

Sphaerae Mundi

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STEPHEN DRIVES THEIR RENTAL CAR FROM THE AIRPORT down Decarie and along President Kennedy towards Maison Verte, the tiny hotel they've booked on Sherbrooke at Ste. Famille. Change is everywhere, Tannis thinks. McGregor Street has become rue Penfield. Ontario Street is now President-Kennedy Avenue. Sir George Williams has become Concordia. And she and Stephen have changed most of all, Tannis acknowledges, as they make their way up the too narrow winding staircase to the small hotel room on the third floor. Thirty years ago they were a handsome couple with much in common. Both tall, slim, full of vitality, energy, and ideas. Now, she thinks, they are most alike in the compromises they've made.

Inside the room, Stephen opens closets and cabinets, exclaiming over the little soaps and glasses. "*Tabernac*, it's good to be here," he announces. His French is almost non-existent, and his accent worse than hers, but he likes to show off the vocabulary he picked up as a student in Montreal.

Maudit tabernac, she says to herself, wondering why she is carrying the bulkier bag which holds his books and the extra pairs of shoes which, even for this short trip, he insists upon. Stephen is now focused on finding the bottle of scotch he tucked into his briefcase.

"I'm not going down three flights of stairs to find ice," he says. "Are you okay with just a bit of water?"

She nods, and just as she succeeds in dragging the suitcase over to the closet, Stephen reaches out to offer her a drink, with the glass tilting so that scotch splashes across the sleeve of her best silk shirt.

"Oh hell, I'm sorry. Here, I'll mop up the mess," he says flourishing his pocket handkerchief and stumbling so that he spills the contents of his own glass on her shoe.

Wringing out her shirt in the small bathroom, Tannis takes a sip of scotch and studies herself in the mirror. Large green eyes. Good skin. A capable look, if perhaps a bit serious. She should lose ten pounds, but her figure is still good. *Not bad, there's still time*, she thinks. Not entirely sure what she means; time to work things out or time to start again?

"There has to be give and take in a marriage, Tannis," her father had said many years ago when she announced her engagement to Stephen. "You'll find

the lasting value of a marriage appears not at the beginning but later, toward the end. It is a journey, not a destination. And it's how you travel, day by day, that makes the difference." Married thirty years, Tannis considers the give and take business to be problematic.

"Not to put too fine a point on it," she would say to her father now. "It seems to me that I've given, given, given, while Stephen has simply taken. My youth. Energies. Sexuality. Ideas."

"If I'm to be honest," she might say, "I am disappointed with the way it has all turned out. I had high hopes."

Her father has been dead for almost ten years. Gone, like her mother, her brother, her old friends. Like her life here in Montreal, where everything she used to care about is dead, dying, gone to Ontario, or otherwise disappearing. Nor can she talk to Stephen about her feelings of loss, because he thinks everything's fine.

"We've stayed out of jail, out of lawyers' offices, and out of serious debt. There's been no bloodshed, no litigation, no court orders. And there is Kate. What more could you want?"

Tannis steps out on the little balcony. She can just barely see the old houses along Ste. Famille where they lived in the first years of their marriage, before Kate was born. Lovely Kate, now twenty-two years old, at this moment in Cedar, caring for the family house and garden so her parents can celebrate this anniversary in Montreal.

In the morning, a tray is brought to their door and Stephen radiates good cheer as he sets everything out on the coffee table.

"Proper coffee," he observes. "And real croissants. Like Paris."

"In Paris, we'd have darker coffee, *orange pressée*, and that apricot jam that Kate loved so much and which you can't find in any other city. But, hey, it's Montreal. Where would you rather be?"

She does not add that it was he who made the decision to move west, that if it weren't for him she'd still be living here. In this one brief, precious little life that she has. Instead, she sits in silence as they eat everything on the tray, even the extra slices of toast and marmalade.

"Want to come over to McGill with me and poke around the bookstore for a while?" Stephen asks, already planning the day for them both.

