



DECEMBER # 7—Lunch Alone with Juliana

Visuals: photographs of Robson Square garden and Thurlow St. toward frosty mountains

Had an upsetting conversation with Juliana at lunchtime today. To avoid going into the often-overcrowded lounge and because it was quite pleasant out, we walked to Robson Square garden and sat up there for a few minutes while we each ate our bag lunches. Not sure how this came up but she mentioned that her husband had been in a fraternity during university in Brazil and asked if Sandy had been in one.

When I said he had, she asked, “So if Sandy was in a fraternity and still has contact with that social group, why is he going out with you?”

I don’t think Juliana meant to insult me with this comment. For her, everything about male/female bonding is too matter of fact for her to realize that saying something like this could hurt someone. When Sandy had explained about his relative lack of date life during undergrad, I had no reason not to believe him. So why was this conversation with Juliana so irritating?

She didn’t expect an answer from me, and I certainly didn’t feel like giving her one. Luckily some of her subsequent comments softened my hurt.

“Sandy is a good looking guy, although unassuming. And he has a cute smile.”

“I know.”

“And a great butt.”

“Juliana!”

An involuntary smile came to my lips, and she hurriedly added, “But of course you know that too, Erika.”

She did not wait for a response.

“And well educated. Cultured. Classy even, in an understated sort of way. Yeah. Tons of potential. So why isn’t he with some Canadian girl?”

She didn’t seem to expect an answer because she continued with hardly a pause.

“So how many sorority girls has Sandy screwed? Must be plenty. Living in the British Properties. All that status. They’d be after him for sure.”

These comments sounded as vulgar as something that Nicole might have said before she felt cherished by Fernando.

Juliana continued, “Yet despite everything, I still don’t know why you are willing to take on all these problems, Erika.”

“These problems?”

“Well, once your infatuation with Sandy is over, what will you be left with? A bunch of headaches. You think you have so much in common with Sandy. Well, why not wait until you are in architecture school in Japan and find yourself a nice Japanese guy who you really will have something in common with? In the meanwhile, think about all the things you don’t have in common with Sandy. Language, culture, country.... That’s more to the point.”

Even though I didn’t openly respond to Juliana’s comments, I reacted emotionally. Based on what Sandy had voluntarily told me, I was sure that Juliana’s sexual assumptions about Sandy as a fraternity brother were unfounded and all her other comments were issues I have considered on my own. I didn’t appreciate Juliana confronting me with them.

Perhaps to protect myself, I ended up thinking about what these attitudes said about Juliana at this stage of her life. Is she bitter in seeing so many of us enjoying romantic connections? Has romance passed her by or does that now seem so far in her past? She’s only been married two years, and thirty-one isn’t that old.





DECEMBER # 8—Celebrating Christmas Eve

Visuals: photographs from interior of church, recipes for fish dish, consommé tomato soup, and Mary's own salad dressing

My Canadian Christmas Eve was wonderful—a delicious, fun dinner with Mary's extended family and an inspirational church service, all shared with Sandy.

The reason Sandy was able to spend Christmas Eve with me was his family doesn't have an organized event on this night. His kin are frantically doing last minute shopping and wrapping. Or else they are fetching tired Toronto family members from the airport. And because of the time difference, the Toronto relatives, as soon as they arrive, just want to go to bed in order to have some energy for Christmas Day.

During the day I helped Mary make Christmas Eve dinner in order to learn to make the halibut entrée (stuffed with shrimp, mushrooms, and asparagus), which is Mary's Christmas Eve favourite.

Well, at 7:00 pm the group of nine crowded around the table. These included Mary's mom and dad, Mary's niece Alisa and her husband Marcus, and Mary's friends Darlene and Ben, and of course Mary, Sandy and I.

"So did how did your dinner tradition start, Mary?" Sandy asked.

"Well, Mom was in retail sales so she got home very late Christmas Eve—about an hour after the 9:00 pm store-closing. And everyone else in the family was making last minute, hand-

made gifts on a sewing machine or in the workshop or they were painting or assembling projects behind closed doors.”

Alisa commented, “My family made many of its own gifts too, so that must be because my mom grew up with that tradition.”

Mary’s mom confirmed, “Yes, we did that as family, although this tradition really started after your mom (Mary’s sister) had left home.”

Mary continued, “Initially I made a big pot of chilli, a salad, and some garlic bread so that whenever people were ready to eat, they could stop and serve themselves from the crock-pot and then carry on with their activity. But then we began to sit down together, and over the years I made the meal increasingly elaborate. Soon I was making up to a dozen dishes for the sit-down dinner.”

“And you had this at your parents’ house?” Marcus asked.

“Yes, I did the cooking here but then Dad would pick up Daphne and me. We would keep the food warm by wrapping it in towels, as there were no microwave ovens then.”

Mary’s dad confirmed with some pleasure, “That took a fair bit of effort, getting everything down the stairs and loaded into the van. Luckily the streets were practically deserted on Christmas Eve so the drive out to the Cove was easy.”

Mary then resumed saying, “When we arrived at Mom and Dad’s house, we would rush to get all on the food onto the table and everyone seated in order to eat while the food was still hot. Howard and his family lived next door so the little cousins would walk down to dinner in their new Christmas pyjamas knowing that the minute everyone got up from the table, these kids were ready to go home to bed.”

Mary added, “By the time Daphne was in her teens, we realized that we could put more energy into Christmas cooking and decorating and having time for friends and family by not exchanging Christmas gifts. But despite freeing up time by not having last-minute wrapping to do, we still maintained the Christmas Eve dinner tradition.”

“Good for you. Most Canadians are still stuck obtaining way more gifts than they should, wasting all that time, energy, and money,” Sandy commented.

“And still being stressed out by trying to find all those gifts that people generally don’t even remember a few days later,” Darleen added. “At home all that gift giving got totally out of hand. That is one of the positive aspects of living half a country away—the cost of postage makes sending gifts prohibitive.”

"Yet even without considering the postage expense, you do end up wondering, what's the point of all that?" Mary's mom commented.

"Yeah, there's an empty feeling looking around Christmas morning at all that wasted, discarded Christmas wrapping paper and mementos that were only fleeting surprises...." Ben added.

"But still, I realize not everyone can get away from gift giving. They would just feel too guilty," Mary stated.

"But guilty about what? Not giving family useless consumer items rather than giving in other ways? And abusing the environment with all that waste?" Alisa asked rhetorically.

"Well, Daphne and I gave up gift giving when we gave up watching television," Mary laughed. "That made it easier. The pressure to buy all that unnecessary stuff comes from TV. Being free of that influence, we were able to choose the aspects of Christmas that we enjoy most and want to preserve."

"Well, this certainly is a nice tradition and we are so glad to be part of it," Darlene said.

"Wouldn't miss it." Ben quipped, "I come for the vegetables."

"The vegetables?" Mary laughed.

"Well, you know the fish is delicious...."

"Yes, Mary, we'd still love to have that recipe," Darlene added.

"But you do something especially nice to the vegetables," Ben continued. "They are really what I look forward to. I do hope they won't be out of reach next year."

"How do you mean that?"

"Well, did you hear the talk about putting a tax on food that has to be flown in, that isn't grown locally?"

"Which is almost all our food now," Mary added. "The worst actions that our local and BC governments ever undertook was to release the agricultural land in Richmond for housing developments and useless shopping plazas when it was such an excellent growing area. To have to depend now on another country for food is a big mistake. What could Canadian governments have been thinking about when they did this?"

