

Ice Age

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## PROLOGUE – ICE AGE

Today, a cold wind rattles the window and whistles through the branches and balustrade. There are no reports of this event but I hear it and see the stems whip and window blinds heave with the blasts they receive. Passersby cover their heads and clutch their jackets, bending their bodies against the gusts.

Thermometers report a mild air temperature despite the cold we feel. We should be enjoying a reprieve from real winter conditions, say the weather experts, but that is not our experience.

Sure, some days we may give into our illusions, trust the newspapers and advertisers, believe our own hype. It can all look rosy but there are ups and downs.

Sometimes, these days, it is as if nature is reversing and inverting itself. Indeed, on the warmest most flowery blue skied days, one can feel the iciness bloom deep inside our bodies and perceive a glittering frost where the sun is supposed to shine. Car canopies, pools of water and glass walls can gleam but radiate cold. Mental clouds can darken the most brilliant days.

Gazing at the reality before us, in the cities or in the country side, the scenery conveys the coldness of postcards, at times. Things can look fine, even very beautiful, but some cool breeze hits us carrying the thought that something is not quite right. It is just too good to be true. Did you think that thought, or was it whispered in the wind?

Sometimes we sit in the comfortable shelter of home and a strange draught might penetrate our fortress. It may seem illogical, having clawed the air around you without any apparent source. Is it our imagination? If so, what inspires it? Is it the spirit of the dead, the complaint of an unsatisfied past life intending to disturb your contentment, such as a past resident who suffered or someone who died in the street and has a bone to pick with you?

Is it the answer or a warning that is “blowing in the wind?” Or, is it a new though vague menace?

Is it knowledge of the atrocities of humankind that chills our hearts and cools our enthusiasm for existence on this planet? Is it a natural in-born inclination towards selfishness and evil that sends cold radiations into the souls and hearths of others, turns some among us into veritable vampires that exist in a dimension between the living world of God and the realm of Death and Despair? Is it our own good conscience that haunts our houses and neighbourhoods so as to stir up concern and mobilize change?

Certain people, I will not say who, might believe that creatures originally alien to Earth have found their way into our societies with the intent of wreaking havoc, lizard people busy breeding evil by breeding with important families of history who spread infectious greed and brutality, develop technologies not only aimed at watching us but also at controlling our

minds and making people do bad things against their own best interest. The lizard people have cold hearts and fabricate more coldness.

However, there are more common explanations, climate change being the most obvious of them. There have been various theories and predictions. Remember the concern over the depletion of the ozone layer, the outer layer of the Earth's atmosphere that screens out ultra violet particles shot incessantly from the sun?

I noticed no celebration when the ozone layer was declared as having repaired itself. It was supposedly fixed by expressly altered human action. The hole in the ozone layer was the biggest cause of global warming, so we were told for a time. What was making the hole? The postulations ranged from the burning of fossil fuels to the testing of nuclear weapons. Orders range everywhere to cover up and protect our skin from unduly high ultra violet invasions. Anyway, it's gone now, apparently. That's what Al Gore said.

Maybe nobody made the declaration . The chorus of alarm merely changed its tune one day. If the problem is still carbon dioxide accumulations, then I do not even know if the problem really was fixed. Maybe it was not there in the first place and scientists and governments do not wish to lose face by letting on that they were wrong.

Now, we hear a different warning, albeit one on a closely related theme. The atmosphere is still intact, in fact it is too efficient, says Al, because the atmosphere is getting too thick by the rising carbon dioxide releases, which results in the trapping of ultra violet rays between the Earth's surface and the outer atmosphere. Oceans will boil and flora and fauna will bake, claim he and his followers and sponsors.

"There is a solution," comes their cry. It is to change the way we do things in order to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. "It can be done," is the refrain, "if we make changes NOW!"

Instead of fighting wars and building defenses against alleged terrorists, suggest the harbingers of this view, we should unite to change technologies and human habits, create and use alternate forms of energy and transportation and industrial production, change eating, shopping and housing patterns, and so on and so forth.

