



## ***FEBRUARY # 1—Accident on Whistler***

*Visuals: photographs of North Shore mountain and Whistler; ambulance at hospital emergency entrance*

After my strained, non-communicative parting with Sandy the day of the Chinese New Year's parade, I was relieved when he phoned me. He sounded hesitant at first. (Had he talked to Lynn, his "advisor"?) But, as irritated as I had been at him for being so judgmental of me (and Noboru) at the parade, I melted at the sound of his voice. (What is it about that voice?)

We started with a superficial catch-up conversation. Yes, he'd made it to the West Van Library before closing time, got out the book he needed. He had managed to finish his essay that night and had completed another major project since then. So he was feeling more relaxed, he said (as if by way of an excuse for his attitude that day?).

"Erika, I'm sorry about how I was after the parade."

I hesitated, as it's difficult for me to set aside negative emotions on a moment's notice.

So after a pause, he asked, "Will you forgive me?"

"Your suspicions always hurt me, Sandy, but I'm trying to be understanding."

"Would you let me make you a pre-Valentine's dinner as an apology?"

"You'd do that?"

"Yes. I want to."

"All right. I'd like that."

To come up with a time, I mentioned a few plans I had to work around.

He responded, "Well, what about Saturday evening on your way home from skiing at Whistler?"

I was glad that Sandy seemed to want to have the dinner as soon as possible.

"Okay. My group will be taking two cars, so I'll ask to be in the first car to leave the mountain to try to get back to West Van by at least eight o'clock. Would that be early enough?"

"Yes, that's good. Then it's set."

Confirming by phone the night before, Sandy seemed excited about making the dinner.

"So what's the menu?"

"You'll find out soon enough. But nothing Japanese."

"Sandy, you should know by now that I didn't come to Canada to eat Japanese food."

He admitted that he had asked his mom for some advice.

"Just as long as you don't get any help from your parents with the actual cooking."

"I can't. They won't be around. Dad's in Portland for the weekend, and Mom's spending tomorrow with a friend in White Rock and that includes a late-night event."

"That's good."

"Also, we should plan to go into the hot tub. It's particularly relaxing after a day on the slopes."

"Is that the main reason you think we should go in the hot tub, Sandy?"

"Well...."

"Or is this your idea of shyness therapy for me?"

"At least I hope this time you won't have a towel that comes to your ankles."

"To my ankles? That's an exaggeration."

"You're right, but.... Oh, I'm almost forgetting some news."

"Good news I hope."

"Yeah, it is. Gordon's wife had their baby last night. A boy."

"Oh, great! That's early then."

"Yes. Two weeks. So that's a relief."

"A relief? Having two babies within nine months!"

"I mean the band is relieved in knowing that Gordon won't be off helping with the delivery the night of the gig."

"Am I still invited to the gig?"

"Of course you are. I invited you ages ago."

"I hoped you hadn't forgotten that."

"How could I? I want you to be there for sure. I'm really looking forward to performing with the band again."

"Any threat that you might give up architecture to go back to the band full time?"

"No way. But all being together again should be a lot of fun."

"Look at the time, Sandy. I should say goodnight if I'm to get enough sleep for skiing."

"True. It's getting late."

I agreed to phone Sandy on the way back tomorrow as soon as I could to let him know when the car I was in would reach Park Royal. He said he would come and meet me there.

"So have fun cooking. See you tomorrow night."

"Yes, goodnight."

As I was putting the receiver down, I heard Sandy say something else, but I did not hear it clearly. Was it "I love you"?

Early next morning I found out that our group had made some last minute changes. Only Sebastian, Marina, Pierre and Adrian, Noboru, and I were going to Whistler, so we didn't need two cars. Instead Adrian rented a mini-van. Still, Sebastian picked me up and then we met the others in North Van.

Even the local mountains looked terrific after new snow through the night, so we set out with a sense of adventure.



Almost two hours later when we arrived at Whistler, we parked and then walked to the rental shop for equipment. Mary had lent me her daughter's skis, boots, and poles and Noboru had the equipment that he had bought the previous time on the mountain, so we were the first outside. I had trouble getting one boot securely into position. Noboru leaned over to adjust the back of my ski binding.

"That should do it."

"Thanks a lot."

When the others joined us, Marina teased, "Noboru, do you realize how ridiculous you look in that hat? You are the most visible person on this mountain."

Pulling the tight, knitted hat more firmly over his ears, he said, "So what's wrong with that? My sister made me this hat. Orange and red are her favourite colours, and it's very warm,"

"Well, then, I guess we mustn't laugh at it," Sebastian commented.

We decided we wouldn't try to all get together for lunch, but we agreed to meet at the end of the day in the bar at the lodge within sight.

Marina and I stayed together all morning, but she is a much more experienced skier than I am.

So I reassured her, "I'll be okay on my own, Marina. Don't feel you have to stay with me on these less challenging runs."

A while later when it had begun to snow lightly, I could see her competently swooshing down some difficult slopes.



In the late afternoon, I paused at the bottom of a hill to see if I could see Marina getting on any of the lifts. I was surprised when I saw Noboru's bright orange red hat on a person strapped into a ski patroller's backboard sled. A second later I was alarmed in realizing it must be Noboru. I skied as fast as I could and signalled the ski patrollers to stop. When I caught up with them, I crouched down to face Noboru.

"Noboru, what's happened?" I asked.

"I've broken my leg," he said with a bit of a gasp.

"Oh, no! Are you sure?"

"Yes, I felt it snap," Noboru grimaced. "I got my ski caught in a mogul... during a jump."

"Do any of the guys know?"

"No, I was skiing on my own."

Addressing the ski patrollers, I said, "Look, I'm Noboru's closest friend on the mountain. May I accompany him?"

"I think we can arrange that. An ambulance will transport him to Squamish Hospital."

The ambulance driver agreed that I could accompany him.

"Noboru, I'll be in the cab with the driver."

"But what about skiing?"

"No matter. I'm coming with you." I touched his shoulder.

"Thanks," he said, obviously in pain.

I wished that I knew how to alert the others to what was happening, but was too alarmed for Noboru to do much thinking about how to manage that.

It was about an hour-long drive down to Squamish Hospital.



Once the ambulance arrived at the emergency entrance of the hospital, Noboru was wheeled through the waiting room into a separate, closed-off area of the emergency ward. Whenever he was moved, he breathed hard and grimaced.

My anxiety and the closed-in, crowded small space, made me feel very hot. I took off many of the layers of clothing that I'd worn on the slopes. The doctors asked me to step aside until they assessed Noboru's leg.

In a few minutes they told us that a surgeon wouldn't be available until evening to set this kind of fracture. They put Noboru on some pain medication drip, but clearly he was uncomfortable, so I didn't like to leave his side.

Noboru gave me his cell phone to call his parents in Japan. With some effort he managed to show me which pre-set button would get through to his parents and which one, to his homestay family. But I couldn't phone from inside the emergency area, so I went back into the waiting room. I was surprised to see a no-cell-phone sign there too.

I went outside the front door of the emergency area to where the ambulance had pulled up. It was cold there. I was sorry that I had left my jacket and other warm clothing in Noboru's cubicle. I needed to let Sandy know what was going on. I dialed his number and waited. A cold blast of wind had me thinking, "Come on, Sandy. Just answer quickly."

Finally.... "Hello."

"Sandy, it's Erika. I am in the emergency ward of the Squamish Hospital."

I could hear the alarm in his voice as he said, "What's happened?"

"Noboru has broken his leg."

"No way!"

I told Sandy his voice was somewhat muffled. He said something about holding the receiver between his shoulder and his chin, as his hands were sticky.

"Yes, it's broken. We have just come down from the mountain in the ambulance."

"You traveled with him in the ambulance?"

"Yes."

"I thought you had to be family to do that."

"Well, I'm as close to family as he has here today."

"What about Sumi?"

"She didn't come with us today. In the end only six of us came—Marina and I, Pierre, Adrian, Sebastian, and Noboru."

I heard him apparently start to say something but it seemed to be an incomplete expression.

"Sandy, let me talk because I am not hearing you well. I am outside the emergency ward and it is windy here and I am cold because I have left my jacket at Noboru's bedside. The doctor won't be setting the fracture until at least 9:30 tonight, so I'm sorry but I can't make it to your special dinner tonight."

Did Sandy suggest coming later? I couldn't hear him properly. I was impatient due to my anxiety and shivering from the cold. For the first time I just wanted to get off the phone with Sandy. Did he try to say something else?

"Sandy, I'm really sorry about the dinner, but please understand that I can't think about it right now or about how I can make it up to you. I must get off the phone quickly. I'm on Noboru's cell phone. I don't want to run out of battery and I don't want to leave Noboru alone too long. I need to call his parents in Japan and his homestay family, as well as get a message through to our group so they know not to wait for us at the lodge at the bottom of the mountain. But I'm not sure how to do this, as I don't know the name of the bar where we planned to meet."

"Don't any of the others have a cell phone?"

"Only Pierre and I don't know his number. Do you remember the name of the lodge at the bottom of the main chair? You know the one."

I thought perhaps he could at least tell me the name of the lodge or even the bar, if he had been willing to help me identify where we'd been skiing, and if he had been concentrating, but he seemed to be preoccupied.

"Weren't you all together?" he asked,

"In the morning Marina and I were together but we went our separate ways in the afternoon."

I couldn't hear or understand what Sandy was saying.