"Unless they did it on purpose to deliver us into the hands of the American government," Marcus commented. "Once I heard in an interview on CBC radio, an American interviewee object to something the Canadian interviewer stated, and the American's response was, 'Canadians couldn't do that. If you did, we would cut off your food supply.'"

"No kidding! The American said that to the Canadian interviewer?" Mary exclaimed.

"Yes, he said it three times.... 'You couldn't do that.' 'Yes, we could.' 'No you couldn't, we are your biggest trading

partner.' 'Yes, we could,' was how the conversation went," Marcus confirmed.

"I wish I had heard that."

"He must have been some pompous figure that has let the power of his position go to his head," commented Darlene, who is an American.

"Perhaps, but it may also reflect the attitudes of others of his ilk," Mary's dad added.

"Well, this American authority, the person making this threat on Canadian national radio, made me wish all the more that we could keep control of our important resources. Things that are essential to us," Marcus added.

"Which ones are you thinking of?" asked Darlene.

"Well, our water and power resources for sure."

"Doesn't Canada control its own water and power supplies?" I dared to ask, trying to imagine Japan letting some other country have control over such vital internal resources.

Sandy answered, "The BC and Canadian governments seem intent on selling both our water and our hydro to the Americans, so we will have no bargaining power at all."

"Our governments pretend they are simply committed to a business model in selling resources and services, like other types of merchandise, to the highest bidder," Marcus added.

"Now, dears, it's Christmas Eve, let's not get into conspiracy theory," Mary's mother commented earnestly.

"Conspiracy theory?" Darlene smiled, obviously interested.

Marcus said, "Some of us do wonder if Canadian officials are on the payroll of the American government, receiving money into their Swiss bank accounts in exchange for signing over Canadian resources."

"Then Canadians will have to cooperate with the Americans just to be able to survive using the resources that should have been in Canada's control in the first place," Alisa commented.

"Our politicians just don't realize that keeping our resources to provide us with bargaining clout would be more effective than worrying about having a strong military force for protection," Marcus added.

"Sorry, Darlene and Ben, I hope you aren't offended by these comments," Mary's mom commented.

"Are you Americans?" Sandy asked.

"Yes, we are. But we probably wouldn't be in Canada if we agreed with the US government's approach to exploiting the resources of other countries," Ben reassured us.

"As you know we don't have anything against American people; it's American policies that we object to, along with

Canadian officials who are jeopardizing our future," Mary assured them.

"When we are in a position of total dependency, then there will be no alternative but for Canada to join the United States," Marcus added. "Logically, that seems to be Canadian officials' overall, unstated plan. Yet they hide the fact that they are selling off our resources, or they try to convince us that we don't need to worry."

"And my main concern is not so much the survival of Canada for its own sake, but the fact is that the world doesn't need a larger, more powerful United States," Alisa added.

Mary stated, "I can't help but feel we have been living through the golden age of civilization—a time that there have been enough essentials to go around—food, air, water, power, despite the fact that our distribution system has been flawed. But what is going to happen when consumption is beyond what the world can provide, when greed and panic really do set in as a result of world-wide starvation, polluted water, and unbreathable air? Then only the very rich and the large corporations will be able to afford hydro, water, and nourishing meals."

"Well, sitting in front of all this food, it is hard to believe that such an altered reality will come soon," Ben added.

"Perhaps not immediately, but it will inevitably come. Humans will have to learn to live within what the planet can provide for us on a sustainable basis," Mary responded.

The candles flickered in the center of the table as we finished the main course and started on dessert. The non-drivers who had been drinking wine were feeling somewhat mellow. Mary and I began to clear the table knowing that some people wanted to leave before it became too late.

At the table the conversation became slightly more subdued while I relayed platters and plates to the kitchen counters to aid Mary in the cleanup.

Not long after saying goodbye to the departing guests at the door and finishing the cleanup, Mary, Sandy, and I put on our coats, scarves, hats, and gloves and walked to the midnight candlelight service at the cathedral on Burrard Street. Entering the church, there was an air of reverence in the low light of the high-ceilinged interior graced by colourful stained glass windows. There were tall candles waiting to be lit at the end of each pew.

As the three of us sat there through the church service, Sandy and I held hands. I enjoyed hearing Sandy singing all those carols—I adore his voice, yet he seems to sing without any consciousness of being so much better than everyone else.

Toward the end of the service, all the candles in tall candleholders throughout the church were lit. It was magical.

And it was very moving at the end of the service to see people slowly walking down the centre aisle, each with their own individual candle glowing and flickering. This was the kind of evening that I have always thought might be part of a Western Christmas. I was very grateful to experience it.

We went out into the cool air. It was a lovely frosty night for walking home in the moonlight. As we got to back the front door of the apartment building, Mary assured Sandy he was welcome to come in, but said she understood when he declined. I walked with him to his car. We decided I wouldn't get in with him. We leaned against the metal car door even though it was covered with frost.

"So I knew you would be able to sing," Sandy said with a smile.

"Me? Sing. You were listening to me sing?"

"Of course. And I'd like to hear so much more."

"So how is our song coming along?"

"Not bad, although I've been a little busy."

"Well, let me know when we can sing some of that together."

We kissed, our two cool faces warming up against each other's.

Sandy confirmed similar thoughts to mine, saying it had been the kind of Christmas Eve that he had always wanted to share with a special friend at Christmastime.



*Opening aerial photograph of interior of St. Andrew's-Wesley United Church
courtesy of Mark J. Anthony, M.A.I.B.C., Vancouver, Canada; above image by the
author*



DECEMBER # 9—Seeing Sandy on Christmas Day

Visuals: photographs of Deep Cove on Christmas Day

When I awoke to the smell of bacon cooking, fresh coffee brewing, and blueberry muffins and cheese biscuits coming out of the oven, I felt guilty. Mary had obviously cooking for some time. I got up and I poked my head around the kitchen door.

“Merry Christmas!”

“Yes, Merry Christmas.”

It was a bright, frosty day so, even though there was no new snow on the ground (unlike images from Canadian Christmas cards), it felt rather special. The lights on the Christmas tree and around the living room and dining room windows were already on. Christmas choral music from choirs across Canada played on Canadian radio (the CBC). I dressed as quickly as I could; I was glad I had bathed and set out my clothes the night before.

I was back in the kitchen to help Mary in a few minutes. She had me put on an apron and finish putting things out on the dining table that she was setting up as a buffet. White linen table napkins looked good against the dark red tablecloth. This was in striking contrast to the dark green evergreens interspersed with brown pinecones in the window boxes just on the other side of the glass.

Before long, Mary’s mom and dad arrived and soon after Howard and Ella and their toddler Jenny and then Alisa and Marcus came through the door and took off their layers of warm clothing. They all helped themselves to fresh fruit juice from the punch bowl as Mary started the cheese omelets. There were also grapefruit segments, sliced cantaloupe, and grapes for

our guests to nibble on while they milled around. All were in good spirits.

Howard and Ella were in their new sweaters that they had given each other and Jenny was in a traditional red velvet dress with white lace on it. I was glad when Ella put a full-length bib on Jenny as her hands became sticky from the fruit.

We finally all sat in the living room in the presence of the Christmas tree and ate our omelets and muffins. Marcus and Alisa had already spoken on the phone to relatives in Toronto, as Toronto is three hours ahead of Vancouver time, so they passed on their news and greetings.