Talk of global warming is all the rage. It is the stuff that animates and lends credibility to the neo-hippies and new age spiritualists, anarchist youth and rebellion inclined workers. It paints green over red and purple over blue. It sparks refreshed industrial hunger and consumer appetites that are dulled by gloomy stock market and bank reports. It assuages financial wounds and gives cause for economic hope. Maybe adjustment is realistic and all is not lost. Maybe there is reason to promote consumer and investor confidence, after all, especially if it is not the economy that is our biggest concern but also if we are all doomed regardless.

The cynical can keep borrowing or stealing, puffed up by the idea that the world will all burn and go to hell anyway. They can give up and give into decadence and despair. Hopefully, the insurance firms can cover for now, the rules bent and the laws twisted, if the governments

continue to rescue the big fish of that business and their partners in crime among the giant corporations.

Global warming may indeed be an “inconvenient truth,” but it may be it only the tip of the iceberg. Maybe it is a mere hand signal of the fantastic powers of the universe. Perhaps they will launch the final conflict over people and the Earth. Maybe evolution is combining forces with physics to bring even greater catastrophe.

I heard that the Earth’s magnetic field is weakening. The moon came and has had its heyday. This possibility can well be called a problem of less gravity, to make an inappropriate pun. The Earth’s revolutions and rotations may be about to change direction, according to some writers called “goofy” by the few readers that bother to pay attention to their articles.

If this kind of change is really happening, could people fix it? Who is even discussing it?

A small muted cluster of theorists predict a sudden freezing of the Earth. They assert that the Earth has been cold more often and for longer periods than it has ever been warm. Warm intervals happen between ice ages. If an ice age lasts 650,000 years, the warming phases last 10,000 to 13,000, so it is stated by these fringe pundits. It has been about 10,000 years since the end of the last ice age. So, do not be fooled by the lure of palm trees or laughs of hyenas or strange new tropical species way up north. Do not get giddy wearing shorts and sipping coolers in the middle of winter.

Perhaps an ice age *is* upon us. If the summers boast record high temperatures and record low precipitation levels, the winters often bear witness to record low temperatures and record high precipitation levels. “I know that the Earth is warming up, but I think that winters are getting colder than before,” remarks the occasional observer.

The soaring levels of carbon dioxide emissions pushed higher by relentless and excessive industry and daily activities that, not so ironically, may raise temperatures and thereby diminish life resources, melting glaciers, destroying marine habitat, and causing chaos with agriculture. Archaeologists say that reduction of environmental resources coincides with, indeed may cause, human conflict, mass death and migration.

One can say that the human world is certainly heating up. The product of this heat is fear, and fear fuels social friction. Hence, life is getting colder. Physical heat is one thing. But the flames rising out of social friction are different. They burn cold.

The coldness numbs the spirit and gels creativity. It halts development, stunting growth and freezing hope and progress. Minds and hearts close and shrink, hide in ice castles. Barriers of ice grow between us. Snow falls like never before.

Keeping hope alive is the only cure, as C. S. Lewis wrote chronicling the story of “Narnia.” Perhaps his forecast of modern times was realistic.

We may reach either of two fates, sooner or later. Either we shall freeze entirely and

become fossils beneath a glacial shield, or we shall experience a total meltdown. One is no better than the other.

At the risk of offending those readers who doubt religion, I recommend a good dose of faith. Let us give credit where credit is due. Do not fret, I think that faith in religion has an important role, but I am not proposing that we study and take religious texts literally, nor do I advocate learning “the Secret.” There are other kinds of faith to add to the brew in order to make a good antidote, or, shall I say impishly, antifreeze. Put your faith in the best examples of human ideas and ingenuity, the truth of nature and artists, the record of valiant victories for good, and the strength of the body and universe. Consult the record of acts of human kindness and generosity. Faith has carried us this far; its potential can be stretched.

