



## ***DECEMBER # 1—Carol Ship Event on Ryan’s Boat***

*Visuals: photographs of the North Shore Mountains, snow on shoreline, carol ships, Ryan’s boat*

The abundant snow on the local mountains and an unexpected snowfall on the city were encouraging people to feel the Christmas spirit and participate in seasonal events. Carol Ship Night gave me another chance for singing Christmas carols as well as understanding a 40-year-old Vancouver tradition.

This event involves many of the boats in Vancouver Harbour, both private and commercial, being decorated with coloured lights and taking out carolers and others to tour the Vancouver waterfront. This goes on most nights for more than a week. Choirs of school children are on board some of the boats as they travel along the shore of English Bay, West Vancouver, Deep Cove, as well as the inner harbour. The coloured lights on the boats are often in the shape of stars, Christmas trees, leaping reindeer, Santa Claus, etc.

Mary’s friend Ryan, whose boat we went out on in the summer to Bowen Island, charts his boat most nights during this time, but he also sets aside one night during the Carol Ship season to host extended family for free. Everyone contributes to a potluck supper. With up to forty people on board, it is a wonderful feast.

Seeing the heavy snow on the mountains, I knew we should dress warmly as it would be cold on the water. The Carol Ships were headed to Deep Cove on our night. So after we left False Creek, where Ryan moors his boat, we proceeded along the West End waterfront and English Bay Beach where we saw a famous, huge, lit-up tree.



Then the boats went around the outer edge of Stanley Park and under Lion's Gate Bridge. This was somewhat frightening as the overhead traffic is noisy, due to the bridge's metal struts. And the water rushes between the pillars of the bridge in great swells. We travelled along the industrial shore of the Vancouver harbour before going under Second Narrows Bridge.

Ryan supplies his guests with song sheets, so those of us prepared for the cold were sitting outside on the top deck, ready to sing, even though the cool air meant we could see our breath in the air. I was glad to get fresh air into my lungs after spending so much time indoors. Mary laughed about her singing ability but remained outside with me most of the trip anyway, and I was glad to sing again to get more practice. Those staying down below in the warmth of the salon socialized and ate snacks.

When it was time for the buffet, the singers took a break and went downstairs despite the crowded space. We steamed up the windows of the lounge to the extent that we couldn't see what was going on along the shore. So as soon as I finished my plate of tasty pastas, chicken, meat balls, salads, and even some desserts, I went back up to the open air. When Mary chose to stay longer in the salon, I talked with some of the nieces and nephews whom I had met in the summer and were among the singers.

As we approached the area close to Deep Cove, residents and other viewers gathered on the decks of their extravagantly lit houses and along the shore to watch the colourful carol ships motor past.

As the boat rounded the corner into Deep Cove, all seemed so quiet. It was as if we were in an air vacuum between the foot of Mt. Seymour (great name, *Mt. See More*) and the mountains to the east of the Inlet.

Even boats moored in the cove were decorated. Just above the beach there was a huge bonfire where people in the community were watching the ships as well as a concert. This was a stirring event for me witnessing what was going on along

the shore and seeing the colourful boats ahead of us outlining the curve of the Deep Cove shoreline.

Of course I was wishing that Sandy were with me, but I enjoyed being in the company of Mary's nieces and nephews. The niece closest to my age and her boyfriend openly show their affection for each other. She casually sits on his lap and leans against him. She said it must be frustrating to come to a foreign country for a year, meeting interesting people (she was obviously referring to men) knowing that I couldn't have a continuing relationship with any of them.

She asked, "How do you keep from getting attracted to a guy despite knowing that doing so would cause pain in just having to leave him?"

I felt very uncomfortable about this conversation because it summed up my original assumption as well as that of so many other people.

Did I say, or was I only just thinking, "Sometimes people do become attracted and attached. And some individuals do give up their country for a relationship no matter how problematic that could be."

Whatever I said in responding to this, I was trying to say in an objective manner, so it wouldn't sound as if I was speaking from personal experience or wishful thinking. Wishful thinking....

*Photograph of snow on English Bay Beach courtesy of Gabriele Hauser, Switzerland; opening image by the author*



## ***DECEMBER # 2—Rainy Night Movie at UBC***

*Visuals: photographs of UBC's Pendulum Restaurant and Student Union Building exterior, downpour on streets*

A week or so after Noboru returned to the school, a four of us decided to go to a movie at UBC. Movies at UBC are inexpensive and we wanted to see the featured movie, *Devine Secrets of the YaYa Sisterhood*. Classmate Sebastian, who is a teaching assistant at the university, said he would give us a ride on his way there to lead a seminar class. Noboru, Sumi, Marina, and I trekked off with Sebastian to find his car in a drizzling rain that immediately became heavier. If I had known how far away Sebastian had parked his car, I would have suggested that we go by bus, as we were close to a bus stop where we ate supper. Instead we walked to his car in what became bone-chilling rain.

By the time we crammed into Sebastian's little car all of us were soaking wet. He laughingly admitted he had bought the car for \$200 when he first arrived in Vancouver and, of course, that price did not include a working heater.

Being so cold, having an umbrella dripping down my leg, and smelling wet clothes, I was very glad to finally reach UBC. But how far were we going to have to walk to get from the parking lot to the Student Union Building? Still I welcomed getting out of the car despite the heavy rain and gusts of wind threatening to blow our two umbrellas inside out. Feeling generally miserable, I again realized I would rather have taken the bus or, better still, been relaxing at home in a hot bath.

Wading through some unavoidable puddles, I momentarily appreciated that one car in the parking lot was at least trying to go by us without splashing. I wasn't looking at

the drivers as they splashed, and I certainly didn't expect the considerate one to be Sandy. But it was!

He rolled down his window.

"Erika?" was all that he said, as if he didn't recognize me for sure in my drenched state. Of course I stopped to talk with him. Marina and Sebastian acknowledged Sandy and then continued walking under their blown-about umbrella. Sumi, with the hood up on her full-length, black, puffy quilted coat, handed me her umbrella (despite it being almost useless) and then ran to catch up with Noboru.

"I can't believe I would meet you here, Sandy. We are going to a movie."

He said he was on his way home. I was preoccupied in thinking of how ugly I must be looking with dripping wet, straggly hair.

I was jolted when Sandy commented, "So Noboru is back, or did he never leave?"

"Uh, Noboru?... He returned a week or so ago."