"It was a shock when I saw the ski patrol hauling Noboru off the mountain in one of those backboard sleds, as we hadn't been skiing together."

"What are the chances of that, of seeing him like that, then?"

In my frustration, I blurted, "Sandford, the chances are irrelevant. It happened."

Maybe I was too impatient to hear all that he was saying, but his voice was muffled and it seemed to me he was trying to figure out the configuration of the group, who was there with whom. The couples.

I was angry at the irrelevancy of this. My hair was blowing into my face so I turned away from the wind going closer to a cement pole beside the emergency entrance doors.

In my increasingly cold state, I interrupted Sandy forcing myself to use a steady voice in repeating, "Look, Sandy, I must get off the phone quickly, so just listen. I am standing outside and I am freezing cold. I've tried to explain all the phone calls I need to make. I've got to get through to our group to ask them retrieve Noboru's and my skis for us and to go home without us. Also I need to call Mary to explain where I'll be spending the night.

"Overnight with Noboru?"

"I can't take the time to listen, Sandy, so please don't interrupt. Of course I have chosen to stay with Noboru. But this is a hospital, Sandy, not a motel."

The wind blew stronger making a whistling sound around the sliding doors of the emergency entrance.

"I don't know what you are saying, Sandy. Despite all the urgent calls I have to make, I have phoned you first. Why can't you appreciate this instead of doubting my word? You're being jealous of Noboru again and not trusting me. Sandford, stop being so self-centered!"

I flipped the phone shut.

Later that evening when Sandy and I were back on speaking terms, sitting on the sofa, he explained how devastated he had felt when I hung up on him.

He also explained to me that his mom had come home earlier than expected and saw the table in the living room set beside the fireplace—with the flowers, unused wine glasses, and unlit candles. And she saw the state of the kitchen with the in-progress preparations that seemed to have stopped on a moment's notice. Apparently she was alarmed and she searched for Sandy in his room and on the deck and finally found him downstairs

"I'd gone down there to lick my wounds and try to figure out what had just gone terribly wrong between the two of us—how that short conversation had gotten so out of control."

Apparently when his mom came into the recreation room, Sandy was sitting on a low-slung chair with his feet up on a coffee table staring out the window beyond the overhang of the deck toward the dark city.

"Sandy?" his mom inquired when she somewhat unexpectedly walked in on him. "What's happened? The kitchen is in a state of chaos. You obviously haven't had your dinner with Erika."

Sandy told me, "I was feeling emotionally exhausted and would have liked to stay silent, but after all the enthusiastic cooking advice Mom had given me earlier in the day, I felt as if she at least deserved a basic explanation."

"So what did you tell your mom?" I asked curiously.

"As calmly as I could, I told her that Noboru had broken his leg skiing and that he was in the emergency ward at Squamish Hospital and that you were staying there with him."

She said, "Oh, dear. Poor thing. Is it a very complex fracture?"

"I don't know. I didn't ask."

"Didn't ask?"

"Well, I guess I sounded like I was doubting Erika's word on some circumstances, so she hung up on me."

"Doubting her word?"

"Well, it seems there were six of them skiing. Three couples. Sumi wasn't there."

"Oh, Sandy. There you go again. Not trusting. You're going to lose Erika if don't stop this! Acting like you think she's constantly on the verge of becoming involved with Noboru. What's wrong with you? Skiing together isn't being in bed together."

"Your mom's right, Sandy. Do you finally get this?"

"I do, but it's hard for me to always remember it, to always believe it."

"So your mom...."

"Mom said, 'Of course Erika would want to stay with Noboru in the hospital. He needs someone there with him, so obviously that would be Erika since she is from his country and speaks his first language.'"

"When I didn't respond, Mom continued rather stridently, saying, 'Is this how you handle disappointment, Sandford? It's as if you are trying to find fault so you can somehow divert your disappointment over missing the dinner. I thought your dad and I tried to teach you that when you run into setbacks, difficulties, that's when you have to be your most patient, most accepting, most logical self. In short that's when you need to try to do whatever you know to be the right thing.'"

"I knew Mom was right, but I didn't have the energy or will to even answer her."

"Mom continued anyway saying, 'I don't see any evidence of your trying to do the right thing in this case. Seems to me today you've suppressed your rational judgment and just reacted with your emotions.'"

Sandy went on to explain to me, "This was the worst reprimand I have received from my mother since I was a teenager. She hurt me as much with those words as you had in indicating your disapproval of me by calling me Sandford."

"I called you Sandford?"

"Yes, at least twice."

"Oh, oh! I don't remember that."

"You were obviously frustrated and angry at me."

"Yes, cold, frustrated, and angry, but I didn't know I could hurt you by just calling you Sandford."

"Well, I obviously deserved it because Mom called me that too. I hope I never deserve to be called Sandford by the two of you again in that same way."

"Ah, Love. I'm sorry. I overreacted."

Taking his hand, I said, "I'm glad you came to the hospital. What made you think to do that?"

Sandy admitted that in sitting downstairs in the dark when his mom came in, "I hadn't got to the stage of thinking about how to rectify the situation. But there was my mom, thorn in my side that she sometimes is, demanding to know what I was going to do about it."

"Do about it?" I responded raising my voice. "What can I do about it! I don't know Noboru's cell number so I can't get back in touch with her."

"But you know how to reach them."

"I do?"

"Well, you said they are in the emergency ward of the Squamish Hospital. Sounds like someone with half a brain could find that, Sandy. And that seems preferable to sitting here stewing, waiting to see if Erika is going to offer you the olive branch. And why should she be the one having to make up?"

Sandy explained to me, "That seemed so simple. Yes, I was willing drive the hour to Squamish just to be doing something to try to resolve this impasse between us. I pulled myself up out of the chair feeling incredibly weary, but I knew that was the answer."

"Mom, you're right," I said, hugging her. "Thanks for caring. And please, leave the kitchen as it is. I'll make sure it is spotless before you go near it to make breakfast."

"Just drive very carefully, Sandy, on that treacherous road."

"I will."

I smiled knowing the rest of the story: how Sandy had driven up to Squamish on the Sea-to-Sky highway and arrived in a state of anxiety. And I, after making the telephone calls I needed to make, had returned to the waiting room in the emergency ward, knowing that Noboru, drugged, was sleeping

soundly. I felt so wrung out it seemed like four in the morning, despite the fact that it was not yet 10:00 pm.

I rolled up my jacket to serve as a pillow. I intended to try to sleep in one of those straight-backed, metal chairs with the laminated wood handles. But a gust of wind blasted in at the opening of the sliding emergency entrance doors. I opened my eyes. It was Sandy!

Supporting myself with the arms of the chair, I just stood up. Our eyes connected unwaveringly. I seemed unable to move. Sandy came forward and we hugged wordlessly. Then we each blurted out something that aimed to be an apology. It was apparent that we both regretted how we had behaved toward each other.

We both sat down and, without touching, soon fell into silence. The environment seemed to encourage that. A few people were trying to sleep in the nearby chairs. Waiting. Just waiting with no apparent energy. A dead space.

So without talking, Sandy stayed with me until Noboru went off to the operating room where his leg was to be set. A nurse came out and said they would admit Noboru for overnight. She assured us there was no point in waiting longer as Noboru would likely not be awake for several hours after getting over the effects of the anesthetic. And it would be at least 11:00 am, before he was to be checked by the doctor before being released.

"So will you come home with me now, Er? I'm willing to drive you back tomorrow morning to transport Noboru."

When I hesitated, Sandy commented, "You could help me clean up the kitchen tonight...."

"Not fair, Sandy."

"Probably not." He smiled weakly, "But you'll come to the house with me?"

"You are willing to bring me back here in the morning to get Noboru?"

"I am."

"Okay, then...."

I wrote a note for Noboru telling him Sandy and I would be back for him around 11:00 am.

I was glad to be getting out of that waiting room, but I still felt awkward—bruised by our interaction. I was embarrassed by my outburst on the phone. But Sandy put his arm around my shoulder and, leaning into the wind together, our scarves blowing behind us, we walked out to where his car was parked. We got in.

Despite being bundled up in all my warm clothing, my bones were still chilled from having been standing outside for so long. I think Sandy apologized for the car being cold again and mentioned that the heater would cut in once we were on

the road a few minutes. Probably I didn't respond to this. I was still going over what had happened. All of it.

A few moments went by and I realized that Sandy had again said something that I didn't catch. I was aware of the silence between us, but I didn't know what to do about it.

I was surprised, nevertheless, when just before we were to connect with the main highway, Sandy pulled over to the side of the road out of the traffic. He undid his seat belt, turned toward me, and touched my face.

"Look, Er. What else can I do? I feel so beat up. I am sorry about everything that has happened. I hate it when we are like this."

"Like this?"

"Not communicating. Distant."

I said, "I don't like it either. And I feel beat up too."

Sandy then moved to kiss me. I didn't particularly respond but I didn't object so he kissed me with an increasing sense of urgency. He undid the zipper of my jacket and put his hand inside, but I had on so many layers that I did not feel anything particularly sensuous and I doubt if he did either. But he had at least revealed his concern.

When he finally moved away from me, he said, "I just hope I haven't done irreparable damage to our relationship, Er."

"Sandy, you've insulted me again by showing that you still don't trust me. Recognize that it takes me a bit of time to get over that. But as annoying as it is, I can tolerate a little of your doubting, and I hope you can stand a little of my anger without thinking we should break up. Aren't we at least that far along in our relationship?"