“Ah, but which acts of human kindness and generosity and examples of ideas and ingenuity should we follow?” you ask. “What is the truth?” you query further. These are good questions. I cannot answer them. We, the people who want to overcome the cold, must try to find answers together. I, an author of fiction, can only make observations, lend insight, or point here or there, suggest and hint. My job is only to think and incite thought.

There is no single leader. There is no simple answer. There is no all-encompassing formula for action or theory. I do not believe in magic, though I believe in believing that it can be done.

## II. Life in an ice box

Some say the world will end in fire,  
Some say in ice.  
From what I've tasted of desire  
I hold with those who favor fire.  
But if it had to perish twice,  
I think I know enough of hate  
To say that for destruction ice  
Is also great  
And would suffice.

*-Fire and Ice by Robert Frost*

She sits in the apartment and hears the silence behind the roar of traffic outside her window. Even in rush hour, the stillness of solitude dominates her world on both sides of the glass.

It is scary sometimes even though she tries to remind herself that it is just an illusion. Even in this vast country with its relatively small population it is hard to really be alone.

There are people in all the units of this building and people in the buildings that surround it. The cars are full of people, even if pedestrians only pass by occasionally. Right now, the stores, offices, schools and community centres are abuzz with human activity. The mail carrier, telephone and internet bring messages from various sources.

"It's quiet in here but there is a world out there," she reminds herself. "It's just that the world seems so far away from me most of the time," she reflects. The spaces between people are usually immense chasms of uncertainty. "It's the uncertainty that can ring loud."

Everyone is contained in their cool containers. Funny to think that they stay there to keep warm, ponders the woman.

Silence is the tactile gnawing unknown or unacknowledged existence that irritates the brain and skin. Silence is the hum of traffic and transmitter, the ocean waves and air currents. It tickles the skin and prickles the mind. Silence is the murmuring awareness of permanence and mutability together. It is the knowledge of infinity and transience resting but alive at the back of our minds.

It is our—humankind's—fault that we detect the silence. Rather, we imagine it. Time is a construct. We decided to measure space. We invent labels even for those things, the voids. If we did not know, we could carry on without pausing to glance around and wonder every so often.

We know something about the subatomic level of existence. We know something about the particles constantly shooting through space, the birth and collapse of galaxies, the movement of magnetic forces and planetary rotations, and so on. So we anticipate that

space and silence is an illusion for scientists say that something is there in the voids. What, we do not always know. We guess.

We know about the silence. We look at the pictures of celestial bodies in the surrounding universe disseminated by NASA and carry the images around with us. The consequence of this vulgar knowledge of the heavens is fear. Silence is anxiety in motion along the spine, under the skin and in the pit of the stomach. The individual person's movement and those of his compatriots and colleagues, the co-inhabitants of human society, resonate across the webs of societal interconnection causing ripples in our overlapping pools of existence. The tension is absorbed. "What does it mean?" we wonder. "What are they about?"

The silence cannot be innocent, we conjecture; it must be threatening. People have become used to hearing lies, the lies of politicians and advertisements, the false prophecies and hopes of religions and spiritual leaders, doctors and lawyers, the lies of happy faces and school books and non-profit organizations and parents, the lies of thieves and murderers. The silence is a monster in the darkness of our blindness and lurks to taunt us from between the shadows and lines that are supposed to demarcate what is and what is not. People have become used to expecting danger.

But she thinks that people live just far enough away from her self that their movements do not reach her. Tiles squeak and heavy heels pound above her and cause one window loose in its frame to rattle but she thinks that she remains unmoved. Sounds drip along the curve of her skull onto her back and trickle onto the floor for her feet to trample. Some babbling annoyance can be detected from here out in the hallway before the hinges of a door groan and its latch registers a complaint as it opens and shuts. The school nearby emits a wry low-pitched buzz when the hours of class start and conclusion are struck. The outside noises of the beast scratching the pane of her existence enough for her mind to coldly note the activity but she is determined not to let them make a scratch on her. She is even immune from the laughter and calls of the children alternately swallowed and disgorged during the daytime by the school.

