



MARCH # 7—Letter from UBC

Visuals: photographs of snow on mountains and in neighbourhood

On a surprisingly cool afternoon on my way into the apartment after school, I checked the mailbox in the lobby. I wasn't expecting anything, although I am always happy when I get an occasional letter from home or from Sabine, who I have not heard from for a while now. I must write to her, whose turn is it to write? I was flipping through envelopes addressed to Mary from her credit union and the hydro and telephone companies and from UBC's department of architecture.

UBC's department of architecture! To me! My heart leapt into my throat and pounded there. Did I also feel my skin go sweaty and prickly? Could this be the letter? Calm down, I was trying to convince myself as I struggled to open the flap. Having trimmed my fingernails recently, I was without my natural letter opener. I was shaking so hard I had to rip the envelope with my teeth. I unfolded the letter. My eyes went straight to the second line.

"We are pleased to be able to offer you a place in the first year of the MA in architecture program commencing in September of this year...."

"Pleased! Pleased!"

I don't remember climbing the stairs or unlocking the door or dialing the phone, I was just aware of hearing Sandy say hello.

"Sandy. Sandy." I sobbed.

"Erika? What is it?"

He sounded alarmed.

"I've been accepted by the department."

"You've received your acceptance letter from UBC?"

"Yeh." I sobbed some more.

"Oh, good work! What a relief. How exciting!"

"And Mary's not here, so I can't tell her."

"You should phone your mom."

"Yes. Yes, I should when I calm down."

"My mom is home. May I tell her?"

"Of course."

Sandy covered the receiver, yelled something in the background, but returned to me immediately.

"Mom's obviously pleased and says, 'Congratulations! I'm coming over. Okay?'"

"Okay," I repeated, standing there shaking.

"We'll go for something to eat."

As soon as I hung up the phone, I paced the floor between the dining room and the kitchen. I opened the fridge door. Closed the fridge door. Looked in the dining room mirror to see if I had changed. Looked happier or more tear ridden? I can't believe this. Why am I sobbing? Not just to get accepted into an architecture program. I've done that at home. But with this, this acceptance from UBC, my future seems to have a clear path to Sandy. To staying in Canada. Even if there will be difficulties.

I cried some more. I looked for some tissue and then sat down at the dining room table leaning on my elbows. I am not sure how long I sat there. Finally I went into the bathroom and washed my face, brushed my teeth, and combed my hair.

I kept thinking about Sandy's advice to phone my mom. What time is it in Japan? I poured a glass of milk, drank slowly, breathed slowly, purposefully, and tried to calm down. I didn't want to alarm Mom as I initially had alarmed Sandy by crying, blurting, into the phone.

I was glad to get Mom directly. And I managed to get out the first two sentences without crying, but then I got blubbery again.

She seemed very happy for me and said, "So, now it's up to me to get your Dad to agree to help support you."

"Will it be difficult to convince him, Mom? I'd like to think that he might even be happy about this, pleased for me."

"Happy? No, probably not happy, but don't worry. I'll bring him around."

"Remind him that it is better here because people do an architecture degree as a Master of Architecture, after a Bachelors, not in place of a BA. Here I wouldn't seem to be backtracking. Dad should be satisfied about that at least."

"He'll be okay with it in the end, Erika. But no, expecting him to be glad about your doing architecture in Vancouver would be expecting too much. As long as you are happy...well, that's all that matters now."

"Mom, you are so good to me."

"Never mind. It's just your turn."

I finally got around to writing Mary a note, giving her the news, and telling her that I wouldn't need dinner, as I would be eating with Sandy. Then I changed into something a little dressier than my school clothes—more flattering slacks, a white lamb's wool sweater, and dress jacket.

I was ready except for putting on my coat when Sandy rang the buzzer.

Over the intercom, he said, "I've parked the car, should I come up?"

"Sure."

I opened the door to Sandy's quiet knock.

Was that the most passionate stand-up kiss that we have ever had? Then we wordlessly hugged for even longer before we started laughing.

"So you did it! You did it!"

"Apparently."

"You know I am more excited for you in getting accepted into the program than I was for myself."

"Really!?"

"Yes, really. For you....well, it means more."

"Because it gives us time to be together?"

"Yes. Exactly. It keeps the door open to your staying here. To our having a future together."

As Sandy helped me into my coat, he said, "You look good. Should we walk to a restaurant or do you have something in mind that we should drive to?"

"Let's go up the hill; it's always good and then we don't have to take the car."

"You know it's snowing again?"

"It is?"

"Yes. That just makes it more fun."

"Okay. But let me get into my boots."

Sandy stood smiling while watching me pull on my boots and then he locked the door behind us with my key. He had a noticeable bounce in his stride and jumped down the last three stairs to the landing. Then he opened his arms as if expecting me to do the same.

"You're pretty happy," I said, as I skipped down the stairs.

"Well, I guess!" he said as he put his arm around my shoulder. "So how long are you going to have to go home for?"

"Sandy, you know."

"But isn't there a way we can make that shorter?"

"Classes start in September. We can't make September get here any sooner."

“But do you still have to leave here in April?”

“I need to contribute something to my expenses. So, yes, I need to go home and work in Mom and my uncle’s business to make some money. Like I did to come here.”

“I hate the idea of your going away.”

“Sandy, we’ve known about this all along. That this is what would happen if I were to get accepted—and even if I hadn’t been—that I’d be returning home in April.”

“I know. But it doesn’t mean I want to accept it without trying to think of a better alternative,” he said squeezing my shoulders.



We walked along the street so preoccupied that we hardly noticed the snow. Still, when we got to the restaurant, we shook out our coats before we sat down. We were glad that it was not crowded and that our favourite table was still available.

After we had ordered, we talked about what our life might be like starting in September when we were both at university together. And then what it will be like when I am still at UBC and Sandy is working in his father’s business and studying part time to get his BC architectural license. We also talked about the possibility of my joining Sandy in working in his dad’s business after graduating.... Our speculations were endless. Never has the future seemed so fascinating for me!

When we finally settled into eating, Sandy asked, “Are you going to tell your friends now about coming to UBC?”

“Not quite yet. I want Mom to tell me about my dad’s reaction first and give her time to swing his opinion and get at least his begrudging approval.”

“His approval of you studying here or of him supporting you?”

“Both, although not so much financially, because I think Mom could help support me now. I just don’t want Dad to disapprove of me entirely or feel that I am disregarding his wishes absolutely. That may take a bit of time.”

“But it’s just a matter of time?”

"I think so. After all, he agreed to my sister studying abroad for four years."

We sipped our tea in a leisurely manner. Then we waited a few minutes for our server to bring our bill.

He smiled in saying, "Let me pay this time. On such a special occasion."

"All right. Thank you."

When we walked back to the apartment, it was no longer snowing. We decided that Sandy would not come up, so I walked him to his car within sight of the apartment.

He leaned against his car door and I rested against him, my arms around his waist. With his mouth against my neck, he quietly said, "You know I'd love to abandon our restraints now that a future seems possible for us."

"You know we will when I get back from Japan. Coming back to Vancouver will be my commitment to you and to our future together."

As if quoting someone, Sandy commented, "I know we have to patiently let our future unfold."

He smiled at me and added, "And patience is definitely not a natural impulse."



MARCH # 8—Dinner at Sandy’s House and Staying at the Apartment

Visuals: photographs from the seawall and view from Sandy’s house

Seems Sandy’s dad can keep a secret....

As usual Sandy and I studied Saturday night and went for a walk Sunday morning near the ocean. Lots of people were on the English Bay seawall in the sunshine glad that the snow has disappeared. Sandy and I planned to go to an early supper at his parents’ house. On the phone Robyn apologized in saying she and Sandy’s dad would need to get away punctually after eating, as they had to leave to get the opera by 8:00 pm.

As we entered their front entranceway, we headed toward the wonderful smells of cooking in the kitchen. We found Robyn there. Sandy’s dad had not yet arrived home. Sandy and I helped set the table in the dining room.

When the four of us finally sat down, I was feeling a little intimidated being in the dining room with Sandy’s dad. It felt bigger and more formal than I had noticed previously. I would have been more comfortable in the kitchen nook.

In the process of eating Robyn’s wonderful seafood dinner, Sandy and I were amazed at something Sandy’s father revealed. Despite appearing to be casual and artistic in wearing his usual black turtleneck, his father seems a bit British, actually even rather proper. That’s why I was so surprised when he admitted, that as a result of teaching in the department one afternoon a week, he knew of my acceptance by the architecture department several days before I received my letter!

“Dad, you knew and didn’t tell us! How could you do that to us?” Sandy challenged him.

“To have revealed anything would have been highly unprofessional on my part. I didn’t even tell Robyn. As it was I was pushing the edge to see the acceptance list, as I usually wouldn’t go out of my way to see that.”

Looking directly at me, he said, “And I want you to know, Erika, that as part-time faculty, I did not have any input on the

admissions selection process. No vote. Be assured you got in on your own merits."

"Thank you for saying this."

"What would we have done if we had known you knew, Dad?" Sandy laughed. "Could we have gotten this out of you?"

"That's why I was glad not to see much of you recently."

And that brings up something else that I haven't had a chance to discuss with you, but perhaps now is an appropriate time. The two of you might want to consider this."