"I'd like to think so, but I can't always judge what 'is true' compared to what I 'hope is true' for us."

"Sandy, you're so insecure! I wish you weren't so insecure. When I'm not freezing cold, I can remember. I can understand. But to forget and overreact, well, then I end up feeling terrible, like I don't fight fairly."

"It's not your fault, Er. You're not the one who got me caught in a sexual triangle and caused me not to trust."

"And I'll make sure I never do, Sandy. That's what I wish you would realize."

"Most of the time I do realize that. I can believe that. But sometimes I fall back. Still, I'd rather we not talk to each other the way we did."

"I agree. I also don't want us to talk like that again."

We hugged. One of our most relaxing pieces of classical music, Pachelbel Canon, came on CBC radio. Barely audible, Sandy reached over and turned it up. We smiled, as if acknowledging we couldn't continue to fight through this soothing sound. So, just sitting there listening, Sandy removed

my glove, finger by finger and stroked my palm and between each finger. As the music ended, he kissed me in a way that I couldn't ignore. I wished we were in a more comfortable place.

"Let's go back to the house then," he said.

Without further conversation he returned to the driver's side of the car and drove back out onto the highway.

He held my hand during some of the trip back, at least on the straight stretches of road. I was glad when we finally reached his street and then drove down that still unnerving (for me) driveway. We pulled into the garage next to his father's car.

"Your dad's car...."

"But just Mom's at home. She kept the car after driving Dad to the airport."

Thinking about the intensity of Sandy's kiss, I semi-seriously said, "So, is it safe for me to come in?"

"Probably just," he responded. "Although I wouldn't trust myself for 'comfort and caring' only tonight."

"That's a warning for me?"

Smiling he said, "Yeah, I guess it is."

"So I sleep in the guest room?"

"That would probably be best."

When I walked into the house with Sandy and saw the romantically set table near the fireplace, my heart melted for him. The daffodils, wine glasses, and cream-coloured candles and matching linen serviettes and tablecloth suggested such expectations.

"It's all so elegant. You did this for me?"

"Of course. You deserve my best efforts," he said, putting his arm around my waist.

However, as we approached the kitchen, he said, "Just a sec."

Standing behind me, he put his hands over my eyes as he steered me through the swinging kitchen door. He let the door close behind us before he took his hands away. I opened my eyes and, surveying the scene, broke out laughing.

"Sandy, how could you make such a mess?"

It seemed that every bowl and pot and pan had been in use, and they all stood now with food residue drying in them. There were separated eggs in measuring cups, asparagus in a pan of water, leeks in a casserole dish, bread crumbs in the process of being ground up in a blender, a head of lettuce partially shredded, and blanched almonds, grated cheese, and chopped onions in small bowls.

"But just a minute. Look at these."

He proudly showed me his plate of rolled strawberry crepes with icing sugar sprinkled over the top of them. One crepe, topped with strawberries but not yet rolled, was still on a breadboard with strawberry juice leaking over its edges.

Obviously this is what he had referred to when he said his hands had been too sticky to hold the phone properly when he had received my call from the hospital.

"It's true, they do look good."

"After we clean up, we can have them warmed up as a night cap, with whipped cream, so you can appreciate them fully."

I smiled at him for being so proud of his efforts.

"But it occurs to me. You probably haven't had any main course that can pass as supper, have you?"

"No, actually I haven't."

"Well, we can't rescue any of the cooking that I had in progress, but we can have a bowl of a stew that I made for myself for last night."

"Alright. As long as your delicious stew doesn't become associated with recovering from fights. As post-fight food."

"How do you mean this?"

"Don't you remember that is what you served me after our fight when you met up with my friends outside the galleries at Ambleside?"

"Please don't remind me of that. Besides, I hope we won't be having any more fights."

"That sounds like a worthwhile goal."

I took off my ski sweater, pushed up the sleeves of my cotton turtleneck, and filled the kitchen sink with hot, sudsy water knowing that a dishwasher could not manage all the miscellaneous pans and bowls with the dried-on food.

After a couple of minutes, I said, "Oh, I almost forgot. I promised to phone Sumi and Sebastian on our return from the hospital no matter what the hour."

"Maybe Sumi would like to come with us to pick up Noboru tomorrow," Sandy suggested.

"What a great idea! But Noboru may need to keep his foot up...."

"We could take Dad's car. I'm sure Mom won't mind as long as I leave her mine so she's not stranded."

While I was on the phone, Sandy took over at the sink where I had left off. I liked watching him work as I talked with Sumi and then Sebastian. Despite the mess, he seemed comfortable in the kitchen.

Sumi had been in touch with the hospital since the surgeon had set Noboru's leg and had been told that everything went well.

"Oh, good. So we can assume he'll be discharged at around eleven tomorrow morning?"

His hands still in water, Sandy turned around and smiled at me as a reminder.

“Sandy wants to know if you would like to come and get Noboru with us.... Yes? Oh good. We should probably leave here just before 10:00.... Coming here?... No, you’d never find the place. We should meet you somewhere.”

Sandy indicated that we could go and pick up Sumi saying, “Get her address....”

When I phoned Sebastian, it was apparent that he too had been willing to retrieve Noboru from the hospital.

“It’s okay, Sebastian. Sandy is going to drive Sumi and me to pick him up. Sandy can take his father’s car, which is wider, so Noboru will be able to sit with his leg flat.”

When I got off the phone, I said, “You did get that phone awfully sticky.”

I took a damp cloth and wiped the receiver.

Then I went and stood behind Sandy at the sink. I put my arms around his waist and submerged my hands in the rinse water.

Having overheard the two phone calls, Sandy commented, “You do have an incredibly supportive group of friends.”

“I know. We are family-away-from-home for each other. But I have the feeling you are becoming an honorary member.”

“I’d like that.”

After we got everything in the kitchen back in order and the dishwasher was humming contentedly, we sat in the nook and had a bowl of Sandy’s stew and then started on the warmed strawberry crepes with whipped cream.

As Sandy finished eating, we noticed the time and were amazed it was so late. He put his fork down and watched me as I struggled to eat my last crepe quickly by holding it like a hotdog.

“Yum, delicious,” I commented as I finished.

Seeing the icing sugar and strawberry juice dripping between my fingers, Sandy held my palm and licked the juice between each finger.

He smiled and said, “Yes, delicious.”

We laughed.

“I’m just sorry that you didn’t get to go into the hot tub to relax your muscles after skiing,” he said.

“That isn’t the main reason you are sorry we didn’t go into the hot tub, Sandy.”

“I know. You’re onto me.”

Sandy took our dishes and rinsed them in the sink. I dried them and put them into the cupboard. We put the milk and the remaining whipped cream into the fridge.

Ah, the fridge—forever a reminder of our first attempted kiss. Sandy smiled at me in acknowledgment and, leaning against the counter, drew me toward him. Yes, we kissed.

A few moments later, when we reached the kitchen door, we stopped to appreciate our work.

"Looks perfect."

"Yeah. Thanks for all your help."

We indulged in an extended hug.

"So did we learn anything about us today, Er?"

"Yes, I need to be a little bit more understanding and you need to be a lot more trusting."

Laughing, Sandy responded, "You a little and me a lot!"

"Right."

"So are we okay?"

"Yes, I think so."

Turning off the kitchen light, we headed to our separate bedrooms. That took all our resolve.

In the morning Sandy's mom lit the fireplace and mentioned that we hadn't disassembled the table set up in the living room. So Sandy and I took our breakfast in there beside the cheerful fire and lit the candles and used the wine glasses for our orange juice. This made me feel that I hadn't totally missed the experience of having a romantic meal beside the fire with Sandy.

As we finished our omelets and toast, he asked, "Did you bring your flute with you?"

"Yes, I was assuming we would have a lot of time to play, after the hot tub, last night."

"Hot tub and music. So things didn't exactly go as planned."

"Not exactly."

"Do you have time to try one piece before I drive you home."

"Moonlight Sonata?"

"Sure. If you are ready for that now."

"Yes, I'm ready. Did you get some practice in?"

"Yes. At your suggestion, I sat down as soon as I got back from getting that book out of the West Van Library. Playing that piece through for just a few minutes helped me to recover my equilibrium and relax, as it has since then."

"After that flare up of unnecessary jealousy," I smiled.

"Yes, that one, which was softened, however, by your parting comment."

"My parting comment?"

"About wanting me to become more secure about us as a couple."

"That had an effect?"

"Yes, of course it did, because I *do* want to feel more secure about us, Er."

"There's no reason why you can't, Sandy."

“Right,” he smiled. “Anyway, your comment and my playing then got rid of my negative emotions, so I was able to tackle my essay in a straightforward manner.”

“We’ll have to remember that for the future when we are stressed.”

“For sure. So let’s see what we can do now.”

I sat down at the piano beside Sandy and again were surprised that we sounded as good as we did.

I commented, “Not bad considering it has been several years since I was playing this as one of my pieces in an amateur AIDS benefit concert. In fact that was the week my sister left home to study in England. So six, almost seven years ago. Has it been that long for you?”

“Even longer,” he smiled (regretfully?).

Sandy’s mom came in from the kitchen where she had been talking on the telephone.

“You’re sounding so good together. I hope you can keep this up.”

“Thanks, Mom. We hope we can too.”