You see, there is contempt in her gaze. Everywhere she goes, she carries contempt like a shield, thin as it is, and conceals the dagger of arrogance, false as it is, maintaining an attitude of smooth and calm wisdom, perforated and threadbare as it is, a stoic and righteous tolerance, as shaky as it is, in the face of modern indignities, injustices and calamities.

Even the cat does not penetrate her consciousness although she sees him and knows about his existence. He moves in synch with her and his cries and scratches are predictable. Though with her, his life is outside hers. He has, really, become an extension of her, so ingrained are their parallel habits of cohabitation. Her husband was like that, she thinks.

She gives the lunch dishes a light scrub and decides to wipe them dry right away rather than let the moisture evaporate as they lay in the dish rack awhile like she usually does. She is tightening her regime of neatness.

She grabs the house keys from the hook under the upper kitchen cupboard, looks down at herself to check the condition of her clothing, and, satisfied with her appearance, exits the apartment for a quick march to the mailbox downstairs in the lobby. She returns and hurriedly closes the door, twisting the deadbolt shut and turning to pad around the corner of the hallway and across the kitchen floor in her boot-like slippers and place the envelopes and flyers on the table. Having returned the keys to their roost, she sits down at the table to peruse the day's deliveries.

There is an envelope from a charity addressed to her among them. She glances up at the glossy calendar on the wall to recall her established pattern of giving, as per the season and issue of the day. With a finger to the chin, she proceeds to turn her attention back to the same envelope. But she must rise to fetch the letter opener from its place in the desk drawer in her room.

In her room, she hesitates for half a second, arrested by the question as to why she does not just perform this task at the desk. "The kitchen is cozier and closer to the apartment entrance," she reasons, opening and closing the desk drawer quickly and turning swiftly to return to the kitchen table. As she sits back into the chair, she remembers that the desk had been her husband's work space and the kitchen hers. Resistant to the gender division of the household as she had always been, she had accepted this arrangement for the sake of convenience regardless. She may not be particularly religious, but she likes order. She is a woman born in Canada and raised there during the regimented years of the Second World War and no amount of participation in the domestic rebellions that followed that period could undo that fact.

She glances over the newsletter about the ongoing campaigns of the Red Cross accompanied by photographs showing scenes of crises here and there. It is not necessary to read it. She gets the gist already. "Doesn't everybody get the gist by now?" she would ask the air in mild anger. "How much does one have to know, eh?"

She rises to retrieve the cheque book from the desk drawer. She is a long time contributor, although she refuses the requests for "PACs," the regular monthly contribution by automatic bank account withdrawals or credit card payments. Aside from the tainted blood scandal, there have been no reports of funny financial business, so she dutifully completes the cheque form for the annual donation of one hundred dollars, lifting her chin in proud and righteous self-assignment of important duty.

Her husband left a well-stocked bank account and she receives her portion of the pension. She used to nag everyone about saving money. However, one of her daughters and even her son continue to approach her about money in the rare moments of contact with them. Well, easy for her to say, indeed, for she only worked part-time for a few years sprinkled throughout her adult life from her college days to midlife. She was and still is mostly dependent on her husband's income and is long since resigned to that realization. Her own government pension income is a miserable sum.

While she wishes to live correctly, she does not want the information from the charity. She

throws it and the junk mail onto the floor, an old habit she repeats even though it is an uncomfortable strain to pick it up for disposal after.

Perhaps she is becoming dumb as well as deaf. Her friends from across the years phone her periodically to report the latest developments of this issue and that, or come to escort her to one event or another but she mostly listens without hearing, merely nodding and grunting in response. She catches the drift well enough without hearing it. "There is simply no more need for so much talk," she figures.

She has been well schooled in keeping mute. She grew up in an era when children were best seen and not heard, according to most adults in positions of authority. In school, they were supposed to work in silence and not speak unless asked to, for a child would get paddled with the yardstick if they dared to speak up. Opinions were generally unwelcome, as were expressions of glee or any other emotion, especially dislike. Politeness was the golden rule. You were not supposed to dislike things. Fathers and teachers and ministers knew best, not little children.