After we had completed our delicious brunch, Mary's mom and dad left to go home to get the turkey in the oven so it would be ready for us all later. Howard, Ella, and Jenny left too as they had Ella's family to visit. Mary explained to me that by hosting Christmas Eve she didn't have to contribute much for the Christmas Day dinner. She has a long-standing Christmas Day tradition of visiting her friend Elaine (the one that I met carol singing at the library). She still lives in Deep Cove. Marcus and Alisa agreed to drop us off at her house on their way past and to later retrieve us.

So about three o'clock in the afternoon, Mary and I arrived in Deep Cove at Elaine and Gerald's house. There was much evidence of gift giving there, some of it still going on as other members of the extended family arrived. Folded gift paper and piles of gifts in boxes were still propped under the Christmas tree despite some having taken their opened gifts into their bedroom.



There was finger food spread out on a huge dining room table. Elaine greeted guests from the open kitchen as she continued to cook what would be dinner for at least 18 members of her extended family. In the meantime, Gerald served as host ensuring that everyone had something to eat and drink.

I met Elaine's mother, about the age of Mary's mother's, and she introduced me to her grandchildren as they emerged from bedrooms or moved from one area to another. She commented on being so proud of her miniature United Nations family, which I had become aware of previously.

Elaine and Gerald's daughter, just a little older than me and recently married, arrived with her husband. They are both

Canadian but they met while teaching for a couple of years in Japan. We talked a while about that—where they had been and what they had seen. I would have continued to talk with them, but Sandy buzzed from the downstairs door, as we had arranged. I put on my outdoor wear, said goodbye to Elaine and the others, and I went down to meet Sandy rather than have him go through the confusion of multiple introductions.

Seeing him again certainly seemed longer than just 15 or so hours. He had on a new, cream-coloured jacket, a Christmas gift. It looked soft and appealing even though I didn't need an excuse for a really warm hug. We got in his car and drove to Deep Cove's main street. We parked in the parking lot next to the male/female-head fountain that we had met in front of twice before. That sculpture always makes me think of Sandy.

The sun was out still but there was not much warmth in it. We walked down toward the beach and then the length of the park. We talked about what our families had done so far on Christmas Day. It was good to hear of this before it all became blurred over by the rest of the day's activity.

Then we went to the sunniest bench overlooking the beach, the one dedicated to the parents of Mary's friends (Mary had pointed this out to me before). Sandy took a blanket out of his backpack and put it down for us to sit on.

He talked about his relatives and the confusion of present opening with the three little kids.

"Does everyone buy everyone else a present?"

"No, as adults we draw names a month before Christmas and just buy one gift for one person, with a price limit, but the kids get more. That's the confusion... having three of them in the house all opening gifts at once."

"So your parents drew your name and got you the jacket?"

"No, actually, this is from just Mom. She declares she gets to ignore the gift rules while we are still students. So she always buys me a major article of clothing, hence the jacket."

"Nice that she has good taste then."

"So you like it?"

"Yes, it looks terrific on you. And kind of cuddly."

"I think Mom was thinking warm rather than cuddly, as it's supposed to withstand temperatures of at least 30 below."

"Ah, useful," I laughed thinking how rare it would be to be for anyone in Vancouver to be in 30 below temperatures.

"In case I go to Toronto in the winter or end up in a snowstorm on a local mountain."

"Oh, of course. Does it have a hood?"

"Yes, the collar unfolds."

"Can I try?"

"I suppose," he commented as I reached around his head and extended the hood out onto his shoulders. He acted if he was just barely tolerating my action. He sat still as I put the hood up over this head and tightened the cord over his chin so that only part of his face showed from his lower lip to his eyebrows.

I laughed when Sandy asked, "Are you finished?"

"Yes, it looks so cute on you. Makes you look about twelve."

"And is that an improvement?"

"Not necessarily. At least, I'm glad you are twenty-five, otherwise I could be in big trouble."

"Big trouble?"

"For being a bad influence on a twelve-year-old."

"Oh, so you are the bad one?" he laughed.

As I undid the hood and flattened it out on his shoulders to fold it as a collar again, he acted like a little kid about to be kissed by an aunt wearing too much lipstick.

Finally, he said, "So does the hood meet your approval?"

"I am wondering if it will be able to withstand 30 below temperatures."

"And what have you decided?"

"Not sure. Maybe you will have to test it."

"I'd just as soon not test it, Erika."

"I guess not. So did you receive another gift from someone who drew your name in your family?"

He unzipped the front of the jacket and showed me the MP3 player he had around his neck.

"Wow."

"From Lynn."

"So what kind of price limit was there!"

"Exactly. This certainly wasn't within it. I lectured Lynn for giving me something this expensive, especially since she and Grant know I don't approve of most electronic toys. But they've provided me with an incredible music library, which they said they particularly enjoyed putting together. As for being over the price limit, well, I think they were trying to pay back something for those weekends that we looked after Noel in the summer. So half of this player rightfully belongs to you."

"Oh, good," I laughed. "Then we can share it when we are together!"

"That sounds fair."

"So how's Noel?"

"Great, but exhausting."

"So it's a welcome relief to get away for a while?"

"Absolutely. You must know how much I love Noel, but, well, the other kids got Noel and the rest of us up at 6:00 this morning."

“Oh, wow! Even Mary was slightly more civilized than that.”

“So are you going to make it through dinner?”

“Good question.”

“Maybe you should come and have a nice, calm dinner with us, assuming all the political topics were adequately covered last night,” I laughed.

“Well, all that was interesting, people stating things we wonder about but don’t always put out there directly.”

Sandy added, “And you know I’d love to have dinner with you, Erika.”

“But we know that wouldn’t be the right thing to do.”

“Exactly.”

Sandy reached into his backpack. I knew we would exchange our handmade gifts then. I was wondering what he could give me that cost less than five dollars in materials. So I was pleased to see that Sandy had made me a CD entitled “Songs of Love.” It was a recording of him singing and playing love songs, and it was dedicated to me.

I was touched. He designed the CD cover and wrote out all the lyrics in some of his beautiful lettering. It includes “our song” that he had sung to me with my friends on English Bay Beach the night I had been there with my flute.

“When did you have time to make this?”

“In quiet moments when I was missing performing, I would get out my guitar and record a song. One song at a time. I have simple recording equipment at home. It certainly isn’t professional quality, but I hope you will enjoy listening to it as much as I enjoyed making it for you.”

“Oh, I can’t wait to hear to it. Thank you so much.”

I opened my bag and gave him what I had made. I watched with interest as he began to undo the paper.

“So what is this?” he asked turning around the high-contrast image of Sandy’s face and shoulders depicting him in looking down in concentration in playing the guitar.

“Wow, this is wonderful! How did you do it?”

“Well, as you can see the image is adapted from the photograph of you on your most recent CD. Mary has been teaching me how to make images in paper pulp, so this is my first serious attempt.”

“Terrific. It will always remind me of how supportive you were of me as a performing musician. Not all my friends were as understanding of my need to do that as you were.”

We hugged.