Without thinking, I added, "His dad told him he didn't want to see him again until he is ready to settle down and be productive."

"I'm not surprised."

"Oh...."

Sandy's tone jarred me. What had Noboru been doing when Sandy spotted him, us? Had he been helping me across puddles or had he been more attentive to Sumi?

"You didn't mention that he is back."

"I didn't want to worry you, Sandy. Honestly, there's no need for you to be concerned."

Sandy looked down at his hands on the steering wheel.

When he didn't respond, I asked, "May I have a ride home with you so we can talk?"

Sandy responded somewhat wearily, "Let's talk in a couple of days. I don't want to say something now that I might later regret."

"Please, Sandy, I would like to come with you."

"Not now, Erika. You are here with your friends. I don't want to interfere with them."

Was I in tears the moment he said this or did they start flowing as soon as Sandy drove away? I felt abandoned, standing there, bedraggled. I could see that Noboru, hood up as his only defence against the rain, was waiting for me at the front of the parking lot. Sumi, Marina, and Sebastian had gone on ahead. When I reached Noboru, he wordlessly put his hand around my shoulder and led me away.

The idea of sitting totally wet, through a movie, was disgusting, but I felt so numb that I wasn't even up to thinking of an alternative.

I filed in with Marina, Sumi, and Noboru and sat down. From the beginning of the movie, I was just aware of my near-frozen feet, wet hair dripping down my neck, and soaked thighs rebelling against wet wool pants. Even more now I wanted to be at home in a warm bath.

The only positive circumstance was that the movie had everyone in tears, so I wasn't the only one weeping. But I was crying about Sandy's unfair disapproval of me, not about the children being lashed by their unstable mother. I felt anger at Sandy for judging me unjustly. After all, by not previously telling him about Noboru's return, I had been protecting Sandy from becoming anxious about Noboru's presence.

Toward the end of the movie, I simply couldn't sit any longer. I whispered to Sumi that I would meet them by the main exterior door at the end of the show.

I went into the orange, overly bright washroom. I tried to dry my hair but the drier kept turning off automatically after just a few seconds, and without of the stream of warm air, my wet clothes felt even more miserable. When other people filed into the washroom, I knew the movie was over.

I joined our group back in the lobby of the Student Union Building at the main doors. Thankfully, Sebastian was waiting for us as he had said he would.



My friends apparently were not suffering as I was from being wet. Or at least their condition wasn't worsened by emotional devastation. I didn't follow the conversation as we hurried back to the parking lot in the dark. I was in endurance mode. I just wanted to be home.

And where was the parking lot? It seemed further than ever. The rain increased after a few minutes so it was again bouncing several inches off the pavement. Again the wind threatened to turn the umbrellas inside out so, despite struggling to control them, they were next to useless.

Finally we all piled into the car. The cold car. It felt even more miserable on the return trip downtown. Again my leg was pressed against a wet umbrella.

The windshield wipers were barely keeping a large enough area clear for Sebastian to see through, and we were all wiping the steam off the rest of the windows. I could not decide if I felt more sorry for the pedestrians walking in the downpour or myself sitting in the cold, damp car.



I was very glad when Sebastian finally dropped us all off at the school. We went our separate ways. I actually ran part of the way home and didn't care when I splashed through puddles because my feet and legs were already soaked to the knee, and water was even running down my back under my daypack.

When I walked through the door, Mary exclaimed, "Erika, look at you! You're drenched! Where have you walked from?"

She felt both my hands and added, "You're freezing!"

I stepped out of my soggy shoes and left two footprints on the hardwood floor and she gasped again, "Your feet must be numb."

"They are."

After Sandy's rejection, I was touched by Mary's concern, and I was so relieved to be in the warm apartment that I had to try my best not to cry. Mary drew a hot bath for me, added some rose scented bath salts to the water (she said a friend had given them to her), and she made me some tea to sip while soaking in the tub. I had to struggle not to tell Mary what had just happened between Sandy and me.

All Mary's attention wasn't enough to keep me from suffering the effects of being cold and soaked through. In the night I began to feel achy from the back of my neck down my whole body, and I began to cough in fits. Sometimes I felt hot; sometimes I felt cold. I hardly slept at all, and of course I was thinking about Sandy.

Mary had heard me coughing through the night so, when I finally got to sleep and didn't wake up in time to go to class, she phoned the school to say that I would be staying home.

I remained in bed all day, yet my headache and muscle aches just seemed to get worse.

When Noboru arrived after school and brought me my homework, I didn't know whether to be pleased at him for being such a considerate friend or to try to explain that his presence in my life is causing me such unhappiness with Sandy.

To admit that Sandy seems unable to accept my friendship with Noboru makes Sandy seem like a suspicious and controlling boyfriend. I prefer to think of Sandy as sensitive and, for some reason, insecure. And why insecure when he has so much going for him?

Of course I didn't say any of this to Noboru. I appreciate that he has been willing to risk getting whatever form of 'flu I have in order to bring the class worksheets to me. After he left I even tried to read them for few minutes, but that made my head ache even worse.

Noboru returned the next day, again bringing me the class assignments. And again he didn't use this opportunity to get any closer to me. We never talked about how long he was planning to stay in Vancouver or if I had anything to do with why he is back.

Sandy later admitted he had driven by the apartment that day intending to try to see me, but at that moment Noboru had been walking up the front steps, so Sandy just drove away.

Sandy must have had to set aside significant resentment to phone after that. By then I had missed three days of school. Answering the phone, Mary explained to Sandy that I was suffering from some form of 'flu, and she mentioned how wet and cold I had been when I arrived home after the show at UBC. Despite the fact that it was almost 10:00 pm (and pouring with rain again), Sandy drove right over.



*Photograph (above) of Robson Street courtesy of Priscilla Bagli, Brazil*



## ***DECEMBER # 3—Sandy Visits While I'm Sick***

*Visuals: photographs of West End streets with rain and snow*

When Sandy arrived that night, I heard him and Mary speaking, but I couldn't hear their words as my door was shut tight. Mary knocked quietly and came in; she again shut the door behind her. She asked if Sandy could come in and talk with me. I said yes, so she asked about turning on a dim light and I agreed. It strained my eyes but I didn't feel I could have Sandy in my room to talk in total darkness.

It was heartrending to see that Sandy felt responsible for my illness as a result of not driving me home when I had asked.

"I certainly would have brought you home then, Er, if I had known something like this could happen to you from being out in the rain that night."