It seemed that life was always putting her in situations that kept her muzzled. She was forced to go to church for a few years. At least there were occasions to sing something, even if the songs seemed to suck the life out of people instead of fortifying them as they were said to do. The songs and prayers, though spoken aloud, were not expressions of herself. At work and to and from work on the buses, people could share silence and not much else, most of the time. They had to listen to commands and follow them without answer. She had not been one to linger in the washrooms to gossip and make fun of others, like some of the girls at work. There were hazards to that activity that she could not afford to risk. She had been tempted, out of curiosity, to strike up conversations on the bus but anyone who spoke up during the commute seemed odd. Then there was her life at home with the little ones — years spent with little souls who could not talk with her as she wished until they passed the toddler stage, at which point they were placed in school as early as possible.

All that one could let loose at times were wisps of vapor escaping from the fires deep within. People were not supposed to expose the fires, and they certainly were not supposed to talk about them. Boys and men could get away with doing that sometimes, but it certainly not ladylike.

You most certainly do not expose your problems if you were to be respected. Prattling on about one's difficulties was a sign of weakness, so she and her peers were taught. Grown-ups were to maintain the appearance of faultless strength. Most certainly were mothers, of all people.

By now, being quiet is a well entrenched habit. When her children call her, she tries to listen but understands little. She wants to know but their lives do not make much sense anymore. "Well, they don't bother to communicate much anymore, anyway," she shrugs.

The photographs they send do not speak. The letters are routine politeness and fake cheeriness. For that reason, the letter from Lucy, her eldest daughter, does not warm her

much. She can guess that it does not say anything. After slicing open that envelope, she examines the letter inside. "God, five pages of the gibberish!" She drops the contents onto the tabletop. She does not want to hear the patronizing tone, the indecipherable details of the family life, so far away, nor the platitudes of dutiful daughter speaking to Mother.

Neither Lucy nor her other kids have the grandchildren send something, or at least put it in their names, even if only to humour her. "They are old enough to write now. They should do that," she chides.

Partly out of vanity but more because she likes to be well prepared and orderly should they arrive at her doorstep, she remains living in the two bedroom apartment with its guest bedroom. At least a friend comes to stay now and then. But they, her own flesh and blood, rarely pay visits. "We're busy with this"..."we wanted to \_ but that came up and we couldn't"..."maybe in a couple of months"..."blah, blah, blah whatever," she would mutter to herself whenever she thought about their absences. She could not hear the excuses anymore if she tried. "Maybe that is why she cannot comprehend much else about them now," she muses. So she does not ask questions of them anymore either.

She scans the pages of the flyers. It is just a habit. She rarely actually buys anything other than groceries and basic household supplies anymore. Besides she can just call the supermarket whenever she runs out of laundry powder or shampoo and request an addition to her monthly order of supplies. Lucy took her to get some new clothing last year and she does not need anything else for the time being. She never changes her grocery order, which is brought to her door regularly like clockwork by a nice boy once a week. He even unpacks the heavy bags in the kitchen for her, all for the two dollar charge afforded to seniors by the supermarket. She only makes a monthly trip the eight block distance to pay her tab with cash at the supermarket, once she has withdrawn her regular monthly budgeted "allowance" from the cash machine inside its entry way, pushing to the front of the line at the store service wicket to complete the payment then exiting the store rapidly to meet the taxi she has booked that is waiting for her. She has never heard of anyone being robbed here before, but she is not willing to take a chance.

She tosses the junk mail into the recyclables container that sits on the floor at the end of the counter close to the table. She goes to the bedroom for a third time to take out an envelope and a postage stamp from the desk drawer and returns to the kitchen table where she places the donation form and cheque inside the envelope, folds its flap and turns it over so that she can stick the stamp onto a corner of its face. It takes her a moment to separate the stamp from the film by picking it with a thumb nail before she sticks it onto the envelope. The depiction on the stamp is of a Canadian flower, which she respects, unlike the mini portraits of the Queen, which she prefers to position upside-down on the postal envelopes.