"The two of us? What is it then?" Sandy asked.

"Well, I assume, Sandford, that you will continue to work at the studio as much time as you can spare away from your studies. I've been wondering if Erika would be interested in working with us too. To take on some of the duties that you've had since the beginning and are ready to pass on."

"Really. To work in your studio?" I'm sure I beamed.

"What a great idea, Dad."

"Most of the work, as you know, is routine, but it would give Erika insight into what goes on in an architectural firm."

"This is so considerate of you. I would love to work at the studio if my visa will allow this."

"Of course."

"If I can arrange to work a little as well as study, well, that would be perfect."

"When could Erika start, Dad?"

"Whenever you can show her what needs to be done."

"Could this be earlier than September?"

"The two of you can determine that. You know we have more work than you have time to do. And your mother is spending more time with the business than she'd like to."

"Yes, I'd certainly appreciate some relief."

Looking at me, Sandy commented, "This sounds so good. Would this be a way to get you to come back earlier, Erika? Do you think you could do some of your income-producing work here late in the summer rather than staying in Japan till classes start?"

"I'd love to, if it is feasible to arrange that."

"Well, if you need a letter showing you have an offer of employment, Erika, let me know and I will provide one."

When Sandy's mom and I were alone in the kitchen, putting food away and starting to load the dishwasher, she said, "You seem happy about Darren's job offer..."

"Yes, to work in a Canadian architect's studio as an international student... What an incredible opportunity!"

"And maybe that would ease you and Sandy into the possibility of taking over the business when his dad retires."

"Sandy has mentioned this, but I dare not jump so far ahead, even though it sounds wonderful."

"Darren has been cautious about this too, saying, 'Much too early to think about any of this, Robyn. Much too early.' But I made plans involving Darren before he assumed we'd share a life. At least he's glad you and Sandy will now have time to determine your relationship once you return from Japan."

Sandy came into kitchen parroting, "Return from Japan. Yes. Return from Japan without delay."

"Oh, listen," Robyn added, "Why don't the two of you take this raspberry cheesecake back to the apartment? There won't be anyone here to eat it this weekend."

"Great idea, Mom," Sandy said. "We can have it for supper tomorrow, Er. Or sooner."

He smiled at me as he helped himself to a large mouthful and then licked the fork.

Putting his head in the door, Sandy's dad said, "Robyn, we need to be on our way if we are going to be on time."

"Yes. Almost done."

Sandy responded, "Just leave the rest, Mom. Erika and I will finish cleaning up."

"Yes, really."

After saying goodbye to them, the house seemed very quiet. Sandy put on a Blue Rodeo CD. It only took us a few minutes to finish putting everything away while moving around the kitchen to this music. That appealing voice reminds me of Sandy.

When the dishwasher was humming, Sandy went into his room to retrieve his laptop, guitar, and overnight things that he'd set aside. While I waited, I stood at the living room window looking at a dramatic sunset.

I was glad Sandy didn't suggest staying at his place overnight. Again I was thinking about Serena. Serena in the white robe. Serena nude. Serena in Sandy's bed. I just don't want to be confronted by any negative associations now.

How long till I stop visualizing those images?



After we arrived at the apartment, we studied a little before stopping to play music. Sandy brought his guitar into the living room along with my flute.

I was unsettled when he unexpectedly asked, "So have you forgiven me, Er?"

"Forgiven you?"

"Whenever you go back to the house...since Serena...Well, you seem to remember that."

"Yes, I am aware of that, Sandy."

"I assumed you are."

"I admit I don't feel ready to wear the robe Serena wore or to sleep in your bed."

"Well, I can make sure you never see that robe again. And you and I have been close...."

"Yes. Our time together since then has softened the hurt, but the memory remains."

"So forgiving and forgetting aren't the same?"

"No. They're not."

I was sorry that Sandy brought this issue up, because referring to it made disturbing feelings resurface.

To recover I started playing upbeat pieces that I know without a score. Sandy improvised. We followed this with some of the love songs Sandy played on the CD he made me for Christmas, including the verses he sang to me last summer.

*I like the path you've chosen.
May I walk along with you?
And if the way gets closed in,
We could cuddle just us two.
And when there's clearer weather,
We could set out once again,
To pursue our goals together,
You are my dearest friend.*

On the beach I had heard these words as if he were singing that simple composition to me personally. So in hearing them again, the memory of that experience gives me warm feelings toward Sandy.

I asked, "Are there any more verses to that song?"

"There are five verses now."

"Five?"

"Yes, I just started the fifth one on Friday morning. While I was stuck in traffic on Lion's Gate Bridge."

"So you really are continuing to add to the song?"

"Yes, I'm adding to it and revising it as we go along."

"So it really is your song," I said.

"Actually I prefer to think of it as our song."

"Are you going to continue the song indefinitely?"

"Not indefinitely. At some point it will be obvious that there are enough verses to constitute a whole."

"So will you sing the rest of it to me?"

"Okay, but I've been kind of hoping that you might sing the second verse to me and that we could sing the third verse together. Then I'd sing the recent two."

"All right. Do you have a copy of the words for me?"

He took a paper out of his guitar case. The words there were in Sandy's beautiful printing.

I looked down at the words as he strummed a few cords as a prompt into the second verse. I sang the words to him.

*Yes, I'd like to travel side by side
With interwoven hands
For each other be a counsellor
And together make our plans.
We seem to have so much to share
and I cherish my time with you.
Discovering how to be a pair
makes my life feel new.*

Sandy returned my smile and said, "And now together."

*Yes, I'd like to walk beside you
To travel side by side
In sun and rainy weather
For each other, be as guide.
I want to be at hand for you,
through quiet times and noise.
I'd like our lives to be as one
to share our troubles and our joys.*

Sandy strummed some additional chords before singing alone:

*I want to be a couple
and see you living in this land
to make some life-long memories
I've even left the band.
We can stroll along the shoreline
Or hike on higher ground,
I want be together
Wherever we are bound.*

*I love to lie beside you
and feel close throughout the night.
You know how much I need you
and yearn to share the light.
To know each other further
we've had to wait so long.
I admit I've sometimes feared
we couldn't be that strong.*

Sandy strummed some more chords before he looked up at me and said, "Obviously that wouldn't do as an ending, so we'll just have to see how the rest writes itself out."

"Still, it is so beautiful."

Sandy's singing of these revealing words had me melting again. How could I stay unforgiving toward him?

Sandy laid aside his guitar and we settled into the sofa. Later we roused ourselves agreeing it was time to turn in for the night.

I was in my almost sheer nightgown standing at the dresser by my bedroom door as Sandy emerged from the steamy bathroom along with the fragrance of shampoo. His hair, still slightly damp, was curlier than when totally dry. He had bare feet and a towel wrapped around his waist. I was struck by the intimacy of this—of standing close, with him in just a towel.

He noticed way I was looking at him.

"Hey? What is it?" But he knew, because he added, "You've seen me in a bathing suit."

"But bathing suits are meant to be seen in public."

"Yeah, so...."

"It's just that you look so ...touchable."

"So should I be sleeping in the other bed tonight?"

I laughed saying, "Either that or out on the sofa!"

"Are you serious?!"

"Not really...."

He concluded, "I just hope we stay this attracted to each other when we can go beyond 'everything but.'"

Photograph of a western sunset from a North Shore mountain courtesy of Priscilla Bagli, Brazil



MARCH # 9—Chance Meeting on Seawall

Visuals: photos of seawall, sculpture of Harry Jerome, and totem poles

Sunday morning I received a phone call from my mom telling me that she had managed to convince Dad to support me through my architectural studies at UBC. I was ecstatic. I was still on the phone in the dining room when Sandy came into the kitchen and started taking things out of the fridge to make breakfast.

I was smiling at Sandy and pointing into the telephone receiver to communicate that it was good news. He mutely tried to guess what the call was about.

Then pretending to want to listen in, he stood behind me, putting his arms around my shoulders and kissing the back of my neck. That had me muffling laughter, but luckily Mom didn't notice. When I got off the phone, Sandy said,

"So what's up?"

"Mom's got my dad to agree to help support me...."

"Ah, yippee," was Sandy's kid-like response. "So you can come to UBC! And that means everything's going to work out."

"Looks like it could."

I didn't know whether to tell Sandy what my father had said in finally agreeing to me going to UBC. When Sandy and I sat down to the cheese omelet that he had prepared, I decided to tell him.

"Mom said Dad still hopes I will come to my senses and give you up and come back to Japan and find a suitable husband."

"Does he have someone in mind?" Sandy asked with a grin.

"I wondered about that too. Apparently Dad sees the main value of my staying longer in Vancouver as giving me

time to get you out of my system, so I don't 'glorify' you for the rest of my life, as he thinks my sister is doing with Andrew."

"But the two of them have a fashion design business together."

"They do."

"So their story has not concluded then, has it?"

"You're right. Just because she left him behind in London doesn't mean...."

"That everything is over between them."

I laughed, "Maybe Yoko and Andrew will even be encouraged by us."

"Well, I'm glad your father at least isn't threatening to disown you ... yet?" Sandy smiled.

"I don't think he will. How could he when he sees how good you are for me? And how much I care about you?"