As we stood up, he put one of the ear-buds from the MP3 player in my ear and then put the other one in his own ear. Joined together by the length of the cord, we walked along within sight of the beach. When we got to the shore, I took my

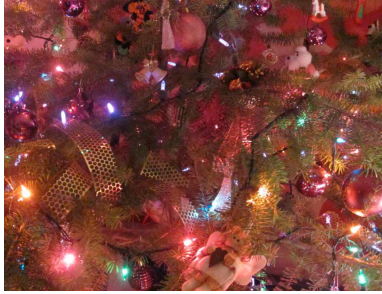
earplug out as we threw some stones in the water trying to make them skip along the almost icy surface. Sandy was able to do this consistently. I wasn't very good at it, so we laughed a lot.



When we began to see our breath in the cool air, we agreed it was time for us to get back to our family groups. Despite the shortness of this visit, I felt I had spent time with Sandy on Christmas Day. We promised we would talk on the phone before going to bed at the end of the night.

He drove me back to Elaine's where I rejoined Mary for a few minutes before Marcus and Alisa came and picked us up and took us to Mary's parents' house, only a couple of miles away, for yet another delicious family dinner. This one, relatively free of politics, was an apparently traditional North American turkey dinner with all the trimmings, in the glow of yet another Christmas tree.





DECEMBER —Boxing Day on Sunshine Coast and at Sandy's House

Visuals: photographs of view from ferry terminal and winter view from Sandy's house, Christmas tree

The next day, Boxing Day, was the time that Howard spent with his first family, and he asked Mary and I to join him in visiting the home of his ex-wife and her husband. The family lives near Gibsons, a 40-minute ferry ride away. Howard arrived at the apartment to pick up Mary and me. Mary's parents and Ella and Jenny were also accompanying us. I had no idea that an ex-wife and family would welcome a current wife and family to share a celebration. But this occasion certainly showed that this is possible and enviable.

In the parking lot at Horseshoe Bay, we all got out of the SUV and headed for the ferry terminal. Travelling as foot passengers, each of us was carrying a daypack containing our food contributions. In the ferry terminal waiting room, a vending machine proudly announced, "Ice cold cola." I thought how much more appealing a cup of hot chocolate would have been at that particular moment, as the day was again rather frosty—too cold to go out on the deck during the voyage.

When the ferry docked on the other side, the sister, Lilian, arrived in her van. We were happy to get in out of the cold. It wasn't far to the house, a rambling, western-style home almost hidden by a rather overgrown, winter-neglected garden. When we got inside the warm, inviting entrance hall, we took off our shoes. Walking in sock feet in the carpeted interior made me feel at home and everyone seemed to relax immediately.

We unwrapped our food and put it on the long kitchen counter that divides the open kitchen from a family room. The various dishes that everyone contributed made a substantial spread without anyone having cooked that day, as the various dishes were leftovers from Christmas.

We all gravitated to the living room where a crackling fireplace, coloured window lights, and a lit Christmas tree created a welcoming environment. There were at least 20 of us

from three generations. Everyone talked excitedly about what the Christmas season was unfolding for them.

When it was time to eat, we all filed out to the kitchen counter and helped ourselves and then returned to the living room and found sofa, chair, hearth, or seating space on the carpeted floor and settled into eating. The food was delicious with lots of variety.

After supper when everyone was feeling mellow, I again saw one of the young women (about 20 years old) sitting with her boyfriend (lounging on him, would be more precise), arms around each other. They seemed to be so comfortable in the presence of all of us without the least embarrassment on their part. Nor was there any apparent notice on the part of any one else regarding this intimacy. It is so nice to see that young people here don't feel they have to hide their affection for each other from their parents.

At one point, Ryan (the captain of the caroling boat), the partner of Howard's ex-wife, asked for my opinion of the event. He said, "I don't want to put you on the spot in front of everyone, Erika, but I'd love to know what you are seeing here that you might not see in your own country."

Because the group had made me feel so accepted, I didn't mind answering. I mentioned the surprise of seeing the open affection between young people as well as three generations interacting more as equals than being separated by age or gender.

"Ah, interesting," Ryan responded.

To get a little more active, some of us went into a music room, a separate, closed room in the house filled with a variety of musical instruments. Most of these were apparently bought at flea markets—very cheap! This included an organ that was missing several notes, and a few guitars missing some strings, etc. Despite having my flute with me to in the hope of later playing with Sandy, I didn't admit that. Somehow playing on a fully working instrument would have felt like cheating, so I stuck with my percussion attempt by beating a small child's drum with a single stick. Well, despite the shortcomings of the equipment, playing these instruments as a group was a lot of fun! This was definitely a room meant primarily for enjoyable music making by non-musicians, rather than being a room in which one was to do any serious music practice.

Anyway the whole sound of the group wasn't held together by any one person, as it might have been if Patrick or Sandy had been playing with guitars having all their strings, or if someone had actually been able to play the organ and it had all its notes!

As it was, someone would suggest trying to play a particular song and we would all struggle to try to make our

efforts sound recognizable as various people tried their version on their (generally defective) instrument.

Before the end of a song, everyone would break out laughing and stop playing without apologizing for any lack of musical ability. I wish Sandy could have been there to upgrade the music and yet see how the cousins were enjoying these attempts at music making despite how awful we sounded.

Mary, putting her head in at one point to watch what was going on later said, "Never have I seen so many instruments played by so many people with what sounds like so little musical ability!"

Everyone laughed.

Because we had eaten dinner early, it was still not late when families started to gather up their things to leave. The sister again drove us to the ferry. Sandy and I had agreed that if I got back to the mainland before 9:00 pm, I would phone him when we reached the ferry terminal and then get dropped off at Park Royal. I was so glad that we returned in time for this to happen. Sandy drove into the parking lot of the restaurant and came inside the door of front reception area where I had been standing, as if waiting for a friend to join me before being seated for our meal.

We got into the car.

"So how's it been with Noel today?" I asked, as we turned up Taylor way to head into the British Properties.

"Oh, it's still a madhouse but a lot of fun. Have you ever tried playing simple but silly board games with a two year old, a five year old, and a seven year old?"

"So who's winning?"

"Well, it's actually hard to tell."

"And how many of you were at dinner tonight?"

"I guess 11 counting the kids."

"I hope that dinner was as easy to put together as ours was."

"Yeah, Boxing Day leftovers are always easy and yet so delicious."

"Amazing, how that turns out, isn't it?... So I love the CD, Sandy!"

"Really, you've played it?"

"Of course, I've played it. I couldn't have gone to bed last night without playing it at least a couple of times. It's wonderful and it seems so personal."

"Well, I meant it to be."

"And I noticed that you sang one song on the piano, a piece that we haven't practised together."

"Well, I have dared to practice some others that we haven't decided on, since I never know when we will be able to play together."

"Maybe tonight? I did bring my flute."

"Oh, good. I hope we can then. And everyone here has admired your handmade paper image of me. They have decided you really are very artistic.... Most definitely meant to be an architect!" he stated.

"They didn't say that!"

"They did say you are very artistic."

"And the part about being an architect?"

"Well, my mom added that."

"Yeah, your mom's amazing. She's so good to me."

Despite Sandy's good-humoured description of how exhausting Noel can be, I was quite touched when Noel came to the door and remembered me. I couldn't tell how much Sandy had primed him. Anyway, Noel showed me an armful of his new toys before I had even been introduced to anyone else.

Apparently the parents were hoping to get the kids into bed, as it was already past their regular bedtime. After I had been introduced to Sandy's other brother, Lauren, and his wife Maureen, and their two kids, I asked if Sandy and I could put Noel to bed for Grant and Lynn. They were delighted.

