boy nodded his head with tears in his eyes.

Speaking to Nicole, Fernando said, "I'll go and have a look in the parking lot to see if there are any parents loading their car and perhaps finally noticing that they are missing their son."

"Ben, I'll go and try to find your parents."

"And we'll stay here."

To Nicole, Fernando said, "If no luck in the parking lot, we can take Ben down to the bathhouse to ask the lifeguards what they do about lost parents."

Fernando sprinted off toward the parking area. In a few minutes he came back.

"Nothing to report."

He stooped down and spoke to the child again.

"We would like to take you to that place down there," he said, pointing to the lifeguard boathouse.

"Then we can tell the lifeguards that you are looking for your parents. They'll know what to do. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Would you like to ride on my shoulders? Then you will be able to see a long way and your parents will be able to see you."

Ben was still weeping but nodded and didn't mind being lifted onto Fernando's shoulders. Nicole and Fernando walked to the far end of the beach. They came back smiling and without the child.

"Re-united," Fernando said. "Apparently the mother thought the father had Ben and vice versa. They were rather embarrassed, as well as grateful, but all is well."

Helen must have been aware of what was happening because she called, "If you are finished being good Samaritans for now, you can come and eat."

We all headed toward the smell of the delicious hamburgers that were cooking on three hibachis. All the extras and a spread of salads added to this along with an impressive display of berries and cut fruit.

As we all sat down, Noboru asked, "What has become of Juliana? I assumed she was with some of the rest of you."

"Oh, did she decide to come? At lunchtime she was still indecisive because of having a hair appointment after class. She thought it might be too late to come after that," Se-Eun stated.

"No, in the end she said she'd rather be late than miss this all together," Noboru confirmed. "I also reassured her we

could get together after to prepare for tomorrow's presentation."

"Oh, too bad, it's your turn to present tomorrow, isn't it?" Claudia commented.

Standing up and scanning the shore, Noboru absent-mindedly asked, "What time is it?" despite wearing his own watch.

At that exact moment several of us saw Juliana at the far end of the beach.

"Here she comes."

"Is that her?"

"Yes. It is."

"Well, then she really has done something radically different to her hair."

"Wow, has she ever."

Juliana waved happily when she finally saw us.

And Noboru whistled, as she got nearer.

"So you like it?" she commented as she sat down amongst us, touching her new short, bouncy hairdo with its lighter blonde highlights. She moved her head from side to side to model it for us.

"Boy, what a dramatic change!"

"Very nice."

Noboru especially couldn't keep his eyes off her and commented, "I've never seen anyone so changed by a hair cut. Your husband will be wowed."

"Do you think so?"

"Absolutely. If he recognizes you at all."

"Thanks. It does feel kind of fun."

A plate appeared for Juliana and people started loading it up for her with all the makings for her gourmet hamburger.

"Have some of the cold asparagus salad before it gets eaten. It's delicious!"

"The other ones are good too."

"Actually, a couple of guys may have just tried to pick me up," Juliana commented. "So maybe that says something about my new coiffure."

"They did?" Nicole asked with interest. "Where?"

"Well, do I have to admit I went to the wrong beach?"

"You did? Which one? Locarno?"

"No, Jericho. I walked all around that beach and when I couldn't find you I finally took a closer look at the sign above the concession stand. I was embarrassed when I realized that it said Jericho instead of Spanish Banks."

"You're not the only one who's ever made that mistake," Carlie commented.

"At that moment a couple of cute guys about my age realized I was concerned about something, so they addressed me and I asked them where Spanish Banks is and how far. They told me they were just about to leave and could drive me over and that it is less than five minutes away by car but on foot it is at least a 15-minute walk."

"Oh, bad idea..." Barry commented.

"I know, I know. I was thinking of what my mother had told me so long ago about taking a ride from strangers. It took all my will power to decline them politely because they really did look like nice guys."

"So you are a little later but safe," Noboru commented, seeming genuinely pleased at her presence and appearance.

"You did the right thing," Barry confirmed.

We sat around on the blankets on the lawn and had our leisurely feast. I confess, in looking around and seeing the group primarily in "couples formation," I was missing Sandy.

But I was totally surprised when Nicole asked, "Erika, isn't that Sandy down there?"

"Sandy?" I said, turning around but not thinking that Sandy could just appear.

Looking toward the far end of the beach, I blurted, "Hey, that is him!"

"Sandy!" I shouted as I jumped up.

I am not sure whose smile was bigger as he spotted me. We sprinted toward each other and hugged, my feet barely touching the ground.

Walking back toward the group, Sandy kept his arm around my shoulder and some of the group clapped as we sat down.

"Help yourself to whatever you'd like," Helen said, handing Sandy a plate and a fork.