"You go ahead. I'll call Luc and Raimonde to check on dinner arrangements, and then I'd like to take a long walk. Let's just meet back here in the afternoon." She needs time alone and she wants to pick up the book she has ordered for

her anniversary present to Stephen, an out-of-print edition of a collection of poems by Robert Creeley, a poet he once admired. Does he have something for her, she wonders? Perfume or bath salts, probably. If he were a gentle patriarch like her father, or a real *mensch* like Luc, he would have an appropriate anniversary present. A pearl necklace. Or no, at her age, maybe the neck is best left alone. A gold ring. A ring with one flawless natural pearl to reflect the perfection of their only child. A pearl. For its light and lustre, and because it is the designated gem for a thirtieth anniversary.

After she picks up Stephen's book, Tannis stops to sit on a bench in St. Louis Square. She closes her eyes for a moment, and recalls Rumi's lines: "Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing. There is a field. I'll meet you there." All cities of a certain age and maturity have such spaces—squares, or commons, or public parks. The green softening the best and concealing the worst of the surrounding dwellings. The shade of trees and hedges. The birds they attract. The sense of community. Montreal is the city of her heart. She believes that. She admires the way it opens up to those who walk its streets, stretching out in every direction, ready to reveal its secrets.

A young couple passes by, arms linked, lingering every little while to embrace. On a nearby bench are a couple of old women, their loose, lined faces intent on an argument while in front of them three small boys play on the grass. One of the boys draws circles on the ground with a stick, while the others shout commands. A dog on a leash barks insanely at a dog that is running free. The air is electric and everything is in movement. A middle-aged man wearing jeans and a white linen shirt saunters past carrying two cups of coffee and a newspaper. *Someone is waiting for him in one of these rooms*, she thinks, returning his smile and feeling her cheeks redden. Once she was such a woman.

She wonders how it will be to meet Luc and Raimonde again. If it had not been for Stephen and Raimonde, something might have happened between her and Luc. Something had happened, in fact, but it was brief, and long ago, so it seems almost unbelievable. What difference could it make now, that other life she briefly contemplated but did not choose?

And so she lives in the little town of Cedar. She remembers long ago, as a child growing up in Vancouver, going with her father to see an exhibition of old globes. What they'd loved best was a small pocket globe about the size of an orange. In the display case, alongside the globe, were the two halves of its casing. Each half was lined inside with celestial zodiac charts. The two pieces could be fitted together to cover the globe, and then opened up to reveal the little

sphere with pea-green seas surrounding golden continents. She had wished she could touch it. Feel the globe being enclosed and encased. The stars closing darkly over the round green and gold planet.

“Like having the world on a string?” her father had joked. “The world in your pocket?” He’d loved it too. The way everything fit together so neatly, the world cozily hidden underneath the sky’s cover.

“I wanted a bigger world,” she would tell her father now. “I didn’t think my life would be so small.”

Stephen stole my spirit, she thinks. A Stephen did my spirit steal . . . Or was it seal? She always forgets the first line of that poem, although never the chill of Wordsworth’s final verse:

No motion has she now, no force;
 She neither hears nor sees;
 Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course,
 With rocks, and stones, and trees.

Has Stephen “sealed” her spirit? *A slumber did my spirit seal*, she remembers now. The word is “seal.” It’s true, in a way, that she’d been slumbering before she met Stephen. And perhaps she’s never really awakened? But briefly, around the time of the affair with Luc, she’d had an idea of a person she thought she could become.

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LUC AND RAIMONDE LIVE IN THE SAME RENTED APARTMENT they’ve had for more than twenty years. Eight and one-half rooms on rue Berri. An area which had been cheap and has become trendy. Luc now teaches psychology at McGill, and Raimonde is at last earning money from her writing. They could afford to buy a house, but instead have put their money into a flat in Paris to which one or the other periodically goes for extended periods of work or study.