Going through our previous routine, Sandy and I lay down on each side of Noel on his bed and read to him. Again Sandy took on the male voices and I took on female parts in the story. Noel and teddy bear fell asleep by the end of the story.

Before leaving the bedroom, Sandy and I had a prolonged kiss leaning against the wall. I happened to see a reflection of us in a full-length mirror on the inside of the partially opened closet door. It made me doubly aware of how appealing Sandy is, not that I needed to be reminded!

We rejoined the others saying, "Out like a light."

"Really?" Grant and Lynn said in obvious appreciation and admiration. "You two have the magic touch."

Sandy's mother said something about how much Noel looks like Sandy when he was a kid.

"Do you know, Sandy, I showed Noel that picture of you when you were about Noel's age. I asked him who was in the picture and without a second's hesitation, he said, "Me."

"Yes, it is pretty remarkable," Sandy's dad agreed.

"May I see the picture?" I asked Sandy.

"Sure."

He went over to a bookcase and brought the photo back to me.

"Wow! It's true. You do look alike!"

I was thinking that explains my immediate affection for Noel, the likes of which I hadn't felt for a little boy before. My affection for Noel is like loving Sandy earlier in his life.

Maureen, the mother of the other two other little kids, returned to the living room surprised that we were already back and that Noel was asleep.

She said, "You two must be hypnotists. My two aren't asleep, but they have promised, on pain of death, to stay in bed."

Sandy's Toronto adult relatives decided to turn in shortly after their kids did. They admitted to still suffering from jet lag. So they headed to their former bedrooms, reassuring us that piano playing with flute would not disturb them. Sandy's parents, perhaps eager to give us some practice time, also headed to their bedroom saying that they were going to watch a video.

Sandy and I sat down on the piano bench together. I was surprised to see that Sandy had his new MP3 player around his neck with a list of numbers on a piece of paper.

"There are some classical pieces recorded on this that I used to play, or would like to play, and I wonder if you know them."

"Do you have the names or just the numbers?"

"Unfortunately I didn't think this through fully until after I'd listened to them all. Besides I can't actually name every piece."

"Let's see how many we can name together then. We can fast forward the recording as soon as we identify a particular piece or decide we are not interested in it."

Sharing the earplugs, this became a kind of a game. We kept score: one point for the name the composer and one point for the title of the piece. In trying to be first to blurt out an answer, we laughed a lot. Worrying about waking up the sleeping relatives, we attempted to suppress the humour. But the more we tried this, the more we laughed.

Of the 20 pieces that we noted that we might be interested in playing together, I got two more right before Sandy did. In the process, however, we compiled a substantial list of pieces that we want to work toward playing together.

We finally turned to the Brahms piece we had been practising separately and played that. Actually in being so impressed at how well we did this, we played it through a second time. I wished Sandy's parents had been listening.

By then we realized how late it had become, and I remembered I had school in the morning.

Sandy drove me home. I had to be satisfied with only one, but very warm, kiss in parting.



December # 11—Claudia Visits the School over Christmas

Photographs of golden sunset from Kits and a drawing from my art portfolio

Claudia's school was closed between Boxing Day and New Year's Eve, while ours kept going. So Claudia arranged to meet with some of us at the end of our class. Rather than going to a nearby coffee shop, she tried to convince us to walk back to Kitsilano with her because it was such a beautiful winter afternoon.

"You'll be able to get some great sunset photographs," she said to encourage us.

"But it's so cold out," Nicole and Fernando had said.

After some discussion, only Juliana and I agreed to walk with Claudia over the Burrard Bridge. Actually we ended up walking as far as Jericho Beach. When we really did get cold hands in taking photographs with our gloves off, we walked to a muffin shop on Fourth Avenue near Claudia's homestay. We wanted a warm environment to drink some steamed milk. We settled at a window table.

Claudia had permission to tell us that Se-Eun and her Korean boyfriend had gotten back together again.

"Really!"

"Yes, apparently he had become tired of the young actress for never being able to participate in a serious conversation."

Juliana's comment was, "Took long enough. And is Se-Eun willing to take him back?"

"Yes. Part of her always assumed he'd come to his senses and realize what he was throwing away. Now Se-Eun is excited that the two of them have reconstructed their plan to tour their

school's English-speaking theatre group while addressing social issues in Korean schools."

I wondered how this would affect Barry. Would he still be going to Korea to teach? But I postponed asking any questions about this as our conversation ended abruptly when Juliana realized the address of the coffee shop was near that of a bookstore she had wanted to visit. She left us saying she would be back in a few minutes.

Her departure then enabled me to ask Claudia about Barry and Korea. She admitted, "I appreciate you not bringing this up in Juliana's presence, because Barry may not be going to teach in Korea at all."

"Really?"

"Yes, and I don't think he would want all our classmates to know that at this point."

"Understandably. This must be so disappointing to him. But why can't he teach there?"

"Not just because Se-Eun has gone back to her former boyfriend, but also because he realizes it is not feasible for him to leave his mother."

"Why?"

"Well, he has been counting on his sister to look after his mom as he has been doing for the past few years. However, his sister has just been diagnosed as having chronic fatigue."

"Oh, how unfortunate."

"Well, perhaps this speaks better of her than just seeming to be irresponsible at times, as Barry has for sometime presumed. Anyway," Claudia continued, "Barry, being as honourable as he is, feels he cannot leave his mom if his sister is not able to look after her."

"I guess not."

"If Juliana knew about Barry's decision, she would probably say, 'Does Barry realize that he is choosing his mother over his potential children?' At least any possible children with Se-Eun," Claudia added.

"But if his mother understood, would she want Barry to be making this decision about his future?" I asked.

"Difficult to know."

"So which came first—Barry realizing he can't go to Korea, Se-Eun having doubts about maintaining a committed connection with Barry, or Se-Eun getting back together with her former boyfriend?"

Claudia responded, "All may have been intertwined. Barry's mom's possessiveness of Barry may have been more divisive between Se-Eun and Barry than any cultural or racial differences."

"Yes, I remember Se-Eun admitting, at a time that she was depressed, that any involvement with Barry would also be an involvement with his mom."

"I'm not surprised at this," Claudia responded. "Barry's gratitude to his mother may have major claims on him forever. He knows that his mom, as a young widow, gave up a great deal in order for him to complete his university education."

There was a break in our conversation as a person adjusted the seating at the small table next to ours and in a loud voice instructed her two friends at the counter what they should order for her. During the few quiet moments before her friends rejoined her with coffee and muffins, Claudia, always wanting to protect me from hurt, took this opportunity to "lecture" me again.

"Anyway, Erika. I want you to realize it's easy to make promises and then go away and lose the personal influence that helped create and sustain the dream. That was originally true with Se-Eun and her boyfriend, and then the same was true for Se-Eun and Barry. Without Barry and Se-Eun's influence on each other, their plan eroded."

"But in Se-Eun's case this seems to have a happy ending as her old boyfriend has in fact returned to her, so they can undertake their project together after all," I answered.

"Nevertheless," Claudia emphasized, "This proves that in the absence of the person sharing the dream, it is difficult to keep aspirations alive."

I lingered over my last sip of foamy milk.

Claudia asked, "Are you listening, Erika?"

I laughed and said, "Yes, Momma Claudia, I'm listening but I don't like what you are saying."

After a moment of silence, Claudia inquired, "So what are you thinking?"

"Actually I am wondering if I dare admit to doing something toward my dream."

"You can trust me."

"I know I can. And you're the only friend that I can tell."