I didn't blame him, but I was very moved by the way he felt. Seeing him so concerned about me had me in tears again. At least his feeling of responsibility gave us a way to reach out to each other.

Sandy went to the kitchen, leaving my bedroom door open.

I heard Mary ask him, "How is she?"

"She's feeling feverish."

"She has been hot and cold all day."

"Do you have an ice pack and a bowl I can put some hot water in? I'd like to wash her face."

"Of course."

"And ice cubes for a glass of water?"

I heard the freezer door open and close and then a cupboard door do the same. Apparently Sandy filled a glass with cold water and I heard ice cubes clink into the glass. Then he filled a stainless steel bowl with hot water as Mary went into the bathroom and returned with a fresh washcloth and small towel.

"Ah, thanks, Mary. I'd like to stay with Erika until she is asleep if being in her bedroom is all right."

"Sandy, as you know, you are both adults. As far as I am concerned, you are welcome to be with her as long as she doesn't object to your being here."

"I appreciate this. And is she on any schedule for pain medication?"

"No, she is just taking a Tylenol when she needs it, and some is there on her headboard. Now is that everything?" Mary asked.

"Yes, I think so."

Mary commented, "I am going to bed as I have an early commitment tomorrow. There is a key hanging beside the door. You can lock the door after you let yourself out and put the key under the mat. I'll pick it up as I leave in the morning."

"Thanks, Mary.... For trusting me."

I had my back to Sandy when he quietly entered my room with the tray and the towel. He knelt down at the side of my bed. This reminded me of how we had knelt at the side of the tub in bathing Noel.

Sandy touched my shoulder to encourage me to turn toward him. When I did, he smiled, wordlessly, and spread the hot washcloth flat over my face. It felt so good as I breathed in the warm steam.

He dipped the washcloth again into the basin of hot water and wiped my eyes and my neck. He encompassed my hands with the cloth and then dried my face and hands.

He offered me the glass of water.

"Are you ready to take another pain killer?"

"Yes."

I momentarily propped myself up on my elbow to take some sips from the glass of water he held for me and to swallow the pill he offered me on the palm of his hand.

Then, taking my hairbrush from my bedside table, he brushed my hair so that it fanned out on the pillow around my head. This was so soothing and so caring.

As he set the tray aside, I turned to face the wall again so he wouldn't see more of my blotchy face and swollen eyes. He lifted my hair and put the cloth-covered ice pack against the back of my neck.

"I'd like to stay with you a while, if that's all right," he said quietly.

"Okay."

After turning off the lamp, he nudged off his socks, raised the blankets, and, still in his clothes, got in beside me. He settled down as if to sleep, putting his arm across my shoulder. I held his hand in both of mine. His chest was against my back

and his thighs were against the back of my legs. I wondered how that might feel if I had not been aching all over.

We never spoke.

We stayed in that position until after I went to sleep. We were soothed by the sound of heavy rainfall, at times hail, outside the window. I realized how comforting it felt in having Sandy just lying there with me.

I dreamt of an image from a photo that I had seen on a calendar at Mary's parents' house. It was a snow scene showing an open, clear sky where the air was soundless and still over pristine snow and a bare tree held new snow in its uplifted branches.

When I awoke it was brighter than usual. My head and muscles no longer ached. But Sandy was gone. I felt an emptiness and a yearning.

I trudged back to school, walking carefully as there was, in fact, new snow on the ground.





## ***DECEMBER # 4— Confronting Sandy's Past***

*Visuals: photograph of gatepost with snow*

The next evening, when I went down into the laundry room to do some washing, I met Leah, who in the course of our conversation revealed some disturbing information about Sandy's past.

"So you are back from the tour."

"Yes."

"How did it go?" I asked.

"Well, actually. Of course we are all exhausted, but we had some wonderfully responsive audiences, and our new band members are beginning to fit in. But how are you... and Sandy?"

"Well, I've had the flu for the past three days...."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"But Sandy came over last night and he looked after me, so we feel very close."

"Ah, nice."

"We certainly care about each other, but recently we have also hurt each other due to lack of trust."

"I guess that isn't surprising."

"Really. Why do you say this?"

Looking as beautiful as ever despite being in jeans and a comfortable, man's shirt, Leah put her laundry basket down and leaned against the table as I continued to place my clothes in the washer, pour in the soap, and slide coins into the slot.

"Has Sandy told you about his experience with his last girlfriend?"

"No, I have never asked. He just said that they broke up after starting to tour with the band."

"I wouldn't usually say anything, Erika, but I regret staying silent last time because this meant Sandy suffered more than he needed to."

"How do you mean this?"

"Well, it seems we had an incestuous little band there for a while."

Perhaps I looked shocked, because Leah said, "I'm sorry, Erika. Saying this is unfair to Sandy without explaining what he was up against."

"Up against?"

"Let me be less dramatic and try to make this as easily understandable as possible. I don't want to damage Sandy's reputation. He certainly deserves better from me and he really was blameless."

"Please tell me what you mean," I said, all of a sudden feeling tight in my chest.

"Well, originally we had a female band manager who used to do our bookings, scheduling, promotion, ordering and distribution of merchandise, and she took care of ticket sale arrangements, air flights and shipping, in short all the things that I do now."

"So she was with the band...."

"Yes, she was. She grew up in London. She still has a British accent and a British, upper-class sense of entitlement. This is despite being almost penniless after her father died when she was about twelve. Her mother remarried and moved her and her sister with her to Edmonton."

Leah continued, "She is tall, thin, and very striking-looking in a pale, dramatic way. Her profile could have been imprinted on a gold coin from antiquity."

"Gold coin?"

"Sorry, Erika. It's just that most people consider her quite beautiful."

"Oh...."

"She was efficient enough in doing the work, so we ignored the negative personal things about her, specifically the way she used men. She could get them to do anything she wanted. I'm not suggesting this was all by giving personal favours or for getting personal favours."

"Personal favours...."

"Not just for her own gain."

"Oh."

"Don't get me wrong, this could be as simple as getting the printer to reprint an advertising flyer for free when an error was our fault, or getting the best possible studio time for recording a CD when better-known bands were waiting in line. No one could ever define her power, but men seemed to feel they wanted to help her. Do things for her. Certainly I could never figure it out."

"Leah, I can't stand this, please."

"Okay. Well, this woman, let's call her Madame X, came across to men as being needy, a kind of helpless female that you open doors for."