*Photographs of Whistler Peak (right hand image on opening page), view of village from gondola, and lone skier on slope, courtesy of Tais Carretero, Brazil*



## ***FEBRUARY # 2—Noboru in His Cast***

A couple of days after the accident, Noboru's homestay brother drove Noboru and Sumi to school from North Vancouver. They arrived a little earlier than usual. Now that the initial pain was over, Noboru looked somewhat like a Cheshire cat proud of all the attention and help he was receiving as he sat there in the lounge with his broken leg stretched out on the sofa. A bouquet of flowers from our classmates was in front of him, and his crutches were lying beside him.

Bae and Song were the first to hear his story directly from him. But Noboru didn't mind repeating it. Students admired and signed Noboru's cast. He was lapping up all this attention as he told the story of my coming with him off the mountain, riding in the ambulance, and going to the hospital with him, and Sumi and I driving back with Sandy to retrieve him from Squamish.

You could almost imagine that he was reliving the return drive from Squamish and the satisfaction of sitting in the back seat with Sumi beside him protecting his foot and being totally concerned about his well being. Actually I had been especially pleased that Sandy had seen this—seen Sumi and Noboru being this close.

Later in the day Noboru had hobbled on his crutches from class back to the lounge. He and I were alone. He said his father had asked him to apologize to me on his behalf for the verbal abuse that he (his dad) had given me when I had phoned to tell him of Noboru's broken leg.

"So what exactly did he say that he would apologize for, Erika? I've never known my father to apologize," Noboru commented.

"Do you really want me to tell you?"

"Of course, I do," he said with genuine interest.

"Well, his reaction had been anger rather than concern. He said you probably broke your leg on purpose in order to make yourself even less capable of working, more useless, so you can stay in Vancouver longer."

“No kidding, did he really say that! That I broke my leg on purpose?”

“Yes, and he also alluded to your becoming somewhat of a bohemian, growing your hair, aligning yourself with women who see themselves as artistic. And, specifically, he accused me of my bad influence.”

“What a bas...! (Pardon me!). How dare he! I’m so sorry about this, Erika. After all you’ve done for me. This must have really hurt you.”

“Actually this didn’t affect me as much as it might have under other circumstances, because at the time I was reeling from Sandy’s distrust.”

“Distrust? How could Sandy distrust you?”

“Well, he assumed you and I had been on the mountain as a couple.”

“As a couple! Doesn’t he see that everything I have ever done to try to have you as a girlfriend has failed miserably?”

“Noboru, surely you don’t see that as failure. If we had become a couple, you wouldn’t now be developing a bond with Sumi. And that looks so promising. I’m sure you are meant to be together.”

He smiled in agreement saying, “That’s true. I appreciate what you’ve done to encourage that.”



## ***FEBRUARY # 3—Valentine's Day Gig***

*Visuals: photographs of Valentine's door piece, Valentine gift bag and card*

At last! The Valentine's Day reunion gig that Sandy had asked me to attend so long ago. I was excited. At least this is how I was feeling leading up to the event.

I looked forward to seeing Sandy on stage in the same club in Kitsilano. Several of my classmates agreed to accompany me again. These included Fernando and Nicole, who would never miss the chance to dance, Marina, who likes to be active in any way, Sebastian (who apparently likes to be with Marina!), Sumi, Noboru (still in his leg cast), Juliana, Song, and Bae.

We all got into the Valentine's Day spirit by wearing something red. Juliana even lent Sumi a red sweater. It looked terrific on her, but we didn't convince Sumi to extend her wardrobe to any colour beyond her sophisticated black.

When we walked into the club, we were overwhelmed by the red glow of so many small red lights and red cloths on the tables. We pushed two tables together and gathered extra chairs so the ten of us could all sit together. The room filled quickly.

I was remembering slow dancing with Sandy there for the first time. As the band filed onto the stage, I was able to smile openly now at Sandy as he took his position at the keyboard with his guitars standing by.

They launched into their first song. It was lively. The band was animated and in touch with the music and each other, and the audience was very responsive.

After a few minutes, Fernando leaned toward me and said, "Wow, they're hot!"

I felt proud to know the band personally. I was also looking forward to the intermission so Sandy and I could dance.

After lots of rousing songs and full appreciation from the audience, the band members finally set aside their instruments and the taped music came on. The floor filled up quickly with couples.

Fernando and Nicole were first up to dance in our group followed by Sebastian and Marina. Song encouraged Bae to try and, despite being reluctant, he looked slightly less awkward than he had on New Year's Eve.

As Sandy approached our table, he greeted Sumi and Noboru who were seated shoulder to shoulder. I was glad that they were looking as much of a couple as they had in the ride down from Squamish Hospital.

Sandy shook hands with them and asked Noboru about his leg. He admitted that he was anxious to get the cast off, but didn't know when that would be.

When Sandy and I were finally slow dancing, I commented, "It looks like you are all having a great time up there."

"We are."

"So are you nostalgic about no longer being in the band?"

"Kind of. But I can put this in perspective. For instance, I'm glad I won't be going on tour next week."

"Me too."

"But I am glad you are here tonight."

"To appreciate what you've given up?"

"Maybe."

"But you know I already recognize that. How hard it was for you to make that decision. To put architecture first."

"I know. But I think you and my mom are the only ones who truly do appreciate that. That the choice wasn't necessarily obvious."

We moved closer. I liked the feeling of Sandy's thighs against mine. I wished we could dance forever. We were quiet during the remaining taped music. As with the previous gig, the intermission came to an end much too abruptly, and Sandy had to dash back to the stage to begin to play again.

When I sat down, Sumi leaned over and whispered, "It's wonderful to celebrate Valentine's Day with someone you love and who loves you, isn't it?"

I hoped she meant herself as much as me about loving and being loved. I smiled and nodded in agreement noticing that Noboru had his fingers over Sumi's on the table.

Well into the second set, Sandy was looking down at the strings on his guitar in concentration. When he looked up he met my glance and smiled. But then something terrible caused a change. Looking out at the audience beyond me, Sandy all of a sudden looked stricken even though he kept playing.

I didn't want to turn to look at what he was seeing, but then a moving figure entered the side of my vision. Someone was sitting down at the far side of the room to the left of me. I stole a furtive glance. I knew instantly it was Madame X.

I had never given her a thought since Leah had described her to me. At least I hadn't expected her to just appear after Sandy had told me about breaking up with her and how she and the guitar player had moved to Edmonton.

But now the joy seemed to go out of Sandy, despite the fact that he kept playing all the notes required of him. His sense of community of being on stage with his fellow musicians, totally in touch with the music and the audience, was gone. I could see that Leah had noticed too. She was singing with Larry but I could see her eyes were diverted. What was she thinking about this? She looked in my direction. I don't know if my face communicated my awareness.

I dreaded the moment that the band would stop playing and Sandy would leave the stage. Members of the audience were on their feet applauding after the "last song" and the following encore. I could see Madame X clearly. (What is her real name? Have I just forgotten it or did I ever hear it? Or have I purposely deleted it from my mind?)

She seemed everything that Leah had told me about, warned me about. Wearing what appeared to be a late nineteenth century, long, maroon dress full at the top (sleeves and bodice) and form fitting through her slender waist and hips. This was not a dress that any women under thirty would dare to be seen in today except as a costume. But just a minute, how old is she? She seemed poised and able to wear this dress with equanimity.

She moved forward as all the band members stepped down off the low stage. Audience members greeted them with outstretched hands. Those close to the front were congratulating them on the wonderful performance. Sandy looked in my direction. But, sure enough, she intercepted him and put both of her long-finger-nailed hands on Sandy's upper arms stopping him where he was and looking into his face. And how dare she! She kissed his mouth.

Was Sandy as alarmed as I was? I saw her speaking to him but couldn't hear anything. Of course I knew I should go to him. Assert myself. But I seemed bolted to the floor. My classmates were unaware of what was happening. They were gathering up their things. Talking excitedly about what a good show it had been and about who was traveling with whom. I was too numb to take much of this in. I jumped when Leah arrived unexpectedly at my side and took my arm.

"Erika," she said. "Sandy needs you. Maybe you should say goodbye to your friends now."

I felt a sense of doom.

"Erika will be coming home with us," Leah reassured the others. "So goodnight and thanks so much for coming."

That was enough to get me to mimic “Goodnight” to my classmates as Leah steered me away.

She took me to Sandy’s side. He could tell that I knew this was her. He gave civil introductions. (I still didn’t take in her name! Starts with an S?) Sandy put one arm around my waist and the other arm across his chest as if protecting himself from her. But despite this reassurance, I was frightened. She seemed to disregard me and totally concentrate on Sandy. She stroked her hair and flipped it back and forth revealing her neck as she continued to look into Sandy’s face.

I was (objectively?) reviewing the facts that I knew. This is a woman who knew Sandy intimately, who had dated him for two years, but with whom he chose to break up. She had caused Sandy much pain when he realized that she was sexually involved with another man as well as him.

In terms of age, she could be an early-blossoming 17-year-old or a well-preserved 35. She had an unmade-up look—her own kind of beauty. Leah had referred to it as pre-Raphaelite, as in the famous British paintings of the woman with that mass of long, curly, auburn hair. I could see it would be easy for a guy to get drawn in by her beauty. But knowing this, I still didn’t know what to do. How I should behave? I was numb. Larry came over and formally, but unenthusiastically, greeted her and asked something about the guitar player who had moved back to Edmonton with her.

She responded, “Oh, we are no longer together.”

Another wave of fear went through me. Madame X alone. On the loose.