"How much we care about each other."

After a couple of hours of studying, Sandy and I decided to go for a brisk walk for exercise. We headed toward Coal Harbour.

Because there are so many languages spoken on the seawall, I wasn't surprised in getting closer to, and then overtaking, a Japanese couple speaking Japanese. But I was startled in passing them when the guy yelled out, "Hey, you two. Aren't you even going to acknowledge us?"

We turned around and laughed.

"Hi Sumi, Noboru," Sandy said.

"What are you up to?" I asked.

"Probably the same thing as the two of you. It's just that we are not overtaking everyone in sight!" Noboru laughed.

Soon the four of us had walked by the nine o'clock gun and were within sight of the statue of the Canadian Olympic runner from North Vancouver. Mary had told me about him previously as someone her sister went to school with.

"So are you studying hard?" Sumi asked.

"Yes," Sandy answered, "but we do need some exercise."

"Noboru, you've got your cast off!" I declared.

"Yes, can I use that as an excuse for not walking as fast as you two?"

"Noboru, you're so competitive!" I said.

"Usually we prefer to take our time and enjoy the sights, but exercise is more the goal today," Sandy said.

"Next week I'll be running like that," Noboru joked pointing to the statue of the Olympic runner.

"Sure, sure," Sumi teased.



Preoccupied with the good news from my mom, Sandy and I set aside our previous anger at Noboru for interfering with my dad and mom's visit.

I soon said to Sandy, "Should we tell them?"

"Why not?"

"What, what?" Sumi asked with high expectation.

"I'm going to return to Vancouver to do my architectural studies at UBC rather than doing the program in Tokyo."

"You are? Oh, you're so lucky," Sumi responded. "So Claudia has been a good influence."

"I suppose she has," Sandy answered, although we hadn't recently related this decision to Claudia's studying here, or Sebastian's attendance at UBC either.

"My mom has just told me this morning that my she has managed to convince my dad not to oppose the plan."

Stunned, Noboru slowly asked, "You've been accepted by UBC?"

"Yes, we found that out recently, but we decided not to say anything until my Dad agreed not to totally disown me."

Sumi was bubbly and supportive in all her comments and wanted to know lots of details about the UBC plan.

Noboru was quiet. The width of the seawall walk, and the surprising number of people out this Sunday, soon had the four of us walking two by two.

Sumi and Sandy carried on their discussion.

But when Noboru and I walked side by side, he asked, "Will you still be returning to Japan in April?"

"Yes, my return schedule isn't changing. It's just when I come back to Vancouver, September or earlier, that is undecided."

Noboru had an accusatory tone in saying, "I knew you must have been planning something like this, not leaving Sandy," he said quietly. "You could have been more open with me, Erika."

That comment hurt me.

"I came close to telling you recently. But until an hour ago, I didn't know if this plan is feasible, Noboru."

Sumi called to me and pointed to a washroom as we were about to head to Brockton Oval. We had a “pit stop.”

In finishing in the restroom first, I opened the door around the corner from where the guys were waiting and overheard the disappointment in Noboru’s voice as he talked to Sandy.

“I just want you to know I couldn’t give up on Erika for anyone less deserving.”

He dared to add, “But if for some reason you and Erika don’t make it as a couple, Sandy, will you try to convince her to get back in touch with me? Maybe then she would finally consider me.”

Still out of sight, I paused to wait for Sumi, mainly so the guys didn’t know that I had overheard this. I was so glad Sumi had been beyond hearing range.

Sandy later told me he felt much empathy for Noboru in imagining how he, Sandy, would feel if I broke up with him now.



We walked toward the totem poles close by. When Sumi again claimed Sandy’s attention in asking him to explain something about the carvings, Noboru’s disappointment and his anger were intermingled in addressing me.

“So Juliana has been wrong all along.”

“Juliana?”

I was surprised at this reference.

“Yes, she has always advised me to have patience, saying that eventually you will be back in Japan, without Sandy, and then you might finally see me.”

“I can’t believe you are still thinking like this, Noboru, since you have new plans.”

“True. But part of my brain may always be wondering.”

“And in wasting your time speculating about me, you distance Sumi. You’re crazy to risk that, as you did recently when you were having discussions with my father.”

Being out of Sumi and Sandy’s hearing, I told Noboru how furious I had been at him when he dropped in at the

apartment uninvited while my parents were visiting. I was surprised that my negative feelings flared up again after all this time.

"You were so inconsiderate to Sandy and me in arriving without notice. And you created a strain between my dad and me in having discussions about me."

"Erika, you are the only person who is able to make me as angry as my sister can."

"Angry?"

"Yes. You are implying that I was strategizing with your father about how to be part of your life. Will you stop that!"

I was somewhat unsettled by this comment.

He continued, "If you are going to eavesdrop on a conversation, then listen well enough so that you get the whole picture without filling in so many gaps yourself or just making things up."

"But I saw you and Dad in deep discussions."

"True. But why do you assume those discussions revolved primarily around you?"

"I heard my name in your conversations."

"Yes, and it would be unusual if your name were not in our conversations. But if you hadn't been so infuriated with me, you would have heard that we are talking mostly about job prospects in the electronics business."

I did not respond.

"Your dad and I are in similar fields, in case that hasn't struck you. And your dad has been kind enough to try to make some connections for me for when I go back."

He looked at me expecting me to say something, but I remained silent. I felt that this comment didn't cover all of their conversations, but there was no point in arguing.

"Note that I need to go back to Japan permanently, Erika, even if you apparently don't. So I've got to have those leads to pursue employment once I return. Otherwise I'll be plunging back into working for my dad without ever having time to search for something else. As far as he is concerned, well, he expects me to start working the moment I step off the plane."

He could tell I didn't feel totally convinced, so he added, "Besides, I don't think it is fair of you to fault me for any of your dad's intentions."

Acknowledging the unfairness of any of my dad's assumptions, I said, "I'm sorry, Noboru. You are right."

"Thank you for admitting this."

He paused and then smiled slightly as he quietly added, "And if marriage into the family is on your dad's mind, well, maybe he's not thinking of you!"

"Really!"

"I have no idea, but you do have two sisters. Maybe he is thinking of me for one of them. He's talked about them. I'm about Yoko's age, aren't I?"

"She's in love with someone already and Kiri is way too young for you."

"Well, okay, but how would I know what's on your Dad's mind? Certainly I am not responsible for anything that he might be thinking."

"You are right, Noboru."

Within sight of Lion's Gate Bridge, I noticed that Noboru was limping slightly and he admitted that he had probably gone far enough for his first walk without his cast. He and I turned and watched as Sandy and Sumi caught up with us. I was glad to see that they seem so comfortable together.

Standing in a circle while other people walked around us, Noboru and Sumi agreed to take a shortcut back to the bus loop in the park while Sandy and I walked the rest of the way around the seawall.

After our goodbyes, Sandy held my hand, even though we were no longer passing people as we had been in starting out.

We walked in the shadow of the noisy bridge overhead, rounded the corner, and passed Siwash Rock, before we found ourselves in the sunshine again. We then caught up with three Japanese males, probably about my age. We got close enough that I could hear their conversation.

Speaking in Japanese, they were comparing stories about a recent party and their admiration of one particular girl named Yumiko, whom they hadn't seen for some time. One guy said somewhat guardedly, "I heard that she is no longer a virgin."

My ears became alert. I was glad that Sandy just happened to be silent a few moments and that he couldn't understand their conversation.

Another of the guys responded, "If so, I am sure she is very selective."

The other guy didn't say anything more. It seemed as if he needed more time to fully assess the fact of this young woman having lost her virginity.

I was pleased that the one guy could so readily accept the information without thinking less of her.

Sandy noticed that this conversation had caught my attention.

"Japanese?" he asked quietly.

I smiled and nodded, but I didn't want to explain the conversation to him immediately. I needed time to think about it. To determine how I feel about this now for me. For us. To determine the reason for Sandy's and my continued abstinence.

Are we holding off based on my original belief of what is right for an unmarried Japanese woman? Or are we holding off due to Sandy's desire for sex to mean something more important than it had in his previous relationship—something that relates to a vision of a shared future. To me this is reassuring. And responsible.

But how will we know when we have enough of a mutual commitment to a planned future together?



Opening image of Lion's Gate Bridge from seawall courtesy of Flavio Sousa da Silva, Brazil; others by the author



MARCH # 10—Overnight Blizzard on Grouse Mountain

With so little time left before scheduled departures home for some of us, our group has been talking about going snowshoeing. From outside the school, we can see fresh snow on the local mountains. We have decided to try Grouse Mountain because we haven't been back there since we climbed the Grouse Grind in all that summer heat. (I'm still trying to forget that negative experience!) Besides, none of us has ever been snowshoeing.

We are enthusiastically looking forward to this outing. All except Song, who is still away with her parents, and Pierre and Adrian, who will go to Whistler instead. They have decided Grouse Mountain, a local mountain, seems too tame.

"Good thing my leg is healed," Noboru stated.

Sebastian responded, "You can't snowshoe with your leg as it is!"

"It's fixed or else they wouldn't have taken off the cast."

"How many days ago?"

"Whenever. It's good enough."

"As long as you don't tell your Dad or he'll have you on the first plane back to Japan tomorrow morning," Sumi teased.