"So what is it?"

"Well, a few weeks ago I took the academic IELTS exam."

"And?"

"And I've just found out I got more than the score required for acceptance into a graduate program at UBC."

"Well, of course you would. Congratulations, but I'm not surprised. I hope you have at least told Sandy."

"Oh, of course I've told Sandy but, despite being pleased, I haven't mentioned this to any of our classmates."

"You're pleased because you are always underestimating your ability, Erika. Getting more than the mark you need shouldn't be a surprise to you."

"Just because it was easily obtainable for you...."

"So you just found out the result?"

"Yesterday."

"And you don't want anyone else to know...."

"Exactly, because I don't want anyone asking why I took that particular test."

"All right. And I assume you got that mark on your first try at the exam."

"Yes."

"So that's good—getting one potential obstacle to your dream out of the way. For lots of international students, obtaining the language requirement to go to a Canadian university is a big deal."

"I know. That's why I'm pleased. A woman at school, who seems so self-assured, conceited even, about her ability, keeps extending her stay in Vancouver just so she can continue to retake the test."

"As you know, being self-assured doesn't guarantee one's success in passing the language exam. But you got it on your first try."

"Yes, so now I can submit my application to UBC's architecture department."

"Have you given any thought as to whether you would do architecture here if Sandy were not in the picture?"

"No, I can't even think about that in any constructive way."

"So at least you are keeping your options open. But preparing for that submission must have taken a lot of work."

"It's true, getting a portfolio together, writing a statement of intent, arranging for academic references, yes, that's been a fair bit of work. But some parts of it were similar to the application I did in Japan."

"For the architectural program that you've already been accepted into," Claudia smiled, as if trying to make me realize that I do underestimate my capabilities and have other options.

"Yes."

"Did you have to do new art work for the portfolio?"

"I included a couple of drawings of heritage buildings in Vancouver that I did for the drawing course I took with Se-Eun as well as one drawing of a West Coast modern house that had an influence on Sandy's dad in designing their house."

"And the other pieces?"

"I got my sister to send me my former portfolio and, with Sandy's advice, I selected pieces from that."

“Good for you. So it sounds like you really are ready to send it off.”

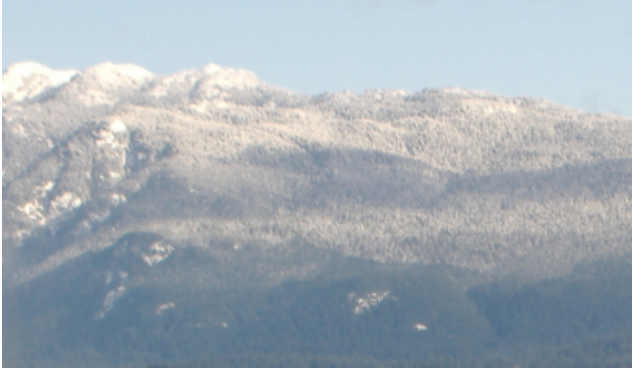
“Yes, I am, as scary as this is.”

Later that night after putting my UBC application and portfolio into a large manila envelope, taping it securely, and walking to the extended-hours post office to get the right postage on it, and handed it to the mail clerk. At that moment I felt an incredible sense of relief—proud of myself even, for actually daring to apply (despite being an indecisive Pisces!).

With that out of the way, I was able to relax. When I was finally comfortably settled in bed, I started thinking about Sandy in the context of what Claudia had said regarding Barry’s gratitude to his mother. This had me thinking about Sandy and his mom. About how close they are. I admire their strong bond, but I am also glad that Robyn has Sandy’s dad and Grant and Lauren in her life too so she is not solely dependent upon Sandy.



Architectural drawing above, of Arthur Erickson’s 1963 Graham House, is by the author.



DECEMBER # 12—New Year's Eve Celebrations

Visuals: photograph of view toward North Shore mountains, and of party foods, and view from the West Vancouver party house

To celebrate New Year's Eve, our group decided to have dinner together at Bae's homestay in North Vancouver. The parents had said he could have the place to himself to entertain his friends. The house is a modest, three bedroom bungalow (all on one floor). We were all to contribute some food from our home country to make an international meal. I spent a couple of hours making, and teaching Mary, how to make sushi and tempura. The others also did their cooking at their homestay and brought it with them to heat up at Bae's place. But Bae did significant cooking on his own; he could have fed us all without any contributions from the rest of us!

Bae lives just off the bus route (close to the border of North and West Vancouver), so Sebastian, who lives in the city, picked me up with my food contribution. I felt more kindly toward his car, with newly installed heater, than I did when we went to the movie at UBC in the pouring rain. It was a clear, cool, windless night. Hardly any cars were on the road.

Sumi and Song greeted us at the door as Bae and Noboru, acting as Bae's assistant, were in the kitchen. Everybody else was in the living room talking or helping set up.

"Happy New Year!"

"Yes, Happy New Year."

"So glad you made it. How's the traffic in the city?"

"Oh, very quiet. Seems everyone is afraid of drinking and driving, or they are already settled and staying put."

Song took my container of food and headed for the kitchen. Sebastian followed to divest himself of his bottles of German wine.

Sumi helped me off with my coat saying, "Let's have a look," as she turned me around to inspect my new, somewhat stretchy velvet pants (yes, black) that she had helped me to buy.

"Ah, we did good," she said looking at my rear end.

"Sumi!" I said, reacting to her being this obvious.

"Indeed, very flattering."

When I went into the kitchen Noboru greeted me with a warm hug and "Happy New Year!", but I felt this was okay, as Sumi stood by smiling.

A second table had been brought into the living room from a bedroom, and aligned and covered with a colour-coordinated tablecloth in order to accommodate us all in one location. While Song, Sumi, and Noboru helped Bae with his cooking, the others milled around eating appetizers, talking, or setting the table. Everyone was looking their best and seemed particularly happy.

Finally the twelve of us sat down at the two adjoined tables for some serious eating. The conversation turned to Bae's surprising cooking abilities and his willingness to let these capabilities be known. Apparently his uncle is a chef.

I had gone to the fridge searching for the pitcher of tomato juice for those of us not drinking wine, so I did not hear the whole story. But apparently Bae had spent much of his compulsory military service working in a canteen kitchen (away from other recruits), cleaning airplanes, and was not subject to all the rigorous physical challenges of military training. I'm not sure what Song knows about his experience, but she said, "That's why Bae isn't as damaged as most Korean guys who've done their training. Those who happen to go in as considerate gentle guys come out preoccupied with macho stuff—primarily sex and drinking."

Being defended like this, Bae couldn't hold back his endearing smile.

"So while the guys credit their military training as the turning point in their becoming men, Korean girls hate what the military does to their guys. Right?" Sumi commented.

Song continued, "Yes, the guys come out more muscular and darker after doing their tortuous physical training outdoors in the sun. You can always spot them, the ones who have just completed their service, compared to the guys who are still waiting to go into theirs."

Bae didn't seem to want to talk any further about his military experience. But when Pierre and Adrian picked up on the fact that Bae had been in the air force and that he too knows how to fly, they pressed for more information on his experience of learning to fly.

Bae merely said, "What's the big deal about flying? It's easier than driving a car."

Adrian said that however easy it is to fly, his biggest dream for the New Year to get his commercial pilot's license.