Raimonde stands on the balcony, calling “Hello, hello,” holding their old dog, Mondo, in her arms. “*Enfin*, here they are, Mondo. Mondo has been worried about you,” she declares. “She thought you’d become lost in the Metro, but, no, I see you have a rental car.”

Their apartment is as it was, except more overrun with books and papers. Books stacked high against colourful walls that are almost completely covered by prints and framed posters. Hardwood floors, recently stripped. Skylights.

Mirrors. Futon couch, glass coffee tables, bright Scandinavian studio chairs. Portable things. Nothing you couldn't leave behind.

"Why are you staying in a hotel?" Luc asks, after shaking Stephen's hand, hugging Tannis and kissing her on both cheeks. "You should be staying with us."

"It's handy to be right downtown, Tannis replies, "and fun to be back in the old area. I walked around all afternoon, looking at the renovations. Did you know that our old laundromat is now a chic little restaurant? And the scrubby backyards and decks have turned into elegant courtyards and beautiful secret gardens."

"There are always secrets, isn't that right, Mondo?" Raimonde is stroking Mondo, but her narrowed eyes are on Luc. "Mondo says men are full of secrets and only dogs are true."

Luc, leaner and older, is even more attractive at this age. Raimonde, despite her dark hair and careful makeup, looks drawn. Tannis wonders if she's had work done on her neck. It looks tauter than when they last met five years ago. She remembers Raimonde, when they were in their twenties, justifying the amount of money she spent on skin cream. "I know I'll always have good legs, even when I'm fifty," she'd said at that time. "The legs are the last to go. But once you get crepey neck you're through. No more affairs. No one wants you anymore. I couldn't bear that."

As always, they settle into the large kitchen around the refectory table upon which Raimonde has arranged plates of dark bread, runny cheese, apples and olives. Tannis admires again the high ceilings, the old windows with their tiny frames. A deep blue plate holds six streaky red apples, and in the background a countertenor is singing.

"Daniel Taylor was a student at McGill and now is world-renowned," Luc says, "and his rendition of Dowland's *Lachrimae Antiquae* is so beautiful I can't listen to it without weeping."

Raimonde snickers. "It's melancholic," she says, slowly coring an apple and cutting it into small slices that she arranges on the edge of the cheese plate.

"Yes, but a pleasing melancholy. It helps us recover from our own sadness. You know," Luc adds, turning to Tannis, "Robert Burton was a contemporary of Dowland. This is the kind of music he might have had in mind when he said men used music 'as a remedy to alter their grieved minds.'"

Tannis clears her throat. She talks about Kate's studies for a fine arts degree and asks about their son, Alexandre. Luc explains that Alexandre is a member of the International Socialists and is constantly at meetings or demonstrations, often not returning home for days at a time.

"This boy is a real revolutionary," Luc says. "More of a Bolshevik. He does not believe separation is the answer."

"But maybe separation is the answer," Raimonde interrupts. "Tell me the truth, Tannis, if you were twenty years old now, would you choose Stephen as your husband?"

"Raimonde, *cherie*, let us go on with our dinner. Leave our good friends alone. They are celebrating!"

"Nobody has remarked on this interesting little Merlot," Stephen points out, as he opens the second bottle. Tannis can see that Stephen wishes he'd brought less expensive wine. She notices him grimace when Raimonde tops hers up with soda water.

"Tannis and I would certainly choose each other," he says, edgily. He quotes Tannis's father's observation about marriage not being a destination but something that emerges from years spent together. "We travel well as a couple," Stephen says. "We enjoy the journey."

"It is not so with us," Raimonde states, emptying her glass and refilling it. "Our years together have driven us apart. We are on completely different paths."

"That's not true," cries Luc. "Yes, there are difficulties, but we do come together. I like Stephen's idea. Sometimes the terrain is difficult, but we are fellow travellers, are we not? Look at our friends who have come from the edge of the Pacific to visit us!"