Sandy has agreed to come with us, despite his looming, end-of-term essays.

In acknowledging we are novices and won't likely last long, we have decided to go just Sunday afternoon. I will report in after returning.

How innocent of potential harm I was in communicating the above! As if the local mountains are merely gentle playgrounds! I am in such despair over what has happened, I

am not sure I can describe this even yet, and it is now almost a week since that dreadful 21 hours of blizzard on the mountain. But I will try....



Ten of us got to the parking lot at the base of the mountain within minutes of each other and traveled up in the same gondola enjoying the view out over the city. As we walked to the rental shop, a ski patroller came toward us and addressed Sandy.

"Hey, Sandford. Good to see you, Man."

"Oh. Hi, Ward."

"It's been a while."

"Yes, I'm back at UBC this year, so I haven't had much time for the mountain."

"Still, where's your ski patroller's jacket?"

"Oh, I'm just here socially. I don't intend to rescue anyone today."

"You can never tell, even when you're not on duty."

"But I'm not going to be skiing. Just snowshoeing."

"Okay, then. Have fun. But don't forget about us, eh."

As we walked away from the patroller, I asked Sandy if his ski patroller jacket was like this guy's.

"Yes, they are all the same, except some are more faded than others depending on how many years the person has been a patroller."

"So is yours more or less faded?"

"About the same I guess. We started patrolling at the same time."

"Well, then I'm glad you are in your Christmas jacket today. Much more flattering."

"And cuddlier?" He asked with a smile in remembering what I had said when he first showed it to me on Christmas Day.

"Yes. Cuddlier for sure."

Once we were all outfitted with snowshoes, we went out into the cool air again and waited for Sandy's instruction as to which way we should go. We had picked up a couple of maps between us. Despite the physical exertion and the clumsiness of walking wide-legged on snowshoes, everyone set out on a trail in good spirits. We laughed a lot, especially in watching Juliana and Nicole. But gangly Bae, brave in coming without Song, took to snowshoes surprisingly well and seemed to enjoy helping others when they got in awkward situations.

It was soon apparent that Noboru, despite his still recovering leg, and Sebastian, our Nordic skier, had more natural ability than others and seemed impatient with the rest of us. Sandy was good too, but he was kind enough to stay with me and serve as our guide. He knows the mountain well from all his experience there. Before heading off on their own, Sebastian and Noboru consulted their map and asked Sandy to recommend some particularly scenic trails. The three of them stood huddled over a map with Sandy tracing lines of the trails on the map with his index finger.

The rest of us stayed on some of the less challenging paths. After a couple of hours, our pleasant afternoon turned gray and the clouds became threatening. It was snowing lightly by the time we were ready to call it quits and head back to the lodge.

We had agreed to meet Noboru and Sebastian there before going down in the gondola. As we tramped into the lodge, we banged snow off our boots on a metal grid. We were glad to take off our damp outer layers. After gulping down our sandwiches from home, we ordered muffins, fresh from the oven, and hot chocolate. All that fresh air had made us ravenous.

Sandy and I had decided we would try to go down with the first group so that he could get back as soon as possible to finish writing an essay due Tuesday. Enjoying the warmth of being inside and making enough noise in our own group, particularly in trying to barter simple snacks in exchange for some of Fernando's stuffed tortillas or Bae's kimchi, we didn't notice that the lodge was emptying out as people headed for the gondola. The snow was coming down faster. Then we became aware of waiting.

Sandy said, "Look. I know where the guys said they were headed. I am going to go and get them. They need to return before the snow gets any heavier and visibility gets any worse."

"Are you sure that's a good idea, Sandy?"

I didn't like to think of Sandy going out after them, but he assured me he would be back in less than half an hour. Sandy put on his already-damp outer clothes and headed out

into the snow. Through the window, I watched him head for the rentals shop.

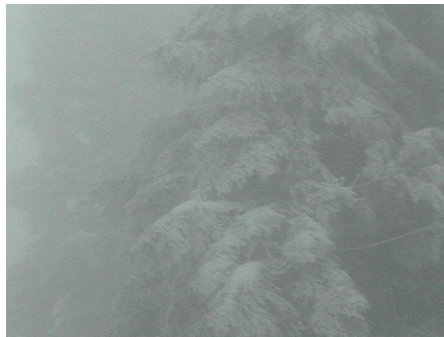
Marina, Sumi, and I decided it would make sense to stay together. So, wishing us good luck, Juliana, Nicole, Fernando, and Bae left. In the process of saying goodbye to them, I lost track of Sandy coming out of the rentals shop. Did he get snowshoes or, for the sake of speed, had he chosen skis to go out and bring back Sebastian and Noboru?

I didn't like this at all—that he had gone off—not then nor a half hour later when the wind was driving the snow horizontal to the ground and the light was fading fast.

Soon Sumi, Marina, and I were becoming increasingly alarmed for our guys. We talked to the next ski patroller who came into the lodge. He looked concerned and then talked to another patroller. After showing them, on a map, where I think Sebastian and Noboru had been heading—to some “scenic” trails—the two patrollers went out together. I wasn't sure their of intentions.

A fierce wind moaned around the doors and windows. The gondola operators decided to close down the cable car until the wind calmed down, so other people came into the lodge to wait also. When they opened the wide doors, a frigid draft entered, and they brought the cold and damp in with them on their clothes. Taking off their wet gloves and shaking out their hats, the smell of wet wool pervaded the room. The people waiting were restless. We were all anxious for the wind and snow to stop.

When the wind calmed down slightly, we heard the motor of the gondola resume even though the snow continued. Several people cheered. They put on their warm outerwear and headed out in the almost dark to get the gondola. Soon Sumi, Marina, and I were the only ones in the lodge. Waiting. Worrying.



Two or three of the kitchen staff were cleaning up, washing the tables, and then washing the floor. We were in their way. They indicated that they expected us to be leaving.

The manager of the lodge finally came out and talked with us. I told him that we were waiting for three others to come in from the snow. I could see that he was concerned. At that moment the two ski patrollers that we had talked with came in to say that they had headed out but had to return without seeing our guys.

They asked more detailed questions about Sandy, Sebastian, and Noboru— their ages, physical condition, etc. This time I mentioned Noboru's healing leg, suggesting that maybe he had become fatigued. We went over maps of the mountain trails again, but at this point we were even less sure which ones we had been walking on and where the guys intended to go. They asked if any of them had cell phones with them. Sumi and I said we didn't think so. We gave them Noboru's number, but it continued to ring when they tried it, so we concluded that he must have left it at home.

More talk. Then I remembered to add that I didn't know if Sandy went out after them on snowshoes or had decided on skis. Sandy's name rang a bell with one of the patrollers.

"You mean *Sandford* Gibson?"

"Yes."

"A ski patroller from here?"

"Yes."

His face softened. He seemed pleased and walked over to another patroller sitting in a corner of the lodge making more phone calls. I heard him explain about Sandy.

The other one commented, "Well, they've got a chance then since one of them is a local."

At first I didn't understand the term *local* until I realized they were alluding to Sandy being from here and knowing the mountain from having spent so much time on it.

A patroller went outside, which I was glad of, but he soon returned alone with a significant amount of snow on this beard and hat. Again he was on his cell phone apparently to search and rescue because in about an hour some of them came in dressed in heavy gear and had search dogs with them. By then it was totally dark. They mentioned that a helicopter was standing by.

A helicopter. So it was official. They were recognizing this as a life-threatening emergency.

One patroller admitted it was not feasible to look for the guys until the visibility cleared. I felt fear shoot through me. Did that mean no one would be looking for them for the entire night? I was afraid to ask. I didn't want to know the worst. All my energy drained from me.

I kept looking at the clock on the wall without really taking in what hour it was. Marina came and stood behind me

and put her arms around my shoulders. She tried to encourage Sumi and me to eat something. We couldn't. I felt nauseous.

Did Sandy even catch up with Noboru and Sebastian? What if he hadn't reached them and that they weren't even all together? Perhaps Sandy's out there, alone. What would he be suffering in that intense cold and blowing snow? And what of the others who don't know the mountain?

I wondered what Sumi and Marina were feeling and thinking. Sumi looked particularly pale, or was the lodge just poorly lit? Most of the lights had been turned off as staff left for the night. The manager, Bruce, and one cook, Astrid, apparently felt that they couldn't leave while we and the search and rescue group were in the lodge. Back in the kitchen, they put on another urn of coffee and made sandwiches for all of us. The rescue group was at one table making phone calls. The dogs, smelling damp, were lying on the floor beside them.

Beyond my fears for Sandy and the other two guys, nagging thoughts distressed me. Selfish thoughts. Sandy's and my assumptions about having plans together somehow made me more fearful. The idea of doing an architect program alone, interning alone.... Anything I had planned prior to meeting Sandy now seemed not worth doing after having a wonderful vision of the two of us being able to do it all together. Sharing difficult times as well as triumphant ones. And it all seemed possible. Or had....

I was frightened even further after Bruce turned on a small television set in the kitchen. Some of us crowded around the kitchen door to watch a newscast. The reporter said that three men in their twenties, two foreigners and a North Shore resident, were lost on Grouse Mountain in a blizzard. He said there was no way to conduct a search until the blizzard stopped and daylight returned.