"Thank you, Helen, and Carlie?"

"Yes, hello."

"I am sorry to have come without any food to contribute, but I thought if I stopped to pick up something, I might miss you all completely. At least I can offer a couple of people rides to the North Shore."

"Only to the North Shore?" I challenged him in good humour.

"Of course I mean 'in addition to you, Erika.' That's why I'm here."

Knowing that Juliana and Noboru needed to get home as soon as possible to work on their presentation, all agreed that they deserved Sandy's offer of a ride to the North Shore.

As the others broke into conversations amongst themselves, I put my hand on Sandy's arm and said, "We never even discussed the possibility of your joining us."

"I hope it's okay."

"Of course it is! I just can't believe that you found us."

"Well, it wasn't all that difficult. You said you were going to be at Spanish Banks. I assumed you wouldn't be leaving before sunset. So when I got finished a bit earlier than I expected.... Well, why wouldn't I try to meet up with you?"

"I'm so glad you did."

Soon Barry took on his teacher role leading everyone in the group in a toast to Claudia and to wish her luck on her trip home to Taiwan and safe return to Vancouver to study "seriously." All insisted that she stay in touch with us after she returns.

Then everyone started gathering up leftover food and dishes and helped Helen and Carlie carry picnic baskets and coolers to Helen's car. Except for dumping the hot coals from the hibachis into the appropriate cement container, Noboru, was less helpful than usual with the cleanup. Amazed at Juliana's new hairdo, he seemed spell-bound by her.

The evening was capped off by yet another wonderful Vancouver summer sunset, which at least one other couple was savouring.





AUGUST # 11—Climbing the Grouse Grind

Visuals: photographs of sign, trail, view from cable car, view of city

Well, yesterday was Sumi's birthday. Simple statement, I know, but I am leading up to admitting how much of a fool I made of myself then by almost dying on the Grouse Grind trail.

I wanted to make a surprise birthday party for Sumi at the top of the mountain, as everyone seemed unaware that it was her birthday. Well, I made a cake and some icing and fancy little sandwiches (which Mary taught me to make), and I packed fresh strawberries and blueberries in separate cookie tins protected with ice, along with champagne, nuts, and some chocolates.

I wanted to put it all together on the mountain, complete with a real tablecloth and little plastic wine glasses, bowls, cutlery, decorative serviettes, and, of course, candles. Mary donated some silly party hats that she said she had kept for years.

At home Mary kept telling me that I should probably have the party at lunchtime at the school because it wasn't feasible to carry that much weight to the top of a mountain. And she emphasized that I must at least get the rest of the group to share carrying this. But I was stubborn; I wanted it to be a surprise.

Because several in the group had climbed the Grouse Grind before, we decided we would all meet at the top so everyone could go at their own speed to improve their previously-set climb times if possible. Well, that meant that within seconds, Noboru, Daniel, Sumi, and Marina were out of sight. Encouraged in hearing that you basically can't get lost if you stay on the trail, Fernando and Juliana went ahead too. So

soon it was just Song and Nicole and I climbing behind the others.

Never once in planning the party had I considered going up on the cable car, which I definitely knew about as classmates had shown me pictures of how wonderful the view is from there.

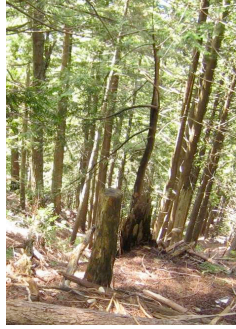


I might have seriously thought about this if someone had reminded me that this was an enjoyable alternative and the view would more likely be clear on the way up whereas the sun might be down by the time we made our return trip. However, this never occurred to me.

Back on the trail I was struggling with the near backbreaking weight (at least for me!) of my pack as I took each step. Nicole and Song became engrossed in conversation—mainly related to Daniel’s return to Switzerland in a couple of weeks and how Song is going to have to deal with that. Soon Song and Nicole lost track of where I was. No one realized just how heavy my pack was.

Well, I don’t want to belabour this, but I was struggling with every footstep and after what seemed like hours of climbing very slowly, I simply could not go any further. I was too exhausted to think straight or to care about what would happen to me.

While it was fairly hot out, the light was dappled amongst the trees. I didn’t have a watch on so I lost track of time. I sat down, leaning against a tree trunk too tired to even take my backpack off. I thought well, I might just have to die on the trail.



I did consider that the group, especially since they were not all staying together, could easily get on the gondola without realizing I wasn't with any of them. They would be concerned about getting to the bottom before the gondola shut down for the night.

But what could I do about that? And I was too tired to care.