"Everything has to do with how we travel," says Stephen. "The history of this country is, in fact, the story of transportation overcoming the challenges of geography."

"That," says Raimonde, "is total shit. You are as dishonest as Luc." She fills Tannis's glass and her own, crosses her elegant legs, and lights a cigarette.

Tannis admires Raimonde's intensity, her self-absorption and her freedom. Envy her life. The Cedar house, with its endless maintenance, housekeeping and gardening, seems like a geriatric dwelling in contrast to the two Godbout residences which are both in real cities and have no gardens, no maintenance. Luc and Raimonde, despite their arguments, are freer, true to themselves and to their work.

"Our relationship is unique, *chou*. It's special. Admit it." Luc has moved to stand in front of Raimonde, and leans forward to cup her face in his hands, but she twists away, almost shouting.

"No, Luc! We once had something special. Now the meaning is gone and will never return. You can't put the pearl back into the oyster."

“Can you help me, Tannis? Stephen? Can you straighten this crazy woman out?”

“Happiness is a matter of motivation. Or perception. Sometimes it takes almost nothing for things to improve.” Stephen recounts a Hasidic parable he recently read that explains the difference between heaven and earth.

“According to this story, the food in heaven is the same as the food we have here. The clothes are the same as those we wear. The houses are the same. The children’s rooms are the same.” He waves his arm to include everything in the room. “Everything the same, only it’s just a little bit different.”

“Exactly,” Luc agrees. “The difference between heaven and hell may be little. Sometimes a very small change can transform everything.”

“Or make it worse,” adds Raimonde. “There is no brilliance in our marriage any more. You would rather spend your time with the girl with the bulging eyes.”

Luc makes a helpless gesture, raising his hands palms upward. An offering.

“There is nothing to it. Why will you not believe me?”

“Because you lie. Look at me, Luc. What do you see?”

“I see you, Raimonde.”

“You don’t understand. I want you to really look at me.” She drapes her arm over the back of her chair and looks at Luc accusingly. “What do you see, Luc?”

“I see my wife. The woman I love, more than anything in this life.”

“You are lying. That is total shit. If I’m the woman you love, why do you fuck your bulging-eyed research assistant?” She turns to Stephen and says, “I know he is your friend, but he is a false man. I’ve done everything for him. Made a home. Taught him about love. Given him his child. And he deceives me with an ugly mistress. Why should I stay with him?”

The room is quiet. Tannis sees that Stephen is angry and will not answer. Luc goes to change the CD and Raimonde leaps to her feet. She snatches the Dowland disc from him and strikes it repeatedly against the edge of the table until it snaps in two.

“This,” she says, “is how you have treated our marriage. This is how I will treat everything you treasure!”

Luc cries out, and Stephen jumps to his side. The room is charged with dangerous possibility.

“Tell me the truth, Tannis,” says Raimonde, opening what must be a fourth bottle of wine. “Never mind the motivational lecture. Tell me what I should do. As my friend. We were always the best of friends, weren’t we? Don’t you remember?”

Tannis doesn't remember. What she remembers is that everything with Raimonde was always about Raimonde. Tannis was overshadowed. You were always the centre of the *mondo*, *Raimondo*, she would like to reply. If not for Raimonde, might not Tannis now be with Luc?

"Just stop, everyone," Tannis says sharply. "Think about the present. Thirty years ago we didn't know what we were doing. We wanted to take risks, yet somehow we ended up making compromises. We had to raise children, pay mortgages, keep jobs. I had to stay on Vancouver Island, no matter how much I hated it." For a moment she is back in Cedar in the unfinished kitchen, waiting for Kate to come home from school, wishing that her life would start up again. "But now, at last, we're free, aren't we? Our children are grown. We've done well, for the most part. We even have a bit of money. When we go to bed tonight, we should imagine what we most want from the life we have left. When we wake up in the morning, we can choose."