Leah, taking on her role as band manager, came over and placed herself between Sandy and the woman. Looking directly at her, Leah said, “Afraid we can’t talk, as we have to leave here before our time is up or we will get charged for an extra hour. Let’s move, Sandy.”

Gordon asked Sandy to help with getting the largest speaker out to the van and asked me to keep an eye on the remaining instruments and the totes on the stage. They headed off and I stepped up onto the stage and then knelt down to repack some of the band’s CDs and souvenir tee shirts into a tote container. When I looked around a moment later, Madame X wasn’t there. It was the strangest feeling. That she had just disappeared. Like maybe she had just been in my imagination. I wish that she had just been in my imagination.

All the guys and Leah went back and forth to the van, which was just beyond the now propped-open back door just off the stage. Despite earlier sunny, almost warm days, the rain was trying to turn to snow and was coming down in a most miserable, bone-chilling form. I could feel the draft coming from

the open door as I sat on my heels on the stage repacking the large container.

Except for this tote and Sandy's acoustic guitar in its case, the stage was empty at four minutes before 1:30 am. I heard the van pull away. Perfect timing but not much to spare. Sandy strode through the door saying to me, "I'll take the tote, Er. Can you can bring the guitar?"

But he stopped in his tracks.

I turned around and to my horror that women was standing there again.

Sandy seemed as unprepared for this as I was.

"Oh," he said noticeably shaken, "We assumed you had left."

"No, I had a minor feminine problem to tend to in the ladies' room."

"Well, we must be going now," Sandy said. But apparently she wasn't about to be shaken off easily.

"I arrived from Edmonton this afternoon. Just yesterday I became aware of the gig. Luckily I was able to get a flight and that the bouncer remembered me and was willing to let me into the show late. Earlier I dropped off my luggage in Burnaby. That's where I am staying. Knowing I'd be arriving here after the show started, I didn't want to be dragging in a lot of stuff. So I left my purse, umbrella, gloves, and scarf back at the house. I'm hoping you can drive me there," she said, ending this recitation with a near pout on her mouth.

Did I see Sandy with a "How dare you ask me that," look on his face? But he was also concerned about doing something quickly to get out of the hall.

"Well, perhaps part way," he said, just wanting to get moving.

Sandy picked up the tote. The three of us headed for the back door to get to where Sandy's car was parked. I walked quickly to minimize the impact of the wind and rain but more importantly to ensure that I would sit in the front seat beside Sandy. I doubted that Madame X would have any qualms about taking my place. I stood the guitar case beside the back trunk and went to the front passenger door.

Once we were all in the car, she dared to suggest that Sandy drop me off first and then drive her to Burnaby. I was pleased that Sandy was at least able to say, "No, I am not willing to do that."

Quietly he asked me, "Erika, will you come with me if I drive to Burnaby?"

"Yes, of course."

He squeezed my hand.

None of us said much as we left Kits, drove along Broadway, through East Vancouver, and then headed into

Burnaby. I felt her presence in the car even without seeing her as she sat directly behind me. When we reached the small house where she is staying, she couldn't get the back car door open. Or at least she pretended she couldn't get it open.

Sandy got out of the car in the rain and walked around to her side to open it for her—something she had undoubtedly planned. Just one more way to lure Sandy away. This really irritated me. Once out of the car, she talked in undertones. Sandy walked her down a few steps and along the sidewalk to the door of the house. This was behind me and beyond my hearing.

They stood under the low eaves of the house. After a few minutes I dared to turn and look in their direction. Sandy, his back partially toward me, had his hands in his jacket pockets, as if to keep them out of her reach. Almost Sandy's height, she was looking directly into his face. I think she was crying. Or pleading even?

This seemed so out of character with the totally self-assured, self-possessed woman who glided across the floor at the club. Now she seemed to be a recently turned tall, 17-year-old girl begging to get her boyfriend back. Sandy didn't seem to be saying much.

When he came back to the car, he said, "I'm sorry, Erika. I fear that I have handled this poorly. For all her manipulating, it is still beyond me to leave anyone out in the street in this weather with no friends, no money and in the flimsiest coat, even if that is the effect that she intended all along."

I was thinking about the rainy night, movie night, in the UBC parking lot, when I asked Sandy for a ride home. At that time he had left *me* standing in the pouring rain.

I didn't realize I had verbalized this until Sandy responded, "But that was different, Er. If I had agreed to drive you home then, I would have been taking you away from your friends, something I pledged I would never do."

I was pleased to finally understand why Sandy had refused to help me then. Why he had just driven away, leaving me to catch up with my classmates.

He added, "But of course I would have driven you home if I had realized how really cold you were and how ill you were to become as a result of not getting out of the weather immediately."

Thinking again of the present situation, I commented, "She knows you are a person with a conscience, Sandy. She is counting on that. She frightens me. I have never felt this way before. I can't explain it."

"I know. She is disturbing me too. She manages to make me feel like a bad person."

"How?"

“Well, she expects me to forgive her and get back together.”

I missed a breath.

“She refuses to be convinced that this isn’t about forgiveness and going back. It is about recognizing that our different values mean that we should never have been together in the first place.”

I was struck silent. Sandy obviously was preoccupied too, as he didn’t say anything for a couple of minutes.

“Er, you and I didn’t even talk about what we would do after the gig. Could you come to my place for the night?”

“Yes, I’d like that.”

He hastened to add, “Not that I am objecting to driving you home; you know I am willing to do that if you want me to.”

“Sandy, I want to come to your place.”

“Good. I’d like us to have some recovery time. To try to reclaim what started out to be such a beautiful evening.”

“But I’ll need to phone Mary so she doesn’t worry about me.”

“Sure. And you should know that Mom and Dad are both at home. It would be best if you sleep in the guest room.”

“Of course.”

We were quiet again until I finally said, “Your dad’s more conservative than your mom, isn’t he?”

“Yes. Why do you ask?”

“Well, you’ve been comfortable in having your mom see us being close. And she seems so accepting of that.”

“Dad is definitely more conservative. He is five years older than Mom. That time period made a difference to what was socially acceptable when he was our age. It’s not that he’s naïve. But I would just as soon not unnecessarily confront him with our being together in his home. To make him feel awkward or that he is somehow responsible for us.... Hey, there’s a phone booth in that plaza.”

He turned right and pulled up next to it.

“Do you need any change?”

“No. I’ve got some, thanks,” I replied, as I got out and closed the car door.

Mary answered immediately so it was a quick call. When I got back in the car, Sandy commented, “Do you think we will be the last two people on the planet without cell phones?”

“Probably.”

“Get through to her okay?”

“Yes.”

“So she was still up?”

“Yeah, she generally keeps late hours. Besides Mary has a phone at her bedside and has told me she would rather wake up

with my call than wake up later on her own and notice that I'm not home and then worry about me."

Sandy found some quiet music on the radio and held my hand. Despite the calming sound, we relapsed back into relative silence.

I was glad when we reached Sandy's street. We parked the car in the carport, and Sandy took the tote and asked me to again to carry the guitar.

"Why do you have the tote?"

"Leah and Larry have asked me to do an inventory so they know what to replace before they set off on the road trip. Maybe that is something you could help me with in the morning."

"Sure."

"It shouldn't take much time."

"How long will the tour be?"

"Almost three weeks."

"Wow, then I really am glad you are not still a member of the band."

"I know. I feel the same way."

When we got into the quiet, almost dark house, we went into the kitchen to see if we would like something to eat.

Sandy's parents were already in bed. There was a note on the fridge door asking Sandy to check the fireplace downstairs.

"Oh, good. Let's have our snack in front of the fire if it's still lit."

We gathered up some snack food on a tray and we went downstairs to the family room. Sandy put the tray on the coffee table and I sat down on the sofa that faces the fireplace. Again Sandy put on some soft music. He added some additional wood to the embers. The fire flared up and soon was crackling in a comforting way. We were able to see by its glow without any additional light.

Looking into the fire, we sipped and munched. Then Sandy set the tray to one side and put his sock feet on the low table. He put one hand on my shoulder and then touched a clip in my hair.

"May I?"

"Yes."

He undid the clip and shook my hair free.

"You like it better down?"

"It looks good up as a change, but when we're alone I like it down. It's silky."

"You're tactile."

"Visual and tactile. Is that so bad?"

"No, of course not."

I smiled, as I was remembering the time of the rose bud on the book when I was wishing Sandy would take my hair

down. I'm glad to know now that he didn't see that gesture as inappropriate; he was simply fighting off his attraction to me by abruptly deciding to take me home to avoid any further closeness.

With my hair spread across my shoulders now, Sandy loosely twisted strands around in his fingers and then gathered a cluster at the back of my head. Then he let my hair fall, smoothing it out again on my shoulders. He did this several times in a distracted manner. This felt soothing, but obviously his mind was elsewhere.

"Sandy, what are you thinking about?"

"You must know."

"Her?"

"Yeah."

"I'd like to know about that."

"Besides her trying to convince me that we should get back together and that in relating to you I am wasting my time?"

"She knows about me and that I'm not from here?"

"Yes. Apparently she phoned Gordon before she got on the plane to come here. He tried to convince her not make the trip after she revealed her intention to try to get back together with me."

"Gordon told you this?"

"Yes, while we were loading the van. Also I thought that in telling her about my commitment to you, I would put a quick end to her bargaining."

"But she chooses to ignore me as she did in person. To not take our relationship seriously, right?"