It is time for her daily walk and she will make her destination the post office today. Not that it is necessary for the purpose of posting the envelope; there is a mail box only two blocks away. However, she wants to walk a certain distance, or, rather, for a certain amount of time in order to get in a little exercise.

Setting the addressed and stamped envelope on the little table in the hallway, she slides open the closet door to access her coat, scarf, hat and shoes. She dons the hat first, twisting around to check herself in the small mirror hanging above the little table. "Oh. I do need a little powder," she notices. So she goes into the bathroom and reaches for powder case, opens it and removes the brush to dab at the powder and stroke her face gently with it before the vanity mirror. She stops for an instant. "Ridiculous. Who will notice me? Why do I care?"

Packing up the powder case, she returns to the hall closet and dons the scarf followed by the coat. The Hush Puppies resting on the mat in front of the door, she slips her socked feet into them, only needing to push a little to get them on properly.

Taking the keys off the table with one hand, she turns the deadbolt then the door knob with the other and steps into the outer hallway, turning hastily to face the door and turn the lock into the closed position with her key. She then removes the gloves from her left pocket and dresses her hands.

Passing by the elevator she enters the stairway and takes the two short flights down to the apartment lobby, and quickly leaves the building. A cold wind greets her as she steps outside and moves along the bare damp sidewalk.

It is winter. No matter, it always seems like winter all the time. Her surroundings always appear colourless, washed in tones of brown and grey. Springtime can seem just as bleak. The flowers cannot flirt with her. The green growth cannot seduce her. "Do other people feel like that, or is it just that spring has nothing to offer the aged?" she wonders, for the umpteenth time. It is not the kind of thing that people say, she knows. She does not want to talk about it however much she wants to learn the answer.

Looking around, she can detect no changes to the environment since her last walk here. Nobody is in sight. Thankfully, there were people of all ages residing in the vicinity of her home but the downside of that situation is their absence during the day. Few women stayed at home all the time, whether they worked for a living or not. Children were whisked into daycares and school and other kinds of learning programs at every opportunity. If a pair of eyes catches hers, she averts the look and tucks her chin in, eyes fastened on the broken concrete ahead of her.

"You barely saw a sign of their pet animals nowadays," she observes. "Instead, you just see silence. Nothing speaks much to you, around here at least." If she did not need to stretch her limbs, she would just stay indoors rather than endure this cruelty. "Better to at least be somewhere where you can hear yourself, under the circumstances," she tells herself.

Inside her suite, she could pick up the moaning and gurgling of the fridge and notice when its motor stopped. She could notice the drip of the faucet whenever she failed to tighten the tap well enough, or whenever it needed its routine maintenance. She could discern the discussions and music released by the radio or TV, when she chose to turn them on. She could sense the roar of the ceiling fan in the bathroom and the hood fan in the kitchen and

switch them off when they reached the crescendo of her patience. She controls the noise there. It is her dominion. She has learned to prefer her own noise and can stop listening to it when she chooses.

Nowadays, it has become as if the things in her apartment and just outside its doors have learned to shut up, so that she doesn't have to switch motors and circuits on and off herself. They go in and out on their own, it seems. Silence dominates these days.

And so moves her life, a sluggish stream of days that meld one into the other in a dull grind of silence with nothing much ever altering its course. "Pathetic!" she would sometimes declare to herself.

### III. Breaking the ice

Then one day a sound breaks the silence woven by the monotony. It startles her from her concentration on the noon newscast, which is mostly the effort of her eyes to read lips or the news interpreters and follow script and imagery. She jumps slightly causing the remote control to tumble off her knee and the throw to slip off her shoulders. She does not recognize the sensation assaulting her domain at first. But it repeats with persistence until it pierces her consciousness. Someone is buzzing the intercom. "Probably a mistake," she decides as she stands up to lift the receiver from its station on the hallway wall, preparing to fend off the intruder.

"Yes?" she asks the apparatus. Her voice sounds weak and thin, she notes with irritation.