"Are you sure you are talking about a woman of today?"

"You might well wonder. She definitely embodies a 19<sup>th</sup> century, upper-class British woman, a pre-feminist for sure."

"Leah, please. Tell me how Sandy fits in all this."

"Well, this lady, in this case an apparent 'lady,' was several years older than Sandy, a fact disguised by her ageless kind of beauty. She played on Sandy's sympathy in a personal way. Anyway he became ...well, her boyfriend."

"Oh."

"But unbeknownst to Sandy, this was not an exclusive relationship, at least not for long."

"No...."

"She became involved with a guy new to the band, a guitarist who had only just joined us. Apparently Madame X and this guy had known each other in high school in Edmonton. He didn't seem to care that he was now intruding on Sandy's already existing relationship with her. Perhaps the guy felt he had some prior claim on her as a result of the two of them knowing each other as teenagers."

"Did Sandy realize this?"

"No. Madame X kept Sandy as the one appearing to be her boyfriend. Perhaps she knew she could keep the other guy safely on the side without having to acknowledge him openly. Perhaps their relationship even flourished with that level of secrecy. Anyway, several people who knew her to be Sandy's girlfriend also saw that she was involved with the Edmonton guy."

"Oh, no."

"Several people, except Sandy. And this is the reason that Sandy got so hurt. When he found out that others in the band knew what this woman was up to.... Should I continue?"

"I hate hearing this, Leah, but yes, I need to know."

"Well, I certainly had wanted to say something to Sandy earlier, but Larry seemed to think we should all stay out of it. But having this going on in our midst was disturbing to the band, especially once we started touring. That created opportunities for her and the Edmonton guy, as we all stayed in the same hotels. That's when Sandy discovered...."

I think I must have turned pale. I sat down on a chrome chair next to the washer, so Leah asked, "Are you still okay with me telling you this, Erika?"

"Is there much more?"

Did I look anxious for this recounting to be over?

"No, I'm almost done. Anyway, Larry finally agreed I should take over as business manager. We decided it wasn't a good idea to have someone outside the band managing the finances, but more importantly, this was a way to get rid of Madame X."

"Did she leave?"

"Yes. Sandy broke up with her, and she was no longer employed by the band, so Madame X and Shane, the new guitarist, moved back to Edmonton, and they've been there ever since."

"So the guitarist's name is Shane?" I asked in realizing this must be the same guy mentioned in the letter Sandy had let me read.

"Yes."

"Do they have any intention of returning to live here?"

"Not that I know of. The regrettable result of all this was that Sandy became so dejected."

"I can imagine."

"Perhaps not so much from having lost this girlfriend as from feeling he had been so naïve and gullible. We've tried to reassure him that he will never again meet such a woman. She definitely didn't deserve to be trusted. But of course this experience has left him insecure."

"This makes me feel terrible."

"Why? Have you given Sandy cause to doubt you?"

"Seen from this perspective, yes, I guess I have."

"In what way?"

"Well, one of my friends.... There's a guy in my class, and we are a tight-knit group. He has declared me to be the love of his life."

"And Sandy knows this?"

"Well, Sandy saw us together in the group and immediately judged that this guy is in love with me."

"Oh, not good."

"But to avoid this guy I would have to give up all my friends because we do everything together. The worst part is that this guy was returning to Japan a few weeks ago so we had a going away party for him. Sandy came to that."

"Really?"

"Yes. I thought that would finally clear things up for Sandy and me. But this guy came back within two weeks."

"Oh, no. And Sandy knows this?"

"He again saw us as a group, immediately recognized this guy, and doubted me because I hadn't told him that he is back."

"Oh, dear."

“But I hadn’t told Sandy because I was trying to protect him. Instead he thought I had been deceitful in not revealing this.”

“Does Sandy think this guy has come back because of you?”

“Probably.”

“Oh, Erika. I am sorry to hear this. You and Sandy seem like such an ideal couple. I know he cares about you. But that would worry him.”

“Yes. So I am sorry to know about Sandy’s painful past, but now I will be able to understand his difficulty in trusting.”

“Please don’t tell Sandy I told you about this. Instead, give him the chance to tell you himself. Have you seen our CD, *Making Waves*, from a year and a half ago?”

“No, why do you ask?”

“Well, that CD package contains pictures of all of us including the former band manager and guitarist. Perhaps you could start by asking Sandy about the CD and about them. About what happened to them. Why they left the band. Perhaps he’ll tell you about this past relationship, so you can try to understand it together.”

“Any other advice?”

“Could you tell Sandy that you can’t avoid seeing your classmate as he is part of your group, but that you will try your best never to be alone with him?”

I paused for a moment thinking about that dinner in Horseshoe Bay. How I hadn’t told Sandy. And how that did feel wrong to be alone with Noboru in terms of my loyalty to Sandy. But I also thought about Noboru bringing my homework to me. If I had told Noboru not to do that, it would have been like telling him to stop being a caring person. That would be harder to agree to.

When I did not speak, Leah said, “Well, I see you have a lot to think about. I certainly hope you can help Sandy learn to trust again.”

“So do I.”

“And what about your not trusting Sandy?”

“By comparison, that now seems trivial. But there were a couple of incidents that made me think he was seeing someone else.”

“Really?”

“I thought so and I let my suspicions build up rather than asking Sandy about the events at the time.”

“Ahh. Not good.”

“And.... Maybe Sandy wouldn’t mind me telling you something more. But only you.”

“You have my confidence. What is it?”

I must have really needed this chance to talk because I admitted Sandy had let me see Serena's letter.

I explained, "Serena knows Sandy has left the band, so she has offered to become his professional manager."

"No!" Julia gasped.

"And now this makes more sense to me. She told Sandy she is Shane's manager, and she said she could service them both."

"Oh, right. Service them both," Leah snorted, making it clear to me what she thought "service them both" would entail.

"Of course Sandy is not interested in her offer. But she also told Sandy she is planning to come back to Vancouver briefly to make some arrangements to personally convince a producer to include Shane in a particular show."

"Ah, her specialty. Obtaining personal favours, sometimes through personal favours."

"But to my knowledge this hasn't happened yet, her coming here. At least as far as I know she hasn't contacted Sandy about being in town."

"Do you know what event that is?"

"A large group concert to be held in UBC stadium in the spring."

"Oh, good."