"Exactly. She is assuming that you and I will have to break up when you go back to Japan.... She referred to you in a derogatory way as a foreigner, seeming to forget that she landed here not long ago."

I started to ask something but then he added, "She stated you've been a bad influence by convincing me to leave the band."

I started to object, but Sandy put his finger to my lips and said, "Er, that assumption isn't even worth a response."

He gave me a simple kiss and then said, "I wish we knew you've been accepted into the architecture program here."

"So we could deflect such criticisms?"

"Yeah. Not that it's anyone else's business to know what our plans are. But also for us. I look forward to knowing what difference it will make if we know that you're going to be staying."

I smiled. "What difference sexually?"

"Yes. That too."

"If we knew I'd been accepted, would you feel that we could become involved sooner?"

"That will be up to you, Er. Even then you may want to wait until September to ensure that we still feel the same way about each other after you return from Japan. Perhaps in going home, which is such a different social context, you'll find yourself reconsidering our relationship. If that happens, I assume you would prefer for us *not* to have become sexually involved."

"This is a terrible strain, Sandy. Needing, waiting to find out. So much is at stake. Certainly I can't imagine wanting to give up being a couple under any circumstances."

"But have you fully considered not living in your own country? Not speaking your native language? Being away from your family for long periods including at important times?"

"Sandy, you know I have, but I still want to be here with you, because I love you."

There. I'd said it. Was that the first time I'd actually said, "I love you"? Was this so much assumed between us that it didn't seem like stating something new? Probably. Because Sandy didn't seem to react.

He just said, "I just hope you still feel this way, Er, once you are back Japan in April. Once you re-experience what it is like being in the comfort of your original environment."

"That's not going to change my feelings for you, Sandy."

"I guess I'd also like to think that sex for us will signify that we hope to build a future together."

"I'd like it to mean that too."

"But I am also aware of my selfishness in never considering moving to Japan to live with you on your home ground."

"Sandy, I've never once thought that you might consider living in Japan. I am assuming you want to take over your father's business when he retires, and I'd love to be part of that with you."

"Really? You can see doing that? I'm sure my parents would be delighted to think that might be possible. Your being in that with me."

"I don't think this is a foreign idea to your mom. She has, on more than one occasion, approvingly mentioned the advantages of Grant and Lynn having a business together."

"I know Mom would have liked to be more involved in the artistic side of the business with Dad. She has taken on the bookkeeping as a way to have some involvement, but this doesn't feed her artistic cravings."

Speaking of.... Are you aware that in just over a month, we may know if you have been accepted by UBC."

"Oh, this is so nerve-wracking. Sandy, I want this so badly."

"I know. We both do. For you to study architecture at UBC. To stay in Vancouver. To have more time for us to be together...."

"What will happen if this door to our dream doesn't open?"

"Let's not consider that. Worrying won't help."

"I know. And I have enough to anxiety to deal with this coming week."

"With your parents arriving here and then taking you away to Toronto with them?"

"Yes. My nervousness is specifically about my *dad* arriving."

"Right. Your mom is the supportive one."

"And Dad certainly isn't."

"Do you think will he try to interfere with our being together?" Sandy asked.

"Well, I'm sorry to say, Sandy, that at the very least he'll be trying to undermine you, us, in my eyes. Trying to get me to end our relationship, as he is doing with my sister and Andrew."

"I hope you'll be steadfast."

"I am determined to be unwavering and not let him affect my view of us."

"Is he likely to confront me in person?"

"I just don't know. I have never experienced this before."

"So it seems like I should be the one to be on edge."

"Whatever Dad does though, never forget that I am on your side."

"I hope that whatever your dad does, you'll remember that you are an adult, capable of making your own decisions."

"Yes, and remember too, Sandy, you are the person I want to share my life with."

In saying all that we turned our attention to making the best of the moment, to enjoy each other.

After a few minutes, I became aware of something and said, "Sandy, you used to have an earring."

"I wondered when you would notice."

"How long ago was that?"

"When Larry and I first started the Alums."

"And why did you give up the earring and let the pierced hole grow over?"

"When I was skiing I snagged the earring in my glove, ripping my ear lobe. That kind of scared me. It happened so easily. So I decided to let it grow over as the wound healed. I was doing a lot of skiing then because I was a ski patroller."

"You were a ski patroller?"

"Yes. On Grouse Mountain. As a patroller I could be on the mountain as much as I wanted. Without that I couldn't have afforded to ski very often."

"There's no scar on your ear lobe. But I can feel a fine core where the hole was."

"Yeah."

"When I touch your other ear you seem to enjoy it."

"I do."

"But not this one."

"It's not that you're hurting it, as you are very gentle, but touch brings back its memory of being injured. In a couple of years, it may forget that it was ever hurt."

"Well, I can wait until then for that one."

"Really? Promise that we'll be together then?"

"Yes. I don't know how, but I definitely want to be with you."

He hugged me closer.

I wanted to see his face, so I sat back on my heels beside him. Wordlessly he reached up and helped me off with my sweater and my bra.

"More shyness therapy for me?" I asked with a smile.

"Sure."

"So then we should have some for you too."

"Okay. But do you really think I need such help?"

"Maybe not in these matters, but still...."

I undid the buttons on his shirt and helped him take his arms out of the sleeves and then remove his tee shirt.

I commented, "We never did get back to the hot tub."

"Yeah, we've neglected that. Next time you're here...."

We made do with this partially clothed contact. Again I loved the feeling of Sandy's bare chest against mine. But now I was more aware of how much clothing we still had on rather than what we had taken off.

Again, as it got very late, we had to use all our self-control to sit up and then go upstairs to our separate beds.





## ***FEBRUARY # 4—Arrival of My Parents in Vancouver***

*Visuals: photographs of the Sylvia Hotel*

Mom and Dad went directly to the Sylvia Hotel when they arrived in Vancouver. Mary recommended staying here for its view of English Bay and for being away from the congestion of downtown while being close to my homestay. Ornamental plum and cherry trees lining streets are just coming into bloom in the West End. And as usual, everything smells so fresh.

Mom and Dad came to school to pick me up. All my classmates waited with me in lounge to meet them (was this Noboru's idea?). I think Mom and Dad were surprised that my classmates didn't just saying hi and disperse. Because of the English-only policy at the school, and so Dad could be included in the conversation, we decided to go a nearby cafe (I insisted on a Canadian one!). We clustered tables and chairs together. I think this gathering gave Mom and Dad sense of how important my friends are as a caring group. Disregarding Sumi, Noboru sat next to Dad and talked with him in Japanese the whole time.

All gave advice to Mom and Dad (mostly to Mom) on what they should do with their short stay in Vancouver. The Museum of Anthropology, the Art Gallery, a symphony at the Orpheum, specific restaurants, the Aquarium in Stanley Park, a walk on the seawall, the Museum and Planetarium, a concert at the Chan Centre, a tour of UBC, etc.

Some of these suggestions made me smile, as I couldn't see Dad doing them, although my mom would love them all. I was surprised in fact that Mom had managed to get Dad to agree to attend the opera in the city. I was sure that he would sleep through the entire production while my mom would be fully engaged for every moment of it.

I am somewhat concerned about the rapport developing between Noboru and Dad. Noboru kept Dad in conversation and both were saying, “Erico...this, and Erico that.” How dare Noboru use my legal name when Mom and my friends were all calling me Erika. He knows this is the version I prefer.

And why was Noboru promoting himself with Dad? I heard him telling Dad how I had stayed with him in hospital and driven an hour with a friend to fetch him from hospital, yet he didn’t mention that the driver was Sandy. Or that Sumi was with us looking after Noboru’s every wish on the drive back.

Was Sumi noticing this? Of course! And how was this making her feel? Like she is still Noboru’s second choice? Surely Noboru should assume by now that gaining favour with Dad won’t have any effect on me. So why would he risk hurting Sumi? I intend to give him a vicious lecture next time we are alone! Sensitive guy that Bae is, he was particularly attentive to Sumi—sharing some lemon cake and trying each other’s drinks.

We finally got up from tables. Mom, Dad, and I were heading to hotel before having dinner and going to opera. For a moment I feared Noboru was even going to walk down to hotel with us. (“Enough, enough!” I was thinking.)

As Mom and Dad and I were within sight of the hotel, we saw a row of yellow daffodils in bloom. Mary had told me that there are always some daffodils on sunny, exposed parts of West End by the third week of February. So glad that Mom and Dad are able to see this.





## **FEBRUARY # 5—*Dinner for Mom and Dad***

*Visuals: Photographs of hotel, dinner, dragon puppet, linoprints*

From the enticing smells apparent on opening the front door, I could tell Mary would be serving some of my favourite foods to my parents.

As I made introductions, my dad said to Mary, in his best attempt at speaking English, "Thank you for taking such good care of my daughter."

Mom smiled and said, "He's been practising that all afternoon!"

Mary responded haltingly in a Japanese greeting that I'd been teaching her too.

We all laughed realizing what a struggle it was to communicate in even the simplest way.

"Come into the dining room. I am almost ready to serve dinner," Mary said. My mom and I provided simultaneous translations for my dad.

"Thank you, Mrs. ...."

"Please, call me Mary. And what is your name?" Mary asked my dad.

"Mr. Yamashiro."

I could see that Mary felt awkward, for appearing not to know our last name, which of course she does. I wish my father would consider allowing someone outside family to call him by his first name. I've become accustomed to this from my time in Vancouver, since our teachers go by their first names.