"Mrs. Blaze?" asks a sharp strong voice.

"Perhaps you're mistaken. This is not the Blaze residence," she replies.

"Well," says the voice with a note of exasperation, "Is your name B-L-A-I-S?"

"What now?"

The names of the letters are repeated more sharply. She is surprised to recognize them as the spelling of her own name--well, that of her husband, which she did adopt officially too many years ago to count. "Oh. Yes, it is. I'm Mrs. Blais," she informs the communicator. "But I'm afraid that I do not donate at the door. You may mail me something if you like," she tells it further, doing the best job that she can to be correctly cordial.

"Oh, no, Mrs. Blais," objects the voice. "Your daughter, Lucy Wilson contacted us. We are a service for seniors," it insists. It repeats emphatically with sluggish deliberation, "YOUR DAUGHTER ASKED US TO VISIT YOU."

It is something about her daughter, apparently. This is highly irregular but one never knows. She decides that she had better find out what this is all about. "I'm in 200. Come up."

She is annoyed to hear the buzzing again after having hung up the thing. "Come up!" she reminds them, whoever they are.

"PLEASE OPEN THE DOOR!" shouts the voice

She hesitates but reads the note beside the apparatus. It tells her to press six to let someone in the front door of the building.

She paces the hall and glances around the kitchen and living room. Everything is in order. No dust or trash. She wears her crisp easy-care clothing for every day, the kind that is readily machine washable and dryable, although she prefers to let her things drip dry as much as possible.

Not sure she will hear the knock, she stands by the door and places her palm on the outer panel so that she can be sure when the alien hand strikes the wood. It soon is felt.

Turning the latch to the deadbolt, she pulls the door open a couple of inches. There stand two women, a tallish fiftyish-something woman with a practical bob and in a smart but plain suit and a smaller, younger coloured woman, longish hair tied back and in mauve slacks and a banana yellow fleece jacket. Puzzled, she inquires, "Whom might you be?"

"I'm Ms. Harvey, from a community organization for seniors. Your daughter, Mrs. Wilson, called us. This is Bonnie," says Ms. Harvey in carefully paced clear tones, gesturing to the other woman. They both smile at her. "May we come in and explain further?"

"Well, if you're quick about it. I'm busy, you understand."

"Oh, I do. We won't take long."

She guides them into the living room and points to the sofa as she resumes her seat, this time in an attentive pose, in the armchair. "Do you need water?" she asks, trying to be mindful of her manners but not wishing to appear gullible.

"No, thank you," responds the big one, who is apparently the leader, with a shake of the head. She continues, rising and extending her arm over the coffee table between them to display a business card. "Your daughter, Mrs. Wilson, called our organization. She said that she was concerned because you living alone. She wants someone to visit you once in awhile. That's what Bonnie is here for. How about it?"

She's immediately indignant at the implication that she is so feeble that she needs a helper. "I'm sorry for your trouble, but I manage quite well."

"We know," is the swift answer. "Mrs. Wilson feels that you might enjoy a regular visit. She can take care of little tasks too, if you wish."

"She could talk to me. Anyway, she knows I'm fine."

"She said that she wanted to discuss this but that you don't use the phone much anymore and you don't reply to letters. Anyway, she sent us something to pass along to you." She digs out a manila envelope from the satchel that is strung over her shoulder. Opening the flap and sliding its contents out, she holds up a pale pink sheet of paper.

"Leave it there on the table, would you? I'll read it and get back to you."

"Mrs. Blais, perhaps you may as well get to know Bonnie a little. Tell us how you feel about the proposal later."

"Where are you from, Mrs. Blais?" asks Bonnie sweetly.

“I’m from right here, young lady,” is the slightly indignant answer. Softening at the chance to say something about herself, she adds, “Well, Vancouver, really. My parents moved here from other places in Canada.”

“I see. I’m from the Philippines.”

“You came to make some money for your family, I suppose. Hah! You won’t get rich here, you know.”