"Good? Yes, I happen to know that event has just been cancelled. Organizers weren't able to raise enough up-front funding to get that production off the ground."

"So she won't have that as an excuse to come back...." O said, thinking out loud.

"Right."

"That's a relief."

"Yes, so stop worrying about her. Instead, work on ways to help Sandy trust you."

"I'll definitely try. Since our misunderstanding, when Sandy and I both had our suspicions, we have agreed to try to be more open with each other. I hope we are able to do this, because I love Sandy so much."

"I can see that and I am sure he feels the same about you."

Leah picked up her laundry basket and her keys.

I said, "Thanks for talking. Could I possibly get a copy of the CD from you?"

"Sure, let's go up and get one now."

*Photograph of gate courtesy of Gabriela Hauser, Switzerland*



## ***DECEMBER # 5—Lantern Parade and Decorating the Christmas Tree***

*Visuals: photographs of St. Paul's lights, parade lanterns, Lost Lagoon fountain, decorated tree*

The lumière parade and evening of decorating the Christmas tree at the apartment was an especially happy time for me because Sandy was part of this. Imagine Sandy and Noboru in the same room! Working together even!

The December lumière event, held on the longest night of the year, celebrates the winter equinox and the beginning of the return of the light. In walking to the school, where my group had decided to meet, I went past St. Paul's Hospital, which has an exceptional display of lights, probably the most impressive lights I've seen in one location.

After we all assembled at our school, we made our own little parade as we headed toward the West End Community Centre. The width of the sidewalk, narrowed by snow piled to the sides, encouraged us to walk as couples. In the dark, some of my friends looked like floating heads only, their faces illuminated as they leaned into the light of their lanterns.

When we stopped to wait for a red light at an intersection, we clustered together in a circle. I noticed then that Adrian and Pierre were holding hands. "Oh," I thought. I hadn't categorized their bond before, but now I realized their kind of closeness. I knew that they had been roommates for the past two years while attending the French technical management college, but I hadn't assumed anything about a more personal relationship.

The West End Community Centre on Denman Street was the starting point for this parade—one of several similar parades in the city. It was too crowded around the front door of the centre to enter the building to see any of the musical

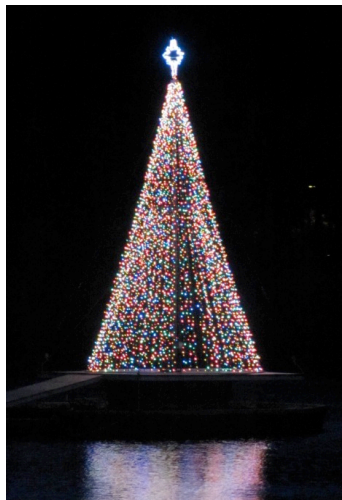
performances or see the conclusion of the lantern making activities that had been going on since the afternoon.



People were lining up outside ready to start the procession. Most carried some sort of lantern—from elaborate to fairly simple. Participants were playing drums and percussion instruments. As we all started filing along the sidewalk, police accompanied us, stopping traffic so we could get across Denman Street. When we progressed along the quieter streets with their snow-covered sidewalks, residents of apartments stood on their light-decorated balconies or looked out of their windows as we went by. So many apartments had Christmas trees shining through their windows.

As we reached the crest of the hill at the edge of Stanley Park, we could see the fountain at Lost Lagoon. It was lit-up with multi-coloured lights and stood like a beacon. Also, barely visible above the tree line, we could see a pinpoint of light that revealed part of the necklace of lights on the Lion's Gate Bridge.

We went down close to the water's edge. I was surprised that, despite the cold, the Canada geese and ducks continue to seem at home on the water. There has been no freezing over.



Just beyond the underpass at Georgia Street on the Coal Harbour side of the park, the parade stopped for drumming and dancing as people gathered around in a circle.

A few minutes later on reaching an area of frozen, snow-covered grass, fire jugglers did an amazing routine. We continued to walk along the edge of the ocean past bistros on the pier as well as lit up private yachts and commercial vessels, which are moored there.

As always when I see extravagant boats or yachts of any kind, I think of Mary's disgust in knowing that some people own pleasure craft when there are still homeless people in the city who don't have clean, dry housing to call home.



When we finally reached the Coal Harbour Community Centre, we entered to find seats and watch and listen to fusion music provided by talented young musicians from around the world.

I was glad, however, that some of us had decided not to stay until the end of the entertainment. Juliana, Marina, and I together left quietly and walked back to the apartment to prepare for the others' arrival. Marina set the dining room table while Juliana helped me with last minute additions to the food.

With Sandy's exams finally over, he had agreed to come to the apartment and join in the Christmas decorating event. We had talked on the phone but had not seen each other since he had stayed with me when I was sick. During these phone calls I had not mentioned his previous girlfriend despite my intention to do so. I worried about how the conversation might come out. But when he walked through the door, I felt reassured as he gave me a very long, warm hug.

"You look terrific," he said.

"Compared to when I had the 'flu, I guess...."

"Well, that too, but walking around in the cool air tonight has you looking radiant."

"Thank you."

I helped him off with his jacket. "Hey, nice sweater. Is that new?"

"No, just one I don't have much occasion to wear."

"Sorry to interrupt. Hi, Sandy," Juliana said, putting her head around the kitchen door into the hallway. "Where would the garlic powder be, Erika?"

“Garlic powder....”

“For the garlic bread.”

“Of course. Top drawer, left of the stove. And I’ll be there in a moment.”

“So how was your last exam?”

“Okay, I think. Certainly I’m relieved to have them all done with.”

“Yes, that must feel so good.”

“Do I dare put my jacket in your bedroom?” Sandy smiled, alluding to feeling more comfortable going in there since spending time with me when I was sick.

“Sure.”

As Sandy headed toward my room, I noticed the more fitted jeans he was wearing.

“Hey...nice pants.” (I was really thinking nice rear end.)

“Yeah? My brother Lauren’s hand-me-downs. He usually passes clothes on to me before they get this shrunk. But I haven’t had time to do my washing lately....”

“But they look so good.”

“So that makes up for the fact that they are not as comfortable?”

“Yeah, for sure.”

He smiled.

I headed to the kitchen to ensure Juliana had found the garlic. The chili that Mary and I had made the night before was staying warm in the crock-pot.

“So what can I do?” Sandy asked, as he came into the kitchen.