This comment had the rest of the group finally acknowledging that this is New Year's Eve and time to describe our major goals for the coming year. Mine of course came to me immediately but, by coming and going into the kitchen, I was able to avoid having to say anything about hoping to study architecture at UBC with Sandy. But I was totally pleased when Noboru said his dream was to continue to see Sumi when they return to Japan, and she seemed happy to agree with this.

Perhaps more surprising was the fact that Song and Bae said basically the same thing—that they are hoping to remain friends once they return to Korea. Apparently Bae has let go of some of the unrealistic expectations he has had about Sumi, possibly due to witnessing Song having to end her involvement with Christian when he returned home to his own country.

Fernando and Nicole also said they hoped to see each other when they are back Mexico. I wondered if Adrian and Pierre, sitting elbow to elbow at the table, might say anything similar. But Adrian only reconfirmed his dream of finally getting his pilot's licence while he is here and Pierre admitted that he hoped to someday immigrate to Canada (is this something Adrian might do with him?). Sebastian mentioned getting the kind funding he hoped for to officially start his program at UBC.

As we finished our leisurely meal, others also began to help with the cleanup in the kitchen. Fernando and Nicole amalgamated the remaining finger food onto one table and removed the other table to clear the floor for dancing. They were also arranging the music—fast music—so they could continue to teach us the salsa. In this case I was glad of the fast music as we were all dancing together. I wanted to save any slow dancing for Sandy.

Pierre is a surprisingly good dancer. He, Adrian, Sebastian, Marina, and Juliana were dancing in a group together. Bae and Song looked cute in their paired, slow dances. She is encouraging to him by not seeming to notice his awkwardness.

Sandy had said he would come and pick me up at 9:30 to take me to a party of his friends in West Van. So as I was dancing, part of me was listening for his knock on the door. When I heard it, my heart... well, I was very happy as I answered the door and encouraged Sandy to come in. He looked so good in a shirt, tie, and dress pants under his new, open, huggable Christmas jacket. He seemed actually quite comfortable in re-meeting my friends since participating in the Christmas tree decorating at my place. He shook hands with them, including Noboru, and wished them a happy New Year. I

was so proud of Sandy (do I have the right to be proud of him yet?).

I gathered up my things and had a few hugs, and then Sandy and I walked outside and got into his car.

"That looks like a fun party. I hope you don't mind me taking you away."

"It has been enjoyable. And the food was extraordinary. I don't think I will be able to eat another thing. But I'm not disappointed in leaving, as this way I get to go to two parties instead of just one."

"So are Adrian and Pierre a couple?" Sandy asked.

"Ah, very perceptive. Apparently they are."

"I pretty much guessed that on the night we were decorating the Christmas tree. And what about Marina and Sebastian?"

"Marina is so friendly to everyone. She speaks so many European languages and pronounces everyone's name exactly the way they pronounce it. She can even roll her R's on the South American names."

"So that means they're a couple?" Sandy laughed at me.

"Could be heading that way."

We drove further west than Sandy's house. I thought we were going to end up in Horseshoe Bay, but we didn't go quite that far. We parked a little way up a hill beyond a cluster of cars, likely those attending the party. I held Sandy's hand as we climbed the stone steps of the house on the hill. There was a thick stand of dark trees on one side. I felt a little apprehensive about meeting Sandy's friends.

The host of the party opened the door and seemed delighted to see Sandy and was polite in meeting me. Some of the guests Sandy's knew from high school, others from university (including the fraternity), and one is even from architecture. As for the girlfriends and wives, well, they seemed as sophisticated as the sorority girls Sandy had described in explaining his dating history. (He had called them, "aggressive" and "materialistic.")

The house was big and the party was spread over four levels. As we walked among the rooms, the guests who hadn't seen Sandy since September mentioned his decision to go back into architecture.

"So glad you decided to do that, Sandford," one guy said and others agreed.

The guy in architecture added, "Otherwise you would be depriving the profession of a very creative architect."

"Thanks, Stephen."

"I hope we get to collaborate on some more projects."

"I do too."

But I noticed that some of the women seemed to be belittling Sandy's judgment about having spent time in the band. One woman, who was wearing expensive jewellery, said, "Thank God you have finally come to your senses, Sandford!"

Were they now wondering what Sandy was doing with me—an ESL student from Japan? Another waste of his time? Something he had yet to come to his senses about?

"Erika's been a good influence," he responded, reaching for some sushi (yes, sushi). "She's also going to be studying architecture in September."

Apparently no one assumed that we hope this might be at UBC. Sandy didn't reveal this possibility, but he was creating opportunities for me to join in the conversation, even though none of the women picked up on this. Some of the men were polite enough to ask some simple questions.

Luckily I was able to respond, "Yes, I have been accepted into an architectural program in Japan to start then."

Most of the food was in the kitchen and dining room (third level), but there were platters of food in the other rooms as well. Sandy and I peeked into the recreation room downstairs but most of the group was doing fast dancing, so carrying our non-alcoholic drinks upstairs, we went into the library, a beautiful room, for some quiet time.

"Look, a piano. If we had brought some music with us, we might have tried playing something here since we have the room to ourselves," I said.

Sandy responded, "Yes, I really want us to make some time for us to practice together."

"I want to do that too."

"Well, remind me, especially when I am stressed out. Playing classical music together can be so relaxing."

The two walls not lined with bookshelves had floor-to-ceiling windows and a glass door onto a deck with a view of the ocean some distance off. A half moon cast a silver streak across the water. We were glad to be alone there. As I had done with my classmates, Sandy and I talked about our wishes for the coming year. But with Sandy I could be totally open, as our hopes centre on each other.

"And you know, I put my application to UBC in the mail last night."

"Oh, I am so glad that you've managed that. What a constructive way to end the year."

Raising his drink (non-alcoholic as it was), he said, "So here's to our plans for the coming year."

We clinked glasses. Never have I had such hopes embodied in a simple toast.

Yes, we kissed.

I could still feel Sandy's kiss when we walked down one flight of stairs to the buffet. As Sandy hadn't had any of my friends' international feast, he was ready to eat something. I shared some of his food just to get a taste of it. Then we went to the recreation room to join in the New Year's Eve countdown. Someone had turned on a television set. Soon everyone in the room was chanting: 10, 9, 8... and then, at 0, everyone shouted, "Happy New Year!" Everyone seemed to kiss everyone in sight, blew whistles, and rattled noisemakers. Luckily Sandy was there for me to kiss again, as I didn't feel like receiving the germs of a lot of strangers. Despite having his arm around my shoulder, Sandy received his share of attention. Everyone eventually calmed down and the music turned quiet. Sandy and I did some slow dancing, merged together.

I was not sorry, however, when the party started to break up, as I knew Sandy and I were going back to his house to spend the night alone. His parents were staying in the downtown hotel where their party was taking place.

We put on our coats, scarves, gloves, hats, etc., and went outside into the frosty air. There was hardly a car on the Upper Levels Highway, so we were soon driving up Taylor Way and along the now familiar streets with lovely, lit-up houses and stunning views of the city. Still, I'll never feel completely comfortable in going down Sandy's steep driveway, although he doesn't seem to notice that it's not just any other piece of road. The roof, garage, and doorway of the house were outlined in colourful Christmas lights.

Once inside, with coats off, Sandy removed his tie (which I had enjoyed seeing him in), turned on the Christmas tree lights, and lit the fireplace that had been previously set up. With the glow of these and the coloured lights outlining the rail on the front deck, there was no need for any regular lights in the living room.