We sat down and proceeded to enjoy the stuffed chicken, onion casserole, yams, and pumpkin pie, all done in the oven. A treat for us, because at home we don't rely on an oven this much. Of course there were also mashed potatoes, the required steamed vegetables and the essential whipped cream for the pie.

During dinner, on behalf of my father, my mother said, "We've been in Vancouver for two days and we still don't know what a Canadian looks like."

Mary enjoyed this comment.

“Yes, and you could live here for years and still not be able to say what a Canadian looks like. Actually we are more accustomed to defining ourselves in terms of how we are different from Americans, but Canadians can’t even agree on that.”

I had told the others that Sandy would be coming by for dessert on his way home from UBC. I said this about dessert because I didn’t want the others to feel we needed to wait for him to arrive to start the rest of the dinner or to feel he was just being late. We had decided to give Mom and Dad time to be alone with Mary and me.

We tried to have a conversation on various topics, but it was difficult to include Dad even though Mom and I continued to provide translations. We told Mary about the business my mom has with her brother and what that involves and then about what my dad does and the Japanese cities he travels to. I had previously gone over a book of postcards with Mary that I had given her on my arrival, so she had a mental picture of some of these places and was able to say something about them as a way to relate to my Dad.

The doorbell rang. I was both thrilled and terrified. I was looking forward to introducing Mom to Sandy but dreaded what Dad’s reaction to him might be.

Sandy’s timing was perfect, as Mary was clearing plates away from the table when I greeted him at door. Nice kiss.

I whispered, “Hey, you look good!” He smiled.

I hung up his jacket. He was more noticeably “dressed” than usual with his khaki pants having an obvious pleat pressed down the front of them. He was wearing a pale yellow button-down shirt under a beige v-neck sweater with a loosely knotted tie.

I took his hand and proudly led him into the dining room and made introductions. I could tell that Mom immediately liked Sandy, but Dad was treating him very distantly, refusing to recognize how important he is to me.

Sandy presented them with a gift bag containing two bottles of wine. “To drink when you are in your hotel room,” he commented.

Mom lifted one out of the bag and admired the beautiful label, and that prompted comments about Sandy’s father’s role in designing the label and the making of the wine itself.

Knowing that Sandy wouldn’t actually have had time to eat on the way from UBC, I had set aside a plate of main course for him. He smiled as I brought it, without any comment, out of the microwave. After a few minutes, we all enjoyed pumpkin pie and whipped cream along with Mary’s and my favourite English toffee tea.

Mom and Dad presented Mary with gifts they had brought from Japan. Mary opened a set of small linocuts by an artist they know and a charming children's book illustrated by the same by same artist using the same technique. Sandy asked about the artist, so Mom explained something of his background. Sandy's appreciation of the linocutting process revealed his experience in having made linocuts in a printmaking course he had taken as an undergrad.

In opening a red dragon puppet with a moveable jaw, Mary said, "Oh, fascinating."

Sandy commented, "Wow. Wouldn't Noel love this, Erika, although he could probably destroy it within five minutes!"

Despite knowing that Dad could not participate fully in any conversation in English, Mom encouraged Sandy to talk about his experience with his band and his music. I provided translations even though Dad didn't reveal any particular interest in knowing about this. She explained some opportunities that my cousin Akira has had lately as a musician with more chances for his band to perform. And apparently he has been offered a recording contract to produce a disc for a fairly well known Japanese label. Mom explained that she is happy for Akira while at the same time wondering what this could mean for their business.

Sandy commented, "Your nephew's band must be very well thought of. With my band we always produced our CD's independently and therefore have had limited distribution."

Throughout this discussion, encouraging Sandy to compare his problems in having to decide between music and architecture, Mom revealed much empathy with what Sandy has recently been through in deciding to give architecture a primary place in his life.

She also encouraged Sandy to tell her about the stages he will yet have to go through to become a fully qualified architect. She seemed particularly pleased to hear about the possibility of Sandy taking over his father's business when he retires and how pleased his father is at this prospect. For the first time, I could see that Mom had begun to hope that Akira might be able to do the same for her and Akira's dad when they are ready to retire. In other words, Mom could relate to Sandy in so many ways.

Dad, understandably feeling tired from jet lag but not particularly caring about this conversation, said he was eager to go back to the hotel. To me he seemed to be purposely cutting short his exposure to Sandy.

I wondered, even without understanding Sandy's words, couldn't Dad be interested in observing Sandy's attitudes, his apparent knowledge, his self-assurance in his interaction with

Mom and Mary? Wouldn't Dad like to hear more of his voice, see his hands, just look at him? Apparently not.

Assuming they would be on their way soon, we made our plans for the five of us going to the art gallery Thursday night. I wanted to include Sandy in going to the gallery so my parents can get to know him better, especially in a setting where Sandy is comfortable in his knowledge and taste.

It was a total surprise, and not a welcome one for Sandy and me, when Noboru arrived unexpectedly at the door. In shaking hands heartily with Dad, Noboru said he had been to movie in the West End and was walking by. He said he welcomed the chance to see more of my parents, whom he knew were here having dinner. (Why had I let that slip in some group conversation at school!)

Despite Mom and Dad almost being ready to leave, Mary graciously pulled up an extra chair and offered Noboru some pie and whipped cream (which of course he accepted!). I really wondered at Noboru daring to just arrive. I can't image him doing this in Japan. It's true that everyone is more casual in Vancouver, but still....

It was an effort for me to welcome him when I resented his intrusion. Sandy obviously felt awkward about this too. I had invited Sandy so he could meet my parents for the first time. Sandy's not the kind of person who competes; he got quieter.

Mary made another pot of tea and suggested we take it into the living room. Did she think that Dad might want to go back to the hotel instead? (Abandoning Noboru?) No such luck. Despite Dad's desire to leave a just a few minutes earlier, he settled into a conversation with Noboru as they walked into the living room together.

Mom, Mary, Sandy, and I lingered at dining room table a few minutes longer. I held Sandy's hand on the top of the table and wished I could tell him right then how furious I was at Noboru for arriving uninvited and for manipulating the situation for his own ends.

Reluctantly the four of us joined Dad and Noboru in living room for a few painful moments. Then Sandy said it was time for him to go as he had some material to prepare for an early morning presentation in his class.

Once Sandy had said his goodbyes and had his jacket on, I stepped into hallway with him to explain how angry I was that Noboru had dared to interrupt the visit.

"Never mind, Er. I should be going anyway."

I wish Sandy would be angry over this rather than just allowing himself to be displaced!

Sandy asked me if I was planning to take my flute with me on the trip.

“Yes, I’ll try to practice if I can. I have the music for the next few pieces on our list.”

“I hope to practice as well and will be thinking you as I do.”

Later, I walked Mom and Dad down to the hotel. Mary had assured them this was safe for me to do at night. Dad alluded to my “useless infatuation with Sandy.” I tried my best to provide a rational response. Almost raising his voice, Dad asked, “What’s the point of that?”

He mentioned how he expects me to choose a Japanese man to be my husband. He said that to do anything else would just create unnecessary and continuous problems—“like your sister has.” Dad knows of Noboru’s interest in me and mentioned this as if it must be news to me. Dad also revealed how impressed he is with Noboru.

This discussion was closest I ever came to raising my voice and arguing with Dad. I was straining to hold back tears. I didn’t like hearing his opinions. They are ones I have certainly dealt with myself. Mom is sympathetic to me, but she tends to be quiet when she is opposed to something that Dad is insisting upon. She waits for other ways to get around him.

Now I figure women shouldn’t have to be devious like this for lack of any legitimate power within a relationship. Mom would never take this approach with her brother in business—he and she automatically assume that her ideas are as worthy of consideration as his.

No wonder Mom (like Sandy’s mom) believes in a partnership between spouses sharing common interests rather than upholding separate spheres in marriage. Mom doesn’t like Dad’s long absences due to his work, yet when he is around she soon realizes how few activities they enjoy doing together.

I told Dad how inappropriate it had been for Noboru to just arrive at Mary’s house during dinner. “If this had happened at home, Dad, you would have totally dismissed Noboru.”

But Dad said he had just been glad of opportunity to see more of Noboru, to get to know him better. I cringed.

I’m glad I won’t be seeing Dad for a couple of days. (Guilt, please go away!) He and Mom are travelling up north to view the aurora borealis.



## ***FEBRUARY # 6—Taking My Parents to the Vancouver Art Gallery***

*Visuals: photographs of VAG and its architectural details — columns, facades, lion sculpture*

Another evening of contrasts—from joy to anger.

Having returned from their trip up north in the late afternoon, Mom and Dad were to accompany Mary, Sandy, and me to the art gallery. On arriving at the apartment, my dad asked about phoning for a cab, so Mary did. If we been on our own, we would have walked.

Once we got there, Sandy and I, arm in arm, looked at the art, savouring our favourite pieces, and Mary and my mom also made their way around the exhibition together. Dad, however, spent most of his time out in the lobby talking on his cell phone.

Mary later told me that my mom had been envious of way that Sandy and I were enjoying the art together as if we were in a world all our own. Mom would notice this since she feels the absence of any intellectual and any emotional closeness with Dad. That's why she hopes that my sisters and I will choose a loving partner with whom we have more in common than she has with Dad.

What a pleasant surprise, despite some awkwardness, when Sandy and I met the architecture instructor from UBC whom Mary talked with last summer when she and I visited the department. He and Sandy greeted each other warmly and shook hands. I knew he had to be same man, as he is black, particularly pleasant looking, and fairly young to be an architecture instructor.