“How ‘bout getting down a dozen of those glass cups and putting them on this tray. They are for the mulled cider. And you can tie a coloured pipe cleaner to the handle of each one so people can identify theirs and keep one cup for the whole evening.”

“Great idea. Mmm. I love the smell of cinnamon and nutmeg.”

“Yes.”

After finishing tying on the pipe-cleaner markers, Sandy said, “And plates?”

“Okay. And there are more knives and forks in that wooden box on the dining room shelf.”

“Marina, could you slice up this tomato and put the pieces around the edge of the salad?”

“Sure.”

“How are you at helping get lights on a Christmas tree, Sandy?”

“Well, we’ll see,” he laughed. “My parents’ marriage has just barely survived putting the lights up together a couple of nights ago.”

By the time the doorbell rang, we were fairly well organized and the table was ready. On arriving, most of the group helped themselves to the spiced cider simmering on the stove. But they decided that it would be good to do the basic decorating before eating.

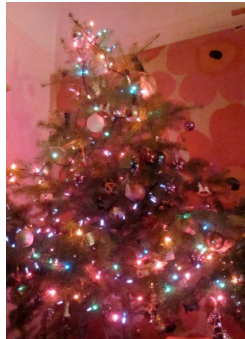
The living room was soon alive with my friends dealing with the boxes of decorations. And the Christmas music that was now continually playing on the radio was helping to set the mood. When I looked into the living room, I was pretty touched to see Sandy, Noboru, and Bae all working at getting the lights on the tree. I realized that Noboru had on jeans (for the first time?) and a white cable-knit sweater similar to Sandy's cream one. They both looked so good.

"Hey, Guys, nice looking tree," Juliana commented.

They seemed pleased with their efforts.

"But wait, we have to put on the rest of the decorations yet," Sandy said.

Having been through the boxes, others stood near the tree handing Sandy, Noboru, and Bae the balls and individual decorations to add. When done, the three of them worked at putting lights around the living room windows.



Juliana and Claudia were arranging evergreens around the fireplace. Even though it is electric, the fireplace casts a cheerful warm glow in the room and adds warmth. As their project, Fernando and Nicole were attaching Christmas cards to the pane-glass door separating the living room and hall. Sebastian, so much taller than everyone else, helped Adrian and Marina string a couple of sets of lights around the dining room windows and then another string above an archway in the hall. Pierre spent most of the time untangling one set of lights that no one else would have bothered with.

Mary and I had made a door decoration previously and, having finished the lights, Sandy came with me to the hallway door to help me put it up. And, yes, outside the door, away from the others, we had a relaxed kiss.

"I'm so glad you are here, Sandy."

"Me too. Thanks for including me."

The group didn't stop for food until the decorating was complete. The place looks so festive, and smells wonderful with the real Christmas tree and some vases of evergreen branches that Mary had brought back from her parent's place in Deep Cove. Song had even arranged a bowl of evergreen branches, candles, and gold balls in the bathroom.

With extra chairs rounded up and brought into the living room, everyone sat and enjoyed the glow of the tree as we ate a leisurely, simple, dinner on our knees. Again I was interested in seeing the comfort between Adrian and Pierre, who were sitting crammed next to each other with two others on the sofa. Anyone who hadn't noticed before would have noticed their closeness then. In fact when we were talking about favorite Christmas memories, they both mentioned a Christmas beer festival in Salzburg four years ago when they had met through a friend.

"The atmosphere in the advent season is gorgeous. Snow, little lights everywhere, beautiful Christmas markets and typical Austrian food," Adrian remembered as if being transported back momentarily.

Looking at Adrian, Pierre confirmed, "Yes, the outdoor craft exhibitions and the entertainment in the cool air makes the whole scene seem magical."

As the group finished eating, individuals gathered up plates and glass cups and washed them. There weren't many preparation dishes to clean. As the others put on their coats and got ready to head to the North Shore, I was glad I didn't have to go outside to go home. And I was particularly happy that Sandy wasn't in a rush to leave. He helped me wash and dry the left over cutlery and tidy up the living room before being willing to relax.

"That was fun," he commented as he came back into the living room with another glass of mulled cider. "But do you agree we have had enough Christmas music for one evening?"

"Sure. Have a look for something else," I said, as I went back into the kitchen to make sure the oven had been shut off.

When I returned to the living room, Sandy was standing by the CD player holding the band's *Making Waves* CD. I really hadn't meant for him to find that immediately. It hadn't been on the top of the pile, for instance. Sandy seemed frozen to the spot.

"Oh, play that one."

"I didn't know you have this one...." He said quietly, as if to himself. He put on the disk and returned with its case and set it on the coffee table in front of us.

"You can tell me which parts you are playing and when you are humming in the background."

"Is that what we call it?" he smiled faintly. "Some call it harmonizing or backup vocals...."

"Sandy?"

"Yeah...."

"I was joking."

"Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to insult your knowledge of music," he said, but apparently he was preoccupied, as he stayed silent.

I decided to give him a moment to see if he would say anything confirming Leah's information.

"Erika, you've never asked me anything about my previous girlfriend."

"When we first met, you said you broke up after you started touring with the band."

"That's certainly not the whole story."

"No, I don't suppose it is."

"Do you think we are strong enough to talk about this without putting another strain on us?"

"Well, you did very well getting the lights up with Noboru tonight...."

"Actually that wasn't too bad. Really. Noboru seems like a very good-natured person."

"He is. So in your saying that, I should try to be understanding in hearing something about your past."

"I'd appreciate that. I don't want to create any more problems for us, Er. I want so badly for us to be together over Christmas."

"Oh, so we are just together for over Christmas?" I teased.

"You know what I mean, Erika," he said being more serious than I expected. "I would especially hate for us to have a misunderstanding now. I'm really looking forward to celebrating together."

"We will."

"Like at my parents' anniversary party. That could have been almost boring for me, but it was wonderful because we were there together."

He opened the disk cover to the inside pages showing all the members of the band.

He pointed. "That's her."

I looked closely and said, "She is beautiful. You never mentioned that she was in the band."

"With the band. She was band manager, as Leah is now. Only she didn't sing. Or play an instrument."

"Did you know her before she was band manager and get her the job?"

"No, that's how I met her. Through the band."

“So why didn’t she continue as band manager?” I was surprised that this question had slipped out so easily, unexpectedly.

“Because it became awkward for the band, and me, after she and I became a couple.”

“Oh. So she quit the band...”