We went into the kitchen but decided we didn't feel like having anything more to eat or drink. Back in the living room, Sandy put on a CD of some quiet classical music—including some Chopin that he knows I particularly like—some that we've tried playing together and some others. We sat down on the sofa in front of the fireplace and talked about some of his friends. But we knew conversation wasn't what we were really wanting either. We settled further into the pillows that were propping us up on the sofa. Sandy had one arm under my head; with the other hand he gently traced lines across my stomach. I felt as if his hand were a magnet drawing inner fragments across the underside of my skin.

Sandy asked me about what he has assumed to be my modesty.

"I know I was a little self-conscious the first time I walked out to the hot tub in a bathing suit to join you, Leah, and Larry there."

Sandy laughed, "Even though you had that five-foot towel draped around you? We barely saw your feet!"

"So you thought I was shy?"

"I certainly did."

After letting me know that I could change my mind at any time, Sandy started undoing the buttons of my sweater. I welcomed the chance to see how I felt about partial nudity with him. He slowly helped me take my arms out of the sleeves, undid my bra, and slid the straps down over my arms.

"You are lovely," he commented quietly as he touched my shoulders and drew his hands down my arms.

Did I expect to feel more exposed? Sandy's seeing me, and his seeming approval, made me feel, well, even more attracted to him.

I dared to say, "Now I think we should do you."

"That seems fair."

He smiled as I started to undo the buttons of his shirt. After we got his arms out of the sleeves, and his undershirt off, I touched the blond hair in the centre of his chest.

"This is the same colour as your hair when you were eight."

"You know that?"

"The first time I came here you showed me the photograph of you standing in front of your previous West Van house. You, as a blond little kid. Don't you remember showing me that photo?"

"Yes, now I do. You have a good memory. And it's true that I was blonder when I was young."

I leaned against him in his half-prone position. His skin felt so good against mine. He stroked my back and we settled further into the pillows on the sofa. Being so relaxed, I was afraid I might fall asleep, so I sat up again leaning back on my heels beside him. He reached up and touched my shoulder and then brought his finger down across my breast to my waist.

After a few minutes it was apparent that neither of us wanted to get up to go to separate beds. We both alluded to wishing we could manage 'comfort and caring only,' like when I was sick, so we could stay together for the night.

We were quiet a moment then Sandy suggested, "How 'bout if I bring out the top foam mattress from my bed so we can sleep here in front of the fire?"

"That would be wonderful."

"And I can lend you pyjamas."

I agreed to this without mentioning the nightie that I had brought with me.

We managed to get to our feet, and, yes, we kissed standing up. Again his skin felt so good. I grabbed my blouse and put it around my shoulders as I followed Sandy toward his bedroom (neater this time). He opened a drawer and brought out two pairs of folded blue pyjamas. He put one pair under his arm and started to give me the bottoms only to the other pair, but I took both pieces.

“You don’t think I am going to let you get cold, do you?”

“Just in case.”

I went into the bathroom to get washed and changed while Sandy set out the mattress with sheets, pillows, and a duvet on the floor in front of the fireplace. He built up the fire further. I heard him going back to his bedroom to get ready for sleeping. Still he was lying bare-chested and propped up on one elbow in front of the fire, when I came out.

Arriving in both the top and the bottom of the pyjamas, I sat down cross-legged in front of him on the mattress.

“Now do we really need that on?” he said alluding to the pyjama top.

I was glad I had put it on because that meant Sandy helped me off with it.

“So we’re sure we can manage this as ‘comfort and caring’ only?” he asked.

“Absolutely,” I tried to reassure us with some false confidence.

“Okay,” he said as we both lay down again.

I turned my back to him to look into the fire. And he lay close to me as he had that time I was sick, putting his arm across my shoulder, his chest against my bare back, and his thighs against the back of my legs.

We exchanged “Good night” and “Happy New Year,” rather formally as we tried to show how easy it is to sleep together without succumbing to sexual temptation. The soft hair in the center of his chest felt like hundreds of soothing little sensors caressing my back.

I’m not sure who fell asleep first, but when I awoke just before dawn, Sandy still had his arm over my shoulder, so I was surprised to see that he had his pyjama top on. He was breathing quietly. Moving his arm aside gently, I sat up slowly and put on a pyjama top too. I went back to sleep.

I hadn’t given any thought to getting up, or about when Sandy’s parents would return. I was a little alarmed when I later opened one eye and realized it was bright out (snow on the ground again?) and I heard someone in the kitchen. I knew I should struggle to become fully awake, but at that moment I didn’t know what to do to not be seen sleeping together on the living room floor. So I did nothing except pretend to be more deeply asleep than I was.

A few minutes later, Sandy stirred as his mother came in with a tea tray.

"Good morning and happy New Year," she said without any awkwardness as she greeted us. Sandy sat up on the mattress and leaned back against the base of the sofa.

"Did you and Dad have fun at your party last night?"

"Yes, it was marvelous! We got to bed about 3:30."

"So that was about the same as us."

"And how was your evening?"

"Good. Yeah, it was nice."

He referred to friends at the party whom his mother knows. He provided updates on what they are doing. He also mentioned their favourable reactions to him giving up the band and returning to university.

"So they are glad to reclaim you."

"Yeah, apparently. Is Dad around?"

"No. He just dropped me off. He has gone to the studio to do what he promises to be only a couple hours of work."

Despite having been seen like this, there was nothing for me to do but to show myself as being fully awake. This was actually easy, as Sandy's mom seemed unconcerned by the fact that the two of us had spent the night sleeping together in front of the fireplace.

"Good morning," I said somewhat sleepily, smiling at Sandy.

"Happy New Year, Robyn."

Sandy put out his hand to draw me close to him leaning against the sofa. He put his arm around my shoulder and kissed the side of my temple.

His mom said, "I've always wanted to sleep in here when the Christmas tree is up, to be able to drift off to sleep while enjoying the lights."

"Yes, it was beautiful," I confirmed.

She poured out some tea, asking, "Will you have some, Erika?"

"Yes, thank you."

At that moment I was certainly glad to be wearing Sandy's pyjamas, both pieces. Our sitting side by side in almost identical blue outfits seemed so unisex and non-seductive.

Robyn turned and put some kindling from a pile onto the old coals and relit the fire so it was crackling again.

"Thanks for that," Sandy said. "Is there snow down below or just up here?"

"Just here. The city streets are bare."

"Oh, good."

As we sipped our tea, I looked past Sandy and was struck with embarrassment in seeing my bra lying on the sofa. It

looked so tell-tale, as if hastily discarded. But Sandy's mom didn't seem to notice.

"Would you both like to join Dad and me for brunch? Or is that too much if you will be coming back for dinner tonight?"

Sandy looked at me to see my answer. And then said, "Sure, as long as that won't rush things for you and Dad. We are going to the Polar Bear Swim, as Erika hasn't seen that. We want to meet her friends there by 1:30, so we need to leave before 1:00."

When we finished our tea, Sandy said, "Er, why don't you go and get dressed while I get this bedding back to my room? You'll likely take longer than I will. You know you're welcome to a shower. "

"All right."

Kneeling on the mattress, I passed our cups to Robyn. She got up with the tray and headed for the kitchen. That gave me the chance to reach around Sandy and snatch my bra from the sofa. Sandy laughed with me.

[To read the next section, return to the Table of Contents and click on JANUARY DIARY ENTRIES 1-3.pdf]