I seem to have dozed off. At any rate I awoke momentarily alarmed as I heard something crashing down between the trees from the trail above me. Noboru unexpectedly appeared in my midst, grinding to a halt with loose earth flying around his feet. He stumbled slightly, as the downhill momentum had had him almost running free fall.

"Erika, here you are! Are you hurt?"

I was so embarrassed.

"No, I am just tired."

"We've been worried about you. Take off your backpack so I can carry it."

He helped me off with it, amazed at how heavy it was.

"What's in this? No wonder you've only made it this far. Why didn't you offload some of whatever you've got in here?"

"It's birthday party food for Sumi. I never thought to abandon anything. I suppose we could get rid of the ice now."

"Ice! Well, couldn't you have let us know to share the load?" he asked as he opened the backpack and took out the ice. He tore open its plastic bag and dropped the wet ice onto the ground.

"I wanted it to be a surprise."

"Well, it's a surprise all right, but are you going to be able to keep going now?"

"Yeah, without the pack I think I can manage. And I've had a bit of a rest."

"You go ahead then so I don't lose you again. We were all getting so worried."

"Thanks for coming back for me."

"No problem."

Trying my best not to let Noboru down, I kept climbing when I wondered if I really could go any further. Well, we finally made it to the top, and as Noboru and I came over the crest of the hill everyone in our group, sitting cross-legged in a circle on a large flat rock, cheered loudly. Again, I was so embarrassed.



As we approached, others came forward offering to help with the load.

“What have you been carrying!” Bae exclaimed, as he took my backpack dramatizing its heaviness by almost falling over under its weight.

“And that’s so much lighter than it was,” Noboru explained on my behalf, passing my backpack around to show the group how much it weighed and telling them it had even been significantly heavier with ice in it.

“Ice in it?” Daniel asked. “What would you be planning to do with the ice?”

There was much groaning as each attempted to lift it. This made me feel quite a bit better.

Song and Nicole were extremely apologetic.

“We didn’t know you were behind us.”

“We would have helped you for sure if we had known. We assumed you got ahead of us.”

Fernando too was feeling bad about having decided to go ahead of “the girls” to see how fast he could make it to the top.

“Not worth knowing,” he confessed, “especially compared to Noboru’s, Daniel’s, and Sumi’s times.”

Bae, as kind as always, was truly concerned. “Are you going to be all right, Erika?”

“Well, probably besides being somewhat stiff tomorrow, yes, Bae, I am fine now, thanks to Noboru for rescuing me.”

“I should have come with him. I knew I should have accompanied him.”

“It’s okay, Bae. Don’t feel bad. I’m okay now.”

Noboru looked pleased that he had finally been able to do something for me in a way that I could openly appreciate.

"Well, can we all sit down now and enjoy some of the food for Sumi's birthday party?" I said.

"Birthday party?" Sumi exclaimed, thinking that no one was aware of her birthday.

"How did you know it's my birthday? I never tell anyone when my birthday is."

"I once saw it on one of your school forms, and I just remembered it because it is one day after my cousin's birthday."

Seated on the large rock, I unpacked all the food and party favours.

"Could you pass these around?"

Bae handed out the paper hats and made sure everyone was wearing one.

I iced the cake on the spot and put on the candles.

"Nobody has ever given me a surprise birthday party before," Sumi said, "and certainly not on the top of a mountain!"

"And look at these fancy sandwiches. Fit for a queen!" Marina said.

"Everything's so delicious," they all agreed.

Several took pictures of the group in the silly hats toasting Sumi with the champagne in the plastic wine glasses.

As the sun went down behind the trees, we knew it was time to pack up the tablecloth and the rest of the party supplies. Everyone was given a portion of the much-reduced load before we headed off to catch one of the last rides down in the gondola.

The sun provided us with an incredible golden pink sky over the entire city and there were clear views beyond the shining ribbon of the Fraser River to other mountains in the east and to those on Vancouver Island to the west. No wonder people get hooked on doing this climb!

Despite this beauty, I was relieved to get down to the road. I think it may be some time before my classmates stop teasing me about "almost dying on the trail for the sake of a friend," but it was worth organizing this party for Sumi, especially as it really was a surprise.

Kind enough not to say, "I told you so," Mary gave me some fragrant bath salts for my bath and some herbal tea to sip while I was soaking in the tub. Still it may also be a couple of days before the stiffness goes out of my thighs.

Well, I am almost falling asleep, but will I have a nightmare about that trail or will I be able to get a view of it out of my mind?



Photographs of Grouse Grind trail (p. 285) and cable car (p. 284) courtesy of Christian Knaus, Austria; Grouse Grind trail (above left) courtesy of Michal Tomza, Poland; top of grouse grind path (above right) by the author

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