As I feared: no search until morning. More terror went through me.

All of a sudden I thought about Sandy's parents and the possibility of them seeing that newscast. They would know by now that Sandy had not returned when planned. I borrowed a cell phone from a patroller and phoned Sandy's house.

"Robyn...."

"Erika?"

As soon as I heard Sandy's mom's voice, I broke out crying.

Robyn said they had seen the news and were afraid that it might be Sandy and others of our group lost on the mountain. As alarmed and anxious as she and Sandy's dad were, Robyn tried to reassure me. She said she was glad I was there.

Sumi and Marina saw me crying and came over and hugged me. The three of us stood there numb, without saying anything, me listening on the line as Robyn talked just to stay in touch with us.

Robyn offered to phone Mary for me and Sumi and Marina's homestay parents. I parroted the numbers that Sumi and Marina provided. I welcomed Robyn's help with this. I seemed incapable of phoning Mary or talking now to anyone outside the community that we had become, the world inside the lodge.

The night dragged on. Stale sandwiches were replaced with fresh ones along with soup. I tried to eat something but in doing so felt I was going to be sick. I went off and sat in the washroom for a while.

Finally Sumi, Marina, and I put our heads down on our rolled up, now-dry jackets on the table when we could no longer stay awake. We dozed off and on, despite our fear, or maybe partly because of that fear.

As black night turned royal blue, the gondola resumed. Several men arrived with dogs in protective coats.

At the first hint of daybreak the storm seemed to subside somewhat. I was relieved again somewhat as the search and rescue men headed out. Sumi, Marina, and I were alone in the lodge, except for Bruce and Astrid. They were washing up in the kitchen.

We heard a helicopter fly over. I burst out crying.

I will always remember how wonderful that sounded. The helicopter. Knowing that someone was finally doing something. That someone was going out to try to find Sandy, Noboru, and Sebastian.

A few minutes later, the manager came out of the kitchen and said he overheard a short-wave radio message that our three guys had been spotted. Spotted. So they must all be together. Relief. Until I questioned, "But in what condition?"

Bruce didn't know.

This was hopeful news, but our agony continued. Maybe this time of waiting was even worse. Landing the helicopter was still out of the question. We continued to ply Bruce with questions. But he had no additional information for us. Why hadn't the person reporting said something about the guys' condition?

It was depressing in hearing the helicopter return. I even felt angry. It was snowing in earnest again. Rescuers who had headed out on foot returned to the lodge confirming that, with such reduced visibility, it wasn't feasible for them to go any further or for the helicopter to attempt a rescue. They too had no information for us from the helicopter pilot.

Why weren't those in the helicopter passing on any information? What if? What if?

The wait seemed interminable. This was the worst part. Waiting. And waiting. Again it snowed heavily. The cold wind blasted in through the external double doors whenever someone came back in. Eventually it was snowing slightly less, it was lighter, and it was noticeably less windy.

We heard the helicopter go up again. Another surge of hope transformed our despair. Sumi and Marina and I held hands across the table. After a few minutes the pilot in the helicopter relayed a message saying there was a small break in the cloud cover where the guys were, so they were heading down after them.

But still no hint about their condition.

Tears were flowing down my face. I wasn't ready to hear any bad news. I was afraid of hearing that the guys were.....

More silence. No one was passing on any news.

Someone finally stated that the helicopter had picked up all three guys and was taking them directly to Lion's Gate Hospital. No further information. To the hospital. That meant they were alive at least, didn't it? Didn't it?

Bruce thoughtfully suggested that we should head for the hospital and said he would drive us there from the bottom of the gondola. Sumi, Marina, and I hurriedly retied our boots and put on our jackets and our still damp daypacks, scarves, hats, and gloves. We said a quick thank you to Astrid.

It was good to be finally doing something despite feeling numb in not knowing if the guys were unconscious, suffering terribly, or something worse.

As we stepped outside, I had a near gag reflex from the intense cold. The four of us got in the frigid, metal, heatless gondola. So much could have been said then. Should have been said. Like thanking Bruce for staying with us and keeping the group going all night with the sandwiches, soup, and coffee. His and Astrid's kindness had been considerable.

But in the gondola, none of us talked; lives were still in question.



Through the ice swept windows of the cable car, we could see new snow that had blown from every direction onto

the trees, around the bases of the gondola piers, and over the occasional cabin, making all objects into rounded white sculptural forms. The city in morning light looked so crystal-clean and beautiful—incongruous with the way I felt.

I could see pink light breaking across the horizon to the east. In looking at that, I found myself silently saying, “Pink sky in the morning, sailors take warning. Pink sky at night, sailors delight.” Mary had taught me that slogan to help predict Vancouver summer weather. But what did pink sky in the morning mean in this situation? Did it have other implications?

Arriving at the hospital, after a quick thank you and goodbyes, Sumi, Marina, and I jumped out of Bruce’s van and rushed through the automatic doors into the emergency ward. We assumed that at least we could officially hear the condition of the guys. And hopefully see them. But hospital staff provided no answers and certainly didn’t offer to take us to them. I wanted so badly to see Sandy. I needed to see him alive. Conscious.

But there was just more waiting. Waiting. I compared this to waiting in the emergency ward at Squamish Hospital when Noboru had broken his leg. How simple that all seemed now by comparison. One doesn’t die of a broken leg. But one can easily die from spending a night on a frigid mountain in a blizzard.

Why couldn’t anyone reassure Sumi, Marina, and me of the condition of the guys? The nurses weren’t willing to tell us anything, if indeed they knew anything.

It then struck me to phone Sandy’s parents again.

I got through to Sandy’s mom. She was extremely relieved to know that the guys were down off the mountain, not in the cold any longer; that they were in a warm bed in the hospital with someone looking after them, and that I was there.

I heard her say in the background to Sandy’s dad, “Darren, the guys are at Lion’s Gate.”

She said they would come immediately, and they did.

Sandy’s dad had his arm around Robyn’s shoulder as they came through the automatic door. I hugged Sandy’s mom. We were both blurry-eyed. Even Sandy’s dad touched my shoulder somehow acknowledging what I was going through. In their presence, I felt a weight lift off me. Like I wasn’t alone now in worrying about Sandy.

“There’s still no word about how they are. The staff won’t tell us anything,” I blurted.

Sandy’s dad strode past us and went to the nurses’ station and asked questions. He had a room number in an

instant, so we all followed him, not knowing where we were going or what to expect.

As we went up in the metal, impersonal elevator, I managed to introduce Sumi and Marina to Sandy's parents.

I read the sign "Critical Care Unit" and felt alarmed as we walked through the double doors. Entering a four-bed ward, I immediately saw Sandy lying there at the far side of the room with tubes in his arms. More anxiety.

Was he alive, unconscious, or just asleep? He looked so pale and one eye was bruised and swollen. His hands were covered in bandages as big as oven mitts. A frame was holding blankets away from his feet. In seeing him in this state, I became further alarmed.

I walked over to Sandy and put my hand to his face. At least that was warm. Sitting down on a chair at the edge of his bed, I put my face to his chest. I think I wept silently. Sandy's parents addressed the nurse. She reassured us he was not unconscious, just sleeping deeply, as he and the others probably would be for some time, as a result of hypothermia and exhaustion. I sat up and looked toward Sebastian and Noboru with Marina and Sumi at their bedsides.

Sandy's dad asked about the tubes.

"They are delivering a controlled dose of painkiller and extra moisture to re-hydrate him," the nurse responded.

"And what about permanent damage to their hands and feet?"

"It is too early to tell about damage from the frostbite. Sometimes it takes a while to assess that."

I was thinking how important hands and fingers are to an architect/musician, especially for sketching and playing an instrument. I wept some more.

Robyn put her arm across my shoulder and handed me some tissue. I wanted to stop crying, so I stood up but kept my hand on Sandy's arm. My lifeline to him. The nurse went out. Sandy's dad pulled up two more chairs beside Sandy's bed. The three of us sat there but didn't talk. We just watched Sandy breathing.

After a while I noticed an opening in the blue curtain in the next cubicle and saw a young woman sitting with her head down next to a young man heavily bandaged around his head and torso. He looked lifeless. A variety of tubes were attached to his nose, arms, and chest. For some reason I immediately thought "car accident." Two nurses came in. One led the young woman away talking quietly to her. The other proceeded to undo all the tubes. More alarm for me. So he must be... dead.

Within a few minutes, two male hospital personnel came in, covered his body, and took the young man out on a

stretcher. Another nurse came in and stripped the bed. I tried to block out the sound of her cleaning the plastic covered mattress and the smell of the cleaning solution. I felt numb.

I realized I had missed some conversation. How could I have allowed myself to become distracted? I had identified too closely with what had happened to that young man and the woman being led away. Could she be me?

Robyn and Sandy's dad were standing up while a nurse changed some bags attached to the tubes in Sandy's arm. She was saying to us, "Apparently they survived because at least one of them knew exactly what to do in a blizzard."

With a break in his voice, Sandy's dad said, "All that training as a ski patroller..." Straightening himself up, he managed to add, "So that's paid off."

Robyn asked something about Sandy's eye.