She lights a cigarette, and glances over at Stephen through a curl of smoke. He looks tired. Old. She imagines herself returning to this table in the morning, radiant and purposeful and, with a quick glance around the room, turning to Luc and saying, "I choose you. I choose *you*." What would he answer? How would Stephen respond?

Luc says "I need fresh air," and heads for the door, gesturing for Stephen to join him. "It's time to take Mondo around the block."

Tannis looks at Raimonde and sees something like triumph in her dark eyes as she raises a glass to the two men.

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EARLY IN THE MORNING TANNIS AND STEPHEN AWAKEN to the sounds of men shouting and barking at each other. *Chalice! Merde! Tabernac!* Every kind of mechanical noise. A cement truck and maybe a garbage truck. Things being smashed. For a moment, they are surprised to find themselves sleeping on the lumpy sofa bed in Luc's study, until they piece together the last of their drunken conversations before they claimed exhaustion and Luc insisted that it was too late for them to drive to the hotel.

Stephen draws back the curtain, letting the rising sun stream into the room. He dresses quickly, saying he wants to leave before the others awaken. Tannis struggles to her feet and pulls her wrinkled dress back over the underwear she has slept in.

As they reach the door, Raimonde appears in her short black nightgown, Mondo at her heels as always. "Must you go? Can't you stay another day? My God, we never really did have dinner last night, did we? Mondo insists we have at least one meal together. Stay. Mondo and I will make breakfast for us all."

"No, Raimonde, please don't. Next time we'll have longer. Or you'll come to us. But now we must leave. Stephen has a meeting to go to this morning and I want to go to the exhibition at the Musée de Beaux-Arts."

Hugging her at the door, Tannis is aware of Raimonde's small, firm breasts and a not unattractive smell of sweat, wine, perfume, tobacco and sex. It takes her back. Twenty years. Thirty. Luc will never leave Raimonde, she realizes, nor she him. They will carry on, abrasive as always, and Raimonde will always be top dog. Like Mondo. *Grando Raimondo*, she smiles to herself. *Les jeux sont faits*.

Out on the street in the early morning light, Tannis laughs out loud, remembering how she had tried to make everyone choose a new life. As though, like the heroine of a Shakespeare comedy, she could reverse and reconnect them all as they once might have been. "There was a lover and his lass". And yet, the previous night surprised her, and strengthened her spirit. As if something, at last and almost without intention, had been established.

While Stephen drives carefully through the wakening streets, Tannis, still a little drunk and melancholy, imagines her life as a patchwork in which every piece will ultimately fall into place. Like the little pocket globe, with the night sky lifting up and closing down. There are ways of holding all the disparate pieces together, however tentatively.

In the distance she hears the wail of a siren. The outside world stretches before her, filled with uncertainty, collision, pain, impermanence. Things are being broken, shattered. She imagines someone answering a telephone call, friends making casseroles, writing out cards. Thinks of how, in an instant, everything can turn! "Roll'd round in earth's diurnal course. With rocks, and stones, and trees." And there is no way of knowing where it will lead. In the end, she might choose Stephen, still, now, after all these years. Stephen, Kate. The life they've made. There is so much at stake. She decides that when she gets back to the hotel she'll make a list of the things she learned on this trip. She writes it out in her mind. *What I learned from my time in Montreal. There are always things to discover. Good manners matter. Ego doesn't. The past is real, and the future uncertain. You shouldn't mix good wine with soda water. . . .*

Shivering, Tannis touches Stephen's arm but says nothing, simply gazes out at the brick houses, row on row. At the tiny balconies, their picturesque staircases.

Long ago Stephen would run up such stairs two at a time and draw her to him, like a door to a latch, like a hook to an eye.

Maybe, she thinks, that's all there can be. Simply a drawing together, despite the endless giving and taking that is always so disproportionate and so unfair. She looks out the window and stares at the wrought iron staircases. Their lovely curves and counter-curves make an enigmatic script along the edge of the street ahead.