Sandy didn’t seem to hear that comment, but said, “It might have been all right. After all, Leah and Larry are a couple, so why not another one?”

He paused, perhaps concerned about what I might think about what he was about to say.

“It might have worked, except that we took on a new guitar player whom she had known since they were in high school in Edmonton. We had been looking for an additional guitarist for a while—so I wouldn’t always have to choose between playing keyboard or backup guitar.”

Sandy paused seeming to be unaware of me for a moment. I left him to his silence. Then he resumed by saying, “At the time that he joined us, none of us had any idea that the two of them had been sexually involved and were wanting to become so again.”

“Oh....”

Ignoring my reaction, Sandy said, “He is this one.”

I looked closely at his picture.

“Hmm. Why would she choose him over you?”

“I think at the time she assumed she was choosing him in addition to me.”

“Oh, I see.”

Sandy looked at me to see how I was taking this. Somehow, it didn’t seem nearly as bad with Sandy explaining this as when Leah had dropped this information on me.

“Anyway this, their involvement, became apparent to the others almost immediately. I had no such suspicions.”

“Oh.”

He added, “You see, Erika, I wasn’t always as suspicious as I have been regarding your friendship with Noboru.”

“Ah....” I put my hand on Sandy’s knee and smiled at him. I felt like I wanted to hug him to keep him from being hurt, but the harm had already been done. I noticed Sandy hadn’t been touching me as we sat there. Was he assuming I wouldn’t want any contact with him due to what I might think was his tainted past?

“Well, all of this was very awkward for others in the band as they realized that I had no idea that she was involved with both of us at once. She still presented me as her boyfriend. She hadn’t said that she wanted to break up with me. Wouldn’t that have been the natural thing for her to do if she wanted to be with the other guy?”

I was quiet as I didn't know what to say, but I could hear the pain in Sandy's voice.

"When we were touring, when we were all on the road together, well, I finally found out. I'd rather not go into the details."

"It's okay. I don't need to know."

"I was devastated. Not so much because that marked the end of our relationship, but because I felt like such a fool. I guess in a way I also felt I had, to some extent, been used. Certainly I had greatly misjudged her. Her age, for instance. When we first met, I believed we were around the same age. But after we were together for awhile, well, I realized that she was considerably older, judging from her sexual experience."

I stayed quiet even though I was curious to know about that.

"I'd been so naïve in my assumptions. After I saw what was going on, I feared I would never again be able to make a judgment about a woman."

"Ah, Sandy. I'm sorry. I understand now why you have such trouble trusting me around Noboru."

I put my hand flat against his chest.

"Thanks for seeing this. I certainly want to be trusting with you. But there is part of me that may always be ready for the worst. And it will be difficult for me to believe my assumptions are the same as that of another person."

"So that's why you wanted to talk about expectations in the car after Thanksgiving dinner?"

"Yes, exactly. For instance, I had never questioned monogamy before finding out that she was involved with two of us. To have only one sexual partner at a time—I assumed that was something everyone wanted. Expected."

"So we agree on that," I reassured him.

"Good. And she and I never talked about sex. It was as if it was a secret even to ourselves. A kind of pantomime in the dark. An unconscious time immediately forgotten."

"Oh..."

"I want to be able to talk about sex with my partner, even if that is at times awkward."

"I hope for that too."

"That's good then."

"What kinds of things did the two of you have in common? What did you do together?"

"Well, that's a good question. Of course there was the band, but beside that, not much. We went for dinner once a week. I guess that was a major activity."

"Oh, expensive."

"But I was also working in Dad's studio a few hours a week. So I had a bit of money."

“I didn’t know you worked at your dad’s studio while being in the band.”

“I did. I thought I needed to do that.” He added quietly, “Even then I was struggling to decide whether architecture or music was to be more central to my life.”

Sandy was silent several moments before he added, “Er, you may have been outside enough for tonight, but I’d like to get some fresh air. Would you walk with me for a while?”

While going outdoors was the last thing I would have suggested at that moment, I agreed and blew out the candles in front of us. Soon we were at the door bundled up in coats, scarves, hats, and mitts, and putting on our boots. I locked the door behind us.





## ***DECEMBER # 6—Night Walk with Sandy***

*Visuals: photographs of the fireman's tree, Inuit sculpture on English Bay, and snow on the beach*

Sandy took my gloved hand. I could see our breath in the cool air. After a few moments of walking south in silence and then along the shore of Sunset Beach within sight of the mouth of False Creek, Sandy said, "Let's go and see the fireman's tree of lights."

We walked up from the seawall with the crunch of snow underfoot. The huge tree was lit with thousands of coloured lights—more than I have ever seen on one tree. Near the base of the tree's trunk, we stood looking up into its branches with the lights casting their magical glow on our faces and all around us.



When we started walking again, without realizing I was returning to the previous subject, I asked, "What did your mom think about that girlfriend?"

"They never met."

"No? Why not?"

"Well, I just never felt comfortable enough with her that I wanted to take her to meet my parents."

“So I should feel privileged?”

“I felt different about you right from the start, Er,” he looked down apparently preoccupied before he added, “But I talked a lot to my mom about her, probably as a result of my unconscious doubts.”

“So what did your mom think about that relationship?”

“She regretted that I felt I needed to help this woman so much. She thought there was something unbalanced about that. The lack of equality. Mom also thought that we didn’t have much in common.”

“Despite being associated with the band?”

“Well, Mom knew she didn’t play an instrument or sing, that she was just the administrator.”

“Oh.” Instantly I thought thank goodness I play the flute.

“I came to realize that what I saw in her as serenity, possibly influenced by her name, was lack of vitality.”

“Her name?”

“Serena.”

“Oh, yes....”

Sandy continued, “Once we split up, I was lethargic for weeks. I realized that I had been emotionally emptied.”

“Your mom was glad you broke up?”

“Absolutely, although she didn’t say a lot because she could see my pain. Eventually I admitted that part of my suffering was a result of finally finding out I’d been part of a sexual triangle.”

“And what did she say about that?”

“Well, she was sympathetic to what I was feeling, but she suggested I have some medical tests done to make sure I’m okay.”

“And you did that?”

“Yes, even though I knew I had never had unprotected sex.”

“So you’re okay?”

“Yes, thank goodness. But that’s not a situation I ever want to be in again, Er.”

Near the tall Inuit sculpture and in front of the bathhouse, there were a few more people strolling around enjoying being outside despite the cold air.