"From what we can determine, that should be okay." She added, "Now why don't you go home and try to get some rest? There is no advantage to you staying here any longer. The three of them will be sleeping for several hours as we keep them medicated."

I kissed Sandy's temple and pressed his upper arm. Along with Sumi and Marina, we all numbly headed down in the elevator, through the lifeless emergency department seating area, out into the cool air, and toward the parked car.

Robyn said, "Come back to the house to stay the night with us, Erika."

"Yes, we can drop off Sumi and Marina at their homestays," Sandy's Dad added.

"And when we get home, I'll update Mary if you like."

I was grateful that Robyn would think to do this for me. I still didn't feel up to making any decisions for myself. The five of us got into the car. Sandy's dad was practical enough to ask Sumi and Marina for their addresses.

I wordlessly sat in the back seat with them. Sumi said she would phone Noboru's parents and homestay parents and Marina said she would call Sebastian's roommates. Besides that, they too were silent, except for simple goodbyes when we dropped them off.

I was glad when we got to Sandy's house. Without speaking, Sandy's mom led me into Sandy's bedroom and gave me Sandy's royal blue robe. She suggested that I take off my damp clothes so she could put them in the dryer. As I did this, she put sheets and a fluffy quilt on top of Sandy's bed for me to cuddle into. I felt close to Sandy being in his robe on his bed. It was comforting to feel his presence.

I had no thought about my previous reluctance to go into his room due to the memories associated with the band

manager. At that moment I couldn't even have remembered her name. By comparison, that incident seems so trivial and so long ago.

All that mattered now was that Sandy had lived through a night of blizzard on the mountain and that he is alive. But in what condition? And what of his future?

Robyn brought in a pair of her slippers and a nightie and set them beside the bed. She gave me a hot water bottle. I felt as if she were somehow giving that hot water bottle to Sandy when he was freezing through the night in the blizzard. She was so caring and accepting of me. Treating me like family. If I still hadn't felt so wounded from my distress, I might have been overwhelmed by gratitude, even more than usual.

I must have been exhausted from worry and my lack of sleep through our night in the lodge, because I fell asleep immediately.

Some time later, Robyn came into Sandy's room, touched my arm, and spoke gently to me. Still I was startled.

"It's okay, Erika, don't be alarmed, but we want to go back to the hospital to visit Sandy."

As dog-tired and leaden as I felt, I said, "I want to come too."

It was night, although I had no idea what hour. Time seemed so distorted. How long had I been asleep? Again, the three of us didn't talk in the car or even going up in the elevator to the critical care unit.

I was alarmed when I saw the blue sheets closed around all of the beds. We couldn't see any of the guys. But in going into Sandy's cubicle, he stirred. With his good eye partially open, he looked toward me and, with a slight smile, quietly said, "Hi."

I was so happy, I had the impulse to clutch his hands and, in realizing I mustn't, I put one hand on the side of his face and broke out crying again. Robyn had tears in her eyes too as she moved to my side of the bed.

"It's okay, Erika, Mom."

"Son," Sandy's dad said, as he moved closer on the other side of Sandy and touched his shoulder acknowledging Sandy in his reserved way.

"Dad," was all that Sandy said in quietly greeting him too.

"So glad you are awake," his mom said. "How are you feeling?"

A moment lapsed before he responded.

"Weak. But warmer."

"Are you in a lot of pain?" I asked.

"Yes. Some."

"Your hands and feet?"

"Yes."

"How did you survive that blizzard?" his father asked, wanting to know some details. Maybe the heroics.

Sandy closed his eyes again and didn't respond.

Was I trying to encourage him to say something too when I commented, "The search and rescue men were relieved when they heard you were a Grouse ski patroller."

Sandy just smiled slightly and closed his eyes again.

Wondering if I should give Sandy and his parents some time to be alone, I walked around the other curtains. Noboru was pale and motionless and had the same bandages on his hands and frame over his feet as Sandy did. He was asleep. I was glad not to need to speak to him, as I didn't want take my focus off Sandy. Sebastian stirred but was too weak to talk, although he smiled when I told him that Marina had been in to see him earlier.

I rejoined Sandy's parents at the bedside. Sandy turned his attention to me as if we were alone.

"Erika," he said quietly, struggling to speak. "You were ... the reason... I... got through this."

"I am? How did I help?"

Slowly he said, "Feeling... that you were... close by ... waiting... kept me... going."

I remained quiet to give Sandy a chance to complete what he was trying to say.

"Knowing... that you would... want me... to be okay.... to keep trying... to stay awake... when we just wanted... to sleep... to stop feeling... that intense cold."

Robyn touched Sandy's upper arm and said. "But you knew you couldn't do that and survive, Sandy."

"Yes.... I knew."

Another pause.

"Still... it was hard... to keep us all... awake."

"I bet it was, Son," his Dad responded. "So good work that you were able to do that, Sandford. And you knew to dig in and not head back to the lodge when you couldn't see."

Sandy didn't respond.

"So you built a shelter?" Sandy's dad asked wanting details.

After a long pause, slowly Sandy responded, "A covered... trench."

"So how did the helicopter find you?" Robyn asked.

More quiet, and then, with significant effort, Sandy answered, "We stamped out... SOS... in the snow."

"So that's what they saw? That's how they found you?"

Another pause.

“Yes.”

Sandy closed his eyes again and tried to turn on his side as if to get away from the questioning. In doing so he disturbed the blankets on the frame at the bottom of the bed so they caved in on his feet. He cringed slightly. His mom went to the foot of the bed and rearranged the blankets over the frame.

“Those are big bandages you have on your feet,” she said.

Sandy didn’t respond.

His dad tried a few more specific questions. But Sandy remained silent with his eyes closed.

A nurse came in and said Sandy needed to rest and that we should leave.

I leaned over and kissed him on the forehead.

“Sandy, I love you. I will come and visit you tomorrow afternoon.” He gave a slight smile and a partial nod.

Sandy was obviously very weak and in a lot of pain. But he also seemed reluctant to talk, possibly because that forced him to again relive the ordeal in his mind.

At that moment his non-communicativeness didn’t seem important. All that mattered was that he was alive and he had smiled at me.

Photographs of Grouse Mountain courtesy of Jerome Collins, Vancouver, Canada



MARCH # 11—Hospital Recovery and Staying at Sandy's House

For the next few days I was in a daze. I seemed stunned as I mechanically got up, attended classes, and went in rain or sunshine across to North Vancouver on the Seabus to visit Sandy at the hospital. I went alone because Sumi and Marina had later classes than I did.

Sandy was now in a private room. I didn't usually see anyone while I was there, so I got into the habit (dare I admit?) of talking to Sandy, even though he was not awake. I sat there watching him breathe, willing him to get well. (Some might call this praying.)

I wanted to lie under the blankets beside him as he had with me when I was sick. I wanted us to talk together. I wanted to see him smile again. But none of this happened.

On his windowsill I placed a ceremonial teapot and two small matching cups, and each visit I took a thermos of hot green tea. My dream was to share tea with Sandy as soon as he was well enough. Also each day, I left him a card or letter, addressed with his name, as I had taught him, in Katakana calligraphy script, as well as Western print. These messages remained unopened.

Sometimes in the evening I phoned Robyn to talk about Sandy. I needed to talk about Sandy. She said that according to the doctor, Sandy's recovery was slightly slow but seemed to be progressing. As heartening as this seemed, I worried about the lasting effect on Sandy's hands and feet.

What day was it? That never mattered. I went across to North Van to the hospital. In going to Waterfront Station to catch the Seabus, I often walked past the sculpture of the angel

lifting the soldier. I identified with this more than I wanted to. And I always noticed the soldier's hand.



Also, on the trip over I always looked accusingly at the mountains in thinking about what they had done to Sandy. Sometimes they showed themselves to be the menace they can be. The threat. Other days I was mad at them for looking so peaceful and beautiful. Glowing as if with an inner light.

Well, on one of the sunny days, in arriving at Sandy's private hospital room, I was cheered somewhat when I saw Sandy moving his arm as if trying to turn over on his side.

"Sandy?"

I was delighted that he opened his eyes enough to know I was there.

"Hi," he said quietly.

"Oh, Sandy. I've waited so long for us to be able to talk and have tea together."

"Me too... I've seen... your tea things," he smiled slightly. "And the cards... I can't open them... yet. But Mom's helped with some."

"That's not important. I'm missing you so much."

"And I'm... missing you."

"How are you?"

"Stronger."

"But you're still very tired..."

"Yes."

"And are you still in pain?"

"Some, but less."

"I'm glad that you are at least improving."

"I can move a bit... my toes... fingers."

"Well, that's good news!"

I thought Sandy was going to fade out on me again, but at that moment his parents walked into the room.

After greeting them, I mentioned what Sandy had just said about moving his toes and fingers.

Sandy's dad asked, "So does that mean you have some feeling in them too, Son?"

After a few moments, Sandy opened his eyes again.

"Feeling. Yes, some."

"That's what we've been waiting to hear."

Sandy closed his eyes again.

"How did you get the bruise?" Robyn asked.

Without opening his eyes, Sandy only said, "It'll be... fine."

"What about Noboru and Sebastian? Did you all know to do the same thing on the mountain?" Sandy's dad asked. (Hadn't he asked that before? And why did that matter?)