Sandy introduced me to Vincent, and admitted, "Erika was a positive influence on my returning to the department this year."

"Oh, so we have a lot to thank you for," he commented smiling at me. Then he surprised us when he asked, "And have you applied to the department for September entry?"

Sandy and I both looked at each other and laughed and Sandy said, "I never prompted Vincent to ask you that. Honestly, Erika, I didn't!"

Vincent said to me, "I recognized the woman in lavender with whom you arrived, so I realized I'd seen you before."

"Ah, my homestay mother."

"I remember her asking me last summer about the feasibility of an international student being accepted into the department. I assumed she was talking about you as you looked like you were trying so hard to appear preoccupied."

We all laughed some more.

Becoming more serious, Vincent added, "I assume you have applied to an architectural school in your own country."

"Yes, I have done that and been accepted."

"So have you applied to UBC as well?"

"Yes. Attending here is my most cherished dream."

"Perhaps this is not so out of reach. We do have a fair representation of international students."

Mary had overheard these last remarks as she and my mom approached. Mary knew exactly what we were talking about. Recognizing Vincent, she said, "And so we meet again. Hello."

They shook hands.

My mom had no inkling of what we had been talking about, so Mary filled her in on the possibility of international students being accepted in UBC's department of architecture.

Vincent then reassured me, "It's not as if you have to make any decision at this point. If you are accepted by UBC, then you just have one more option to consider."

This made it sound so simple and matter of fact. I was encouraged when my mom didn't dismiss this concept automatically.

By the time we had made our way around the exhibition on the second floor, Mom agreed that my applying to UBC's architecture department is a valid idea!



Sandy came back to apartment with us to have some dessert and tea. Without alluding to the architecture department, Mom now asked a lot more general questions about UBC as well as its standing compared to other Canadian universities. Sandy answered all of them. That is until Dad, in Japanese, asked a question, seemingly difficult on purpose, about UBC's position on research in electronic engineering, microelectronics, and integrated circuit design and technology. Mom could see what Dad was up to but felt compelled to state the query on Dad's behalf.

Sandy said he assumed electronic and computer engineering must be part of the engineering department but he admitted he didn't know about UBC's involvement in any particular areas of electronics research or regarding training for people intending to have careers in the field.

He said that the BC Institute of Technology might do more with these subjects. He talked a little about BCIT in general and its role in BC's education system.

I dared to say I wondered if Maclean's Magazine even reports on electronics in their yearly summary comparing such departments of Canadian universities. I had recently read the issue of the magazine giving the inter-university ratings because Mary subscribes to this magazine and always leaves it on the dining room table.

"Did you notice any comparisons addressing universities' electronics departments, Mary?"

"No, I didn't," she said supportively, "but I wouldn't have been looking for that."

Soon Sandy and I went into the kitchen to make some more tea. I didn't refer to what I thought about Dad's seemingly trick electronics question because I was still feeling happy about what happened in the art gallery.

I commented to Sandy, "That was so exciting meeting the architecture instructor."

"Vincent. Yes, that was a happy coincidence."

"Bringing out in the open my dream of attending UBC."

"You hadn't told your parents you've applied...."

"No, I knew I could tell Mom easily enough. But I've been worried about Dad's reaction. He'll be so negative."

"But your mom...."

"She says if I'm accepted, she will deal with Dad."

"Great."

"But she isn't aware of how competitive it is to get in."

"You have excellent marks and a strong portfolio, so let's stay optimistic."

"Still, it's such a...."



This conversation ended when the buzzer from the downstairs door rang, even though it was almost 10:00. I answered it so that Mary would not need to get up.

As I suspected.... my classmates. When I told them my parents were here, Noboru said, "We know this. We just want to come up and check in with you all before you head off for Toronto."

As I waited for them to climb the stairs, Sandy joined me at the door. As they entered, led by Noboru, Juliana explained they had just come from a late dinner in West End. And whose idea was that, I thought.

As they filed inside, Mary appeared at the living room door greeting everyone and letting them know they were welcome to join them and my parents. Bae, Fernando and, of course, Noboru, went into living room while the girls retreated to my room where they are comfortable. Soon I could hear my Dad and Noboru again carrying on an extended conversation in Japanese as if they were two high-powered businessmen. Fernando talked with Mary and my mom about mobility aids available in Canada and Japan compared with medical products available in Mexico. Bae had fallen back into his previous mode— listening rather than speaking.

When Sandy and I went into the living room after briefly talking with my girlfriends in the bedroom, Noboru stood up, came near me, and touched my elbow. Noboru was totally disregarding Sandy who was standing on the other side of me. How dare Noboru try to claim me after all Sandy did in bringing him back from Squamish Hospital with his broken leg! I felt as if Noboru was trying, yet again, to show my parents how close we are, while at the same time trying to suggest he has some right to me. This irritated me so much!

Sandy went back to the kitchen to wash the cup he was finished with. As soon as I could without being rude, I joined him. He put on his jacket saying, "I must be going now."

"Do you have to?" I whispered, "This is probably all Noboru's idea you know, encouraging them all to drop in."

"Let him have his way."

"Sandy, I hate this. I am so angry with him! How does he dare to do what he is doing?"

"At least go and talk more with your girlfriends. They are innocent of any mal intent."

"I know. They really have just come to wish me bon voyage."

"And tomorrow you will be getting up early and, before going to class, I have to visit a construction site."

"In your hardhat," I smiled thinking of that aspect of Sandy's personality.

"Yes, in my hardhat. I hope you will also have to wear one soon."

"Is it the site of the house on the top of the hill?"

"No, a larger project down on the flats. A development that I'd like to take you to when we get just a little further along."

"When the project, or you and I, get just a little further along?" I joked.

"The project, Erika. You and I are, remarkably, fine I think. As awkward as this time has been, moment by moment, with your father here, at least he hasn't demanded to my face that we stop seeing each other."

"So are you saying things could be worse?"

"For sure. Don't you agree?"

"Yes, but it's not over yet. I am wondering how I will be able to survive Toronto with him."

"I trust you can."

"It certainly won't be without a lot of tension."

"So that's when you will be practising your flute. To relax. Right?"

"If he'll even put up with that."

"I wish I were coming with you and could somehow be a buffer between the two of you."

"I do too."

"I've been proud of the way you've been able to stand up to him, despite his indirect insults."

With his jacket done up, Sandy said goodnight to the others in the living room and wished Mom and Dad good luck on the Toronto trip. This included shaking hands warmly with Mom, although Dad turned away at the moment that Sandy had moved to shake his hand. Very noticeable. Dad was refusing to acknowledge Sandy in this way. I was embarrassed and also hurt by this.

Still, from the bedroom door, Sandy cheerfully said goodnight to the girls.

Alone with Sandy after closing the front door behind us, I apologized to Sandy for Dad's behaviour.

“Never mind. As I said, I was worried about having to deal with far more overt confrontations during his visit.”

Hugging me and changing his tone, Sandy said, “I enjoyed going to the art gallery with you, Erika. I hope we can do this often in our future.”

I confirmed my agreement with a particularly long, intense kiss.

“I am going to miss you so much.”

“And never doubt how much I am going to be missing you. Luckily you’ll only be away for five days.”

We mentioned what time I will likely be back into the city on my return, and Sandy said he will try to see me for few minutes that night on his way home from UBC.

I went back into the apartment and into my bedroom. I was surprised to see my girlfriends sitting with their jackets on. We talked briefly about my plans for Toronto. In a few moments I admitted that I should be going to sleep soon.

“We are willing to leave on a moment’s notice, Erika, but you can see that Noboru is in charge here,” Marina stated, with a reluctant but understanding smile on her face.

I could hear Dad and Noboru still talking. All this awkwardness tonight might have been avoided I had told Noboru about how furious I was at him for dropping in last time. At least I hope he would have honoured my wishes and not intruded a second time. But now who knows?

Noboru and Dad’s extended conversations fuelled the most anger I’ve ever felt toward the two of them. I dared to lead my girlfriends to the living room door. Seeing them in their coats, Mom said, “Yes, we should be on our way soon too.”

When my classmates in leaving said their goodbyes, Dad chose to turn his back so that he didn’t see that I was only just civil to Noboru. Dad’s purposeful blindness made me wish that he had opened the door in the middle of Sandy’s and my passionate kiss!

When I walked Mom and Dad to the hotel, I told Dad I objected to Noboru constantly taking advantage of situations to suggest that we are more attached than we are. Dad refused to acknowledge noticing anything about this.

I subsequently almost crossed the line with Dad in charging him with interfering with Noboru’s growing connection with Sumi. I dared to mention all the interests they have in common and how well matched they are and alluded to their growing intimacy.

“Interfering?! How could I be interfering?” he demanded, refusing to consider that there could even be any close connection between Sumi and Noboru. How dare Dad presume he could know anything about them! He responded by restating something about Noboru’s obvious regard for me.

With my luggage packed, I am in bed trying to not let my rage at Dad and Noboru make me forget my “high” from meeting the architecture instructor at the gallery. His words had made considering attending UBC seem like a reasonable option.

I am even smiling to my Pisces self over having openly acknowledged my dream of attending UBC to all of our group at the gallery, all except Dad that is.

I wonder if I will be able to sleep at all tonight in thinking about this! Yet I am also worried about how I will cope, throughout the Toronto trip, with Dad’s antagonism to the idea of Sandy and me as a couple.



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