We sat down on a park bench. A pleasure boat outlined in coloured lights glided quietly past. It was heading toward False Creek as if being a late, lone straggler from a carol ships event.

We stayed there a few minutes without saying anything, but apparently Sandy needed to do something more active. We got up and started walking the seawall toward Second Beach.



Sandy commented, “You know, I used to listen to an album of my mom’s, by some Canadian folk singers, that has a song entitled ‘I Don’t Sleep with Strangers Anymore.’ I used to wonder who would sleep with a stranger anyway. After my experience, however, I realized that I had, in fact, been sleeping with a stranger. I really didn’t know Serena. Didn’t know much about her past, didn’t realize what she was up to, and had no idea of what she wanted for the future. I didn’t even know how she really felt about us as a couple.”

I didn’t know what to say.

“I don’t want that to happen again, Er. I want sex to entail a commitment to a shared future between my partner and me, not just be a momentary, lustful release even if it’s mutual.”

“Sandy, I’m sorry that this happened to you.”

“And I do want to be able to trust, Er. But it’s hard to go back. You always carry some of your sexual past with you. Also, with you, I’m aware that we can’t assume that what is acceptable in one context is also acceptable in another.”

“So that’s why you said it is important for us to talk about what we expect....”

“Exactly. I don’t want us to just slip into patterns that we might later regret. Like going to bed together without deciding what that should mean to us.”

“You made it seem so easy,” I commented.

“Easy?”

“For us to be in bed together when I was sick.”

“Oh, but that was different, Er. At least I hope that was different. Lying beside you was more about comfort and caring than sexuality. I hope you didn’t feel that I was taking advantage of you while you were sick.”

“No, not at all. But it felt so wonderful, us being together.”

“Yeah.”

“I loved it that you were willing to stay with me when I felt so awful. Looked so awful.”

“I hoped that was okay, Er, but sometimes when you’re attracted to someone, it’s easier to get into bed than to stay out of it. Like when you stayed overnight in looking after Noel with me. It would have been far easier for me to follow you to your bed than it was for me to stay alone in mine.”

“And while I wished you had followed me, I don’t know what I would have done if you had.”

“Exactly. That’s why knowing in advance about expectations is so important. And to know that holding back isn’t for lack of feeling, but is about what is feasible at any particular stage in our relationship.”

Sandy stopped and looked away from me. He was silent and stood staring out toward the horizon. There faint, flickering lights confirmed the presence of freighters waiting to get clearance to proceed around the corner of Stanley Park, go under the bridge, and dock in the harbour.



We continued to walk.

“What about in high school and undergrad? Did you have a serious girlfriend then?”

“I didn’t date at all in high school. I was small for my age. The girls I knew were just friends.”

“Friends....”

“Yeah, girls in the band or in art club. We played at the dances or worked together making decorations for school events.”

“So when did you do most of your growing?”

“When I was 18. That included first-year university.”

“Then you started dating?”

“In second year, on my father’s urging, I joined a frat.”

“A frat....”

"Fraternity."

"Oh, right. The guys in the photograph in your room."

"Yes, that's right. Many of the social activities there matched us up with sorority girls."

"Oh...."

"But not having been accustomed to dating, I found the sorority girls intimidating."

"In what way?"

"Well, they seemed to be so sophisticated and materialistic. Knew exactly what they were after."

"Really."

"Yet, with the urging of the guys, I managed to go on a few first dates with them. But I couldn't be myself around them. I was guessing at the kind of guy they wanted me to be."

"That's not very comfortable."

"Maybe they were willing to date me because I live in the British Properties or maybe because my dad has some status. But I never felt right with any of them."

"So with the band manager it was different?"

"Well, with Serena I felt I could do something for her. She had moved to Vancouver on her own. Without family and, at first, without even a friend. She needed help."

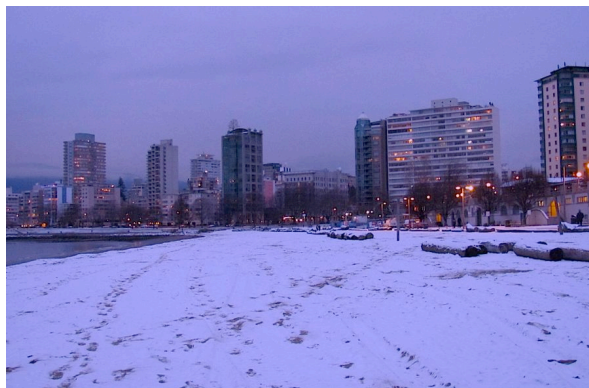
"Maybe you needed to be needed."

"Perhaps. I realize now that Serena's level of need was probably not healthy. But it maintained our relationship."

"In what way?"

"Well, besides needing me in a practical and emotional way, she also wanted me. Claimed me sexually. I didn't have to initiate anything. So it was easy to fall into and stay in that relationship."

In continuing to walk we had arrived back at the main beach. An unexpected gust of wind blew up off the ocean. Sandy zipped his jacket collar up under his chin. The tide was very low and the covering of snow over the sand made the scene unusually bright.



Sandy faced me, took both my hands, and said, "Er, I hate thinking about all this again. Let's go home."

We walked back to the apartment in silence, our breath visible in the cold air. The branches of chestnut trees were stark against coloured lights around windows, balcony railings, and on decorated evergreens. There was hardly anyone on the sidewalk and not even many cars on the streets.

When we arrived outside the apartment building, I paused and commented, "Sandy, you said you wanted to go home...."

"By home, I meant somewhere we can be comfortable together."

"So you'll come in?"

"I'd like to."

Once inside the door to the apartment we took off our coats and other outerwear and went back into the living room. I relit the candles while Sandy put on some quiet music. Then we sat on the sofa again.

With regret in his voice, Sandy asked, "So, do you think less of me for my past, Er?"

"No, but I'm sorry you got so hurt. I don't know how I can help you to trust again, Sandy."

He put his fingers on my still-cool cheek and said, "Only time can heal that. I hope we will have that time."

Seeming assured that I am not repelled by his experience, Sandy drew me closer. In the glow of the Christmas tree lights and candles, we were happy to have some time on the sofa.

In knowing that Mary was away for the night, I felt it could have been surprisingly easy to move from the sofa to my bed. But aware of our pact, maybe even committed to our future, we didn't. Still, we enjoyed each other in our own way.



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