Sandy didn't respond to this. In fact he still seemed reluctant to say anything at all about the blizzard.

Robyn asked me about Noboru and Sebastian. I told her that Sumi and Marina had recently reported that they also have regained some movement and feeling in their hands and feet.



A couple of days later, on gloomy late afternoon, I was unexpectedly delayed in visiting Sandy at the hospital. I was disappointed to see that he was again asleep. His mom had told me that, with his pain medication significantly reduced, he was having trouble sleeping. Apparently he was having reoccurring nightmares about the night on the mountain. Seeing him lying there so peacefully (?), I didn't have the heart to wake him even though I yearned to talk with him (and climb into his bed and lie beside him, but I still didn't dare do that either!).

In adding another greeting card to the pile of those I left on previous occasions, I was moved by a one-word "message" on one of the envelopes. Apparently Sandy had simply written the word, "BIRTHDAY?" in faint, childlike, almost unreadable printing. I wondered how had he written this with bandages still on his hands.

I was weepy in realizing he somehow knew my birthday was the next day. I had almost forgotten, as Sumi and Marina had already convinced our classmates to postpone, until the guys are able to attend, any March celebrations—specifically St Patrick’s Day, my birthday, and a party for Sumi’s, Noboru’s, and my delayed flights home. We are committed to staying in Vancouver until our guys are out of the hospital.

A few moments after I saw Sandy’s heartrending hand printing, a nurse came in. She told me that on Sandy’s request, she had handed him the pencil and envelope from his bedside tray but, in being called away for an emergency, she hadn’t been able to help him write a note. When she returned she saw Sandy just completing that simple “message,” with the pencil in his mouth guided by his two bandaged hands.

There was another touching moment that night in walking by a door ajar and seeing Sumi (had she left class early?) leaning close to Noboru’s face talking quietly. Such a suggestion of intimacy. I was so glad.

I headed for the patient end-of-hall lounge to wait for Sumi so that I could talk with her before going home. I was surprised to see that Bae was there, even though I knew he has been routinely accompanying Sumi and Marina on their nighttime visits. He says he thinks they need a chaperone in going to the hospital alone at night. Besides, with Song still away, he was particularly welcoming their company.

When Sumi joined Bae and I in the lounge, the three of us discussed some details of the birthday party that we intend to organize for whenever we will be able to reschedule it. For us, planning the event is helping us to be optimistic about the guys’ recovery.

Sandy’s parents seem to think that our guys could be released from hospital soon, even if Sandy might be held back a few days longer than Noboru and Sebastian. And best news of all is that the doctor has indicated that he expects a complete recovery of their hands and feet—for all three of them.

I certainly hope they can achieve that goal.





MARCH # 12—Visiting Sandy at Home

Visuals: photographs of view from Sandy's house

After Sandy returned home from the hospital, I arranged to visit him. His mom picked me up after a dental appointment in the city. She said after supper, on their way to attend a wine and cheese reception at Whistler, she and Sandy's dad could drive me to Park Royal, where I would be able to get a direct bus to downtown.

When we arrived, Sandy was sitting in the sunshine-filled living room on a large comfortable chair within sight of the panorama of the city.

Glasses, mugs, a thermos, and plates with the remains of some food were on the table next to him. Sandy had his feet propped up on a covered stool, and his guitar leaned against the side of the chair. On the floor beside him were piles of books and papers and crutches.

I was pleased to see that the large bandages on his feet had been replaced by soft slippers. He looked comfortable in loose, white cotton top and pants. It was so good to see him at home even though he still looked tired.

He turned slightly and smiled at me as I walked across the room.

"Hello, Favourite Person," he said quietly.

I put my hand to Sandy's face as I leaned over and kissed him.

"Hey, you're growing a beard...."

"Not intentionally. Just lazy."

Seeing individual Band-Aids on his fingers instead of the previous large bandages, I said, "Having blisters on your fingers isn't exactly being lazy, Sandy."

"I'm waiting until I'm ready to go back out to campus."

"When do you think that might be?"

"I have to stay off my feet as much as possible for a few more days."

"But you look like you are wearing a karate outfit."

"Deceptive image, eh? Actually it is a karate outfit."

"Where is it from?"

"My brother Lauren left it here on his last visit. The step-in pants and fold-around jacket are a lot easier for me to deal with than shirt and jeans with their buttons and zippers. And these pants are certainly preferable to wearing pyjamas that make me feel so lazy."

"Lazy. Do I detect a bit of theme here?" I smiled.

"I am feeling like I'd need to get on with doing something."

"I think that is probably a good sign, Sandy—being restless means you are probably getting well."

Picking up his guitar, he added, "The doc didn't mention my fingers, so..."

"You've tried playing?"

"I've been testing a bit."

"Is that wise?"

"Well, with Band-Aids on, my fingers are not so tender."

"You still have small blisters on your knuckles."

"Well, yeah. But I am feeling so useless for not being able to go to classes or get my mind back into my essays."

"Have you received extensions on them?"

"Yes, my profs have been great."

"As they should be. They probably saw all that media coverage about you."

Sandy seemed to purposely ignore this, but his mom came in at that moment and asked me to help her with some tea. Once inside the kitchen door, Robyn gave me a clipping from a North Shore weekly newspaper saying, "You probably didn't see this, Erika."

In large type, the article was headed:

**"North Shore Man Saves
Two Foreigners in
Grouse Mountain Blizzard"**

So the North Shore man would be Sandy. I was surprised to see that the article included a photograph of us all.

"Group of international friends just before they set off for an afternoon of snowshoeing on Grouse Mountain. When a blizzard set in quickly, three of the men were

stranded and were forced to spend the night on the slopes. Survivors of the blizzard are Sandford Gibson (second from upper left), Sebastian Hauf (upper right), and Noboru Tamaka (lower right). They appear with girlfriends Erika Yamishiro (upper left) Sumi Matsubara (second from lower right), and Marina Gerhardt (second from upper right) who spent the night in the lodge waiting to see if the men would survive the ordeal.”

I silently read the article:

“A former Grouse Mountain ski patroller saved the lives of himself and two international students caught in a late-in-the season blizzard overnight Sunday. The two foreigners say they are alive, thanks to the survival skills of West Van’s Sandford Gibson. Gibson gained this knowledge through his service as a Grouse Mountain ski patroller during his undergraduate days.

All three of the men are in their mid-twenties—the visitors being Noboru Tamaka from Japan and Sebastian Hauf from Germany. They were part of a group of ten international students who were snowshoeing for the first time. The blizzard struck shortly after the two foreign males decided to go off alone Sunday afternoon just before the others decided to head back to the lodge. At that time it was only snowing lightly.

When the two did not return to the lodge as the snow increased and visibility lessened, Gibson, who knew where the two were headed, decided to go out after them. By the time he met up with them, the snow was in blizzard conditions. Knowing it was too late to try to trek back to the lodge, Gibson tried to convince them that they should all make a shelter and stay put. Tamaka, however, insisted he could find his way back so he set off alone.

Gibson and Hauf remained and dug a trench and covered it to use as a shelter for just the two of them. However, Tamaka, encountering increasing wind and snow, soon realized he couldn’t make it back to the lodge after all so he headed down the hill to rejoin them in their shelter.

“The wind was howling and the snow was heavy. You couldn’t see anything,” Tamaka said.

By the time he reached the shelter, he was stumbling, shivering badly, and somewhat incoherent. Gibson recognized this as the first stage of hypothermia.

“I crashed down some of the wall as I tried to get in, so Gibson had to fix it and make room for me,” Tamaka said.

On Gibson’s advice, Hauf lay on top of Tamaka to try to help him regain some warmth while Gibson enlarged the shelter.

Hauf admitted he too had created problems in resisting some of Gibson’s advice—in his case, to not take off his wet, frozen snow boots. In the process of trying to take them off, the long-legged Hauf kicked a hole in the wall.

When asked how Gibson had finally convinced him to keep his boots on, Hauf appeared embarrassed and said Gibson offered them all his remaining food.

“I knew how serious it must be if Gibson was willing to go without food for however long just to get me to keep my boots on.”

Hauf added, “Gibson fixed the broken wall again while the two of us wolfed down his egg and cheese sandwich, homemade cookies, banana, apple, and trail mix.”

Crammed into the makeshift shelter, smaller than a pup tent, the three lay in a heap on the snow floor all night in total darkness. The challenge for Gibson was to keep all three of them awake. He knew that to fall asleep they would become unconsciousness and die.

“Staying awake was a struggle,” Gibson admitted.

Hauf reported, “Gibson kept us talking about anything just to keep us from falling asleep and when we started to nod off, he shook us repeatedly, yelled at us, or even slapped our faces.”

At daybreak when the wind and snow had abated somewhat, but the thigh-high drifts made walking almost impossible, Gibson enlisted the other two to help him stamp out large SOS letters in the snow that could be seen from the air.

That is how the pilot of the helicopter finally spotted the three.

“But by then, with frozen hands and feet, we were pretty far gone and totally exhausted,” Hauf admitted.

Just before noon on Monday the three were picked up and transported by helicopter directly to Lion’s Gate Hospital where they are being treated for hypothermia and frostbite.”