Bonnie chuckles slightly. “I know. My family thought it would be a good idea for the sake of the whole family. The Philippines is a very poor place, and I’m responsible for a couple of kids.”

“You mean they’re still over there?”

Bonnie notes a show of interest. She grins. “Yes. I finished in the government nanny program. Now I work for this group. It’s my third year in Canada. So maybe I can have the kids come to Canada if it is working out.”

She makes no further reply.

“Your daughter thinks you’re bored. She is worried that you sit around at home too much. It’s not healthy, she thinks. So I just come to say hi, talk or pass the time with you.”

“When?”

“We think that two times a week would be sufficient, and affordable. Today is Tuesday. How about Tuesdays and Fridays, half a day each time?”

“Oh, am I supposed to give you cash each time?” she asks worriedly, stiffening and retreating further back into her chair defensively.

“Don’t worry, Mrs. Blais. Your daughter is taking care of it. Anyway, we will see if you can get the government subsidy. We’ll talk about that later. Just read the letter from your daughter. Now, would you like Bonnie to stay for a couple of hours today, since she is here already?”

Bonnie is scrutinized up and down. “if she likes, I guess,” she answers with a shrug.

“Wonderful. I’ll leave you two to get acquainted. Bonnie will take the form for our office when it’s ready. It’s there with the letter. She’ll help you with it.”

“The permission form, Mrs. Blais,” says Bonnie kindly in response to the elderly woman’s quizzical expression. “It’s an agreement to have me come see you.”

She nods. Ms. Harvey takes her leave crisply.

“Now, what are we supposed to do? You need a job, I guess. Can’t blame you. So, you can hang around if you want, but just on those two days.”

“Okay,” laughs Bonnie. “I’ll drop by on Tuesday and Friday afternoons. Right?”

“I take walks after lunch. What do you want to do about lunch?”

“That’s all right, I can go with you. I like exercise too. If you want to give me a sandwich or something when I come, I’ll just check this box. If not, I’ll come later, say 1:30, and stay until 5:30.”

“I’m not poor! I can spare a sandwich or two. Oh, dear. I don’t know what you like.”

“I’m not fussy,” says Bonnie politely. “We can see how it goes.”

“Well, think about it dear, and I will order something the next time I order my groceries.” She is disconcerted by the girl’s confident and cheery presence. Finding her bearings, she says unintentionally gruffly, “I missed the news.”

“Sorry. I won’t disturb you next time, ma’am. I can bring a book if you’re too busy to talk,” replies Bonnie somewhat slyly. Part of her job is to win over the clients. She has been trained to expect that they are usually stuck in their routine and consider visits from care aides invasive and uncomfortable. It is common sense to expect that anyway, so she has been trying to size this one up and considers that cheery small talk won’t cut the grade. She picks up on the mention of the news. She decides that this one wants distance and she respects it. She thinks that they can break some ice with talks about current events. She then makes a remark about the issue of a new government policy. She smiles when it triggers a response.

“I shouldn’t discuss this now. It’s time to tidy the kitchen and get the mail. Then I must take my walk.”

“Okay. I can look at a magazine now.” Bonnie is trained to let the client perform her own tasks if she wishes. It is preferable for it keeps them mobile and engaged in life. She has been briefed on this client. According to her profile, the issue is social interaction to keep her from sinking into depression, which can result in more health issues. She lost her husband three years ago. She is nearly 70, a crucial point in the aging process. The children live far away. She is getting deaf and becoming socially withdrawn and apathetic, says the file. “Can I walk with you, ma’am?” She is supposed to stay with the client, but it is always best to seek permission. Some clients get so resentful and angry; she understands, for the presence of a caregiver presumes that the person needs personal care, and that is a hard thing to accept. North Americans are too independent and often lead lonely lives when they don’t have to, but, still, she agrees with the concept of personal autonomy that she has been taught. She concedes that all people, no matter their culture, need some measure of control over their own lives, of course. It is difficult for anybody to accept strangers into their homes. If nobody was around her mother, she would try to have an aide visit her mother. But Bonnie

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