In finishing this article, I let out an involuntary, "Wow." And looking up at Robyn, I said, "You must be extremely proud of Sandy."

She replied immediately, "And you must be too."

I didn't know how to respond to that comment.

Robyn added, "But Sandy doesn't want to acknowledge any media coverage, so it is probably best if you don't mention reading this."

So while I'd been moved by the article, I didn't tell Sandy that I'd seen it when I carried the tea tray into the living room.

Robyn joined us too and the three of us were able to discuss some things other than the blizzard, including the event Sandy's parents and their friends Simon and Sue would be attending that evening as part of an annual architectural symposium.

Also the karate pants had piqued my curiosity as they made me realize I hardly know anything about Lauren despite meeting him at Christmas.

"Tell me about Lauren and his involvement with karate."

"Well, you probably heard he is a high school English and Socials Studies teacher and, at least as importantly to kids at the school, he is in charge of their well-recognized karate program."

"Really. That must mean he is good at karate himself."

"Yes, he is," Robyn answered. "As a kid he was small for his age, so when he was about ten, on Simon's recommendation, we started him with karate lessons along with their eldest son."

"He has a brown belt," Sandy clarified. "Didn't you say that that is what Sumi has?"

"Apparently. So, wow, they both must be good."

"On his arrival as an Ontario teacher, he was expected to contribute to his school's extra curricular activities," Robyn stated.

"So he started a karate club as soon as he took that position," Sandy added.

"And their club has brought a lot of attention to their school by winning almost every provincial championship since he formed their club."

"Good for him."

Robyn explained, "So despite the fact that he grew to be almost as tall as Grant, he loved karate and has stayed with it. That was his sport, the way that Sandy's was skiing, and Grant's was track and field."

After we finished sipping our tea, Robyn left Sandy and I alone.

Assuming that Robyn had showed me that newspaper article in the local paper, Sandy said, "Erika, I want you to know that I never talked to the press."

"Sandy, they only quoted you as saying five words."

"But they made them up."

"It doesn't matter, Sandy. No one is thinking that you were encouraging media attention. The newspaper needed a story. Maybe sometime you will feel up to telling me more about what it was like being out there. So I'll know something more about your experience than just what I've learned from the media. But you don't want to talk about that yet...."

"No, I don't."

With his taped fingers, Sandy picked up the guitar and strummed it in a somewhat distracted manner. Obviously he wanted to get off the subject of surviving on the mountain.

"So how are your fingers feeling?"

"Clumsy. I can only play a few slow songs yet."

"That's okay with me."

I always melt when Sandy sings slow songs for me. I moved over to sit on the broad arm of his chair, and I put my arm across his shoulder. After playing a couple of other songs, Sandy sang some verses of what he now refers to as his "Song for Erika." Still strumming, he said, "I have another verse for us."

"You do? Can I hear it?"

"Okay." Sandy smiled as he started singing.

*You helped me through that blizzard,
gave me strength to stay alive.
You kept me going when it was
a struggle to survive.
I felt your presence and your spirit
through the darkness and the strife.
I endured the bitter cold knowing
for me you'll change your life.*

Of course I was moved, but Sandy kept the mood light by quickly joking, "Good rhyming, eh?"

"Yes, perfect. When the pain is gone from your fingers, I'd like to hear you sing all of the verses together."

"Sure. But there'll be a lot of editing and reordering before I really know what will remain as part of the final song."

I asked Sandy about the books stacked around his chair and the homework that he was avoiding. I asked if there was something that I could do to help, such as inputting an essay into his computer if Sandy would dictate the words to me.

In declining this offer, saying that he felt mentally exhausted, he admitted he had not been sleeping well and was afraid to sleep due to the recurring blizzard nightmare that his mom had alluded to. I stood up behind his chair and massaged his shoulders. I could feel knots in his neck and along one shoulder blade.

"Hey, you've found something there," he responded. "It hurts but it feels good."

As I worked out the knots with my thumbs, I felt Sandy gradually relax. I was not intending to encourage him to sleep, but when Sandy's dad came through the front door, he saw that Sandy was in fact asleep. His dad seemed pleased about this and whispered his greeting to me.

In joining Robyn in the kitchen, Sandy's dad explained what I had done and asked Robyn, "Should we let Sandford sleep rather than waking him up for dinner?"

Perhaps my face showed disappointment at the thought of not having Sandy join us at the table, because his dad then asked me, "Would you otherwise consider staying overnight to help Sandy get back to sleep?"

I smiled to myself (hopefully), as he reassured me of a ride into the city in the morning in time for school.

"Of course I am willing to stay."

Sandy was somewhat unsteady as he manoeuvred himself to the dining room on his crutches, while avoiding putting much weight on either his feet or his hands. He seemed groggy at first but revived through the meal. He smiled in hearing that I would be staying over and touched my hand with his bandaged fingers.

I again smiled to myself when Sandy's dad reassured me that I could sleep in the guest room if I chose to. How was it that at the same time this reassurance somehow suggested that it was also okay to sleep with Sandy in his room?

At the end of the meal we continued to sit there relaxing and sipping tea with our lemon custard dessert. After Sandy finished eating, he rested his hand over my wrist. I had the feeling that Sandy's parents particularly enjoyed our presence. They are obviously glad to have Sandy back, but could they also feel the love between us?

The telephone finally made Sandy's parents aware of time. Simon and Sue good-naturedly asked what was keeping them.

Robyn stood up and started taking food into the kitchen.

"I can do that, Robyn," I said. "Sandy can advise me if I don't know where something goes."

"Are you sure? I hate to let you do cleanup after inviting you to dinner."

"It's okay, really. I have nothing anything else to do, so don't be any later than you need to be."

Sandy took my lead and, again somewhat shaky on his crutches, made his way to the kitchen too. I pulled a high barstool next to the counter. He struggled onto it and leaned his crutches against the counter next to him.

Within a few minutes I had cleared off the dining room table and put the dishes in the dishwasher. By then Sandy and I had the place to ourselves.

I couldn't help saying, "I am amazed at how comfortable your parents seem to be in having me here."

"Well, why wouldn't they? They know that I credit you with saving my life."

"Sandy, I didn't save your life. Your will power saved your life."

"But what was my will power based on, Erika?"

There was no point in arguing about this, so I just hugged him as he perched on the high stool. That turned into a nice kiss.

"Would you like help getting washed so the Band-Aids on your fingers don't get wet?"

"That's a good idea," he smiled.

"Okay, I'll go get a washcloth and your pyjamas. Are they still in your drawer?" I asked.

"Yes, second one from the top."

When I returned with a washcloth, towels, and pyjamas, Sandy was still sitting on the barstool but had managed to take off his wrap-around karate top. With hot water from the kitchen sink, I wet the washcloth and washed his face and then lay the steamy cloth on his bare chest and then again on his back. He smiled, probably remembering the time he had washed my face when I was sick in bed. It seemed as intimate as then—more so actually by the time we got the karate pants off and he was in his pyjamas.

As it was still early, we went into the living room and watched a video. It was wonderful to be able to cuddle while doing that. I was in a pair of Sandy's pyjamas again too. When we went into Sandy's bedroom, I helped him get to sleep. That was enjoyable for both of us.

The next morning I wasn't embarrassed when Sandy's parents saw me emerge from Sandy's room. At breakfast they asked Sandy how he had slept. He instantly responded, "The best since the accident."

Turning away from his parents and smiling at me, he quietly mouthed the words, "Despite having my...."

I reached over to tousle his hair. He laughingly repelled my hand.

As Darren promised, he drove me to school on his way to his meeting in the city. And he talked to me. Mostly about my family, my parents' work, and what I had been doing in university and the year before I arrived in Canada. He seemed genuinely interested.

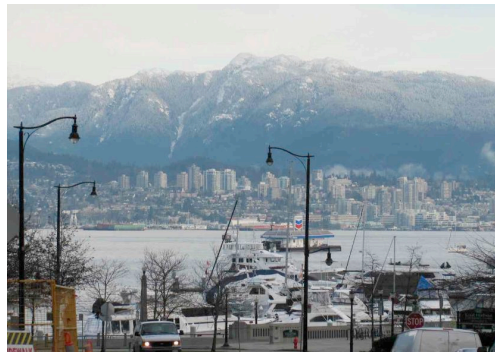
In asking about the Whistler event the night before, I realized that Sandy's parents had decided not to attend any more of the conference that was to continue through Saturday and Sunday. It came out that he and Robyn didn't feel they could leave Sandy home alone all weekend when he was still unable to get around very well on crutches.

I spontaneously offered to stay with Sandy if he and Robyn wished go back to the conference. His dad was delighted.

In explaining that I finish earlier on Fridays than other days of the week, Darren realized he could pick me up and drive me back to the house after finishing his meeting and a lunch he had arranged to have with a colleague.

We agreed on the details. As we continued to drive slowly in the stop-and-start traffic on Georgia Street, Darren called Robyn on his speakerphone to discuss updating their plans. She too seemed very pleased by my offer to keep Sandy company for the weekend. I heard her tell Sandy and he let out a "Yippee!" again like an ecstatic teenager.

In front of the school, I got out of Darren's car feeling the happiest I have since the accident. Imagine. Sandy and I to have a whole weekend to ourselves—at his house.



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