

Nerissa

by Barry R. Taylor

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He parked the car at the edge of the gravel lot, turned off the engine. For a minute he sat still, watching the lazy waves roll onto the beach below. Behind him, the summer sun was dipping toward the tree tops. He opened the door and replaced his formal shoes and black socks with a pair of leather sandals sitting on the seat beside him. He rolled up the cuffs of his trousers. Then he left the car to descend nine worn, wooden steps onto the sand.

The breeze off the ocean was cool and welcome. The tide was in. Thin sheets of seawater spread across the sand to a high-tide line marked by shells and pebbles. The low sun cast sparkles of green and silver across the sea.

She was waiting in her usual place, sitting on a driftwood log polished as smooth as varnish by the waves. She smiled when she saw him. “You came,” she said.

For a moment he didn’t reply. Every time he saw her he was struck anew by her beauty. She had never told him her age, but she looked young. Blonde hair so bright it nearly glowed wound in a loose, swirling braid far down her back. Eyes of grey-blue and infinite depth, like the sea, set in an angel’s face. Slender figure as streamlined as a dolphin, yet with feminine curves that invited the eye and excited the blood. Long, shapely legs and narrow feet. She was dressed as she always was, in an iridescent maillot covered by a diaphanous wrap that shadowed her figure only enough to make it more beguiling. A deep blue stone on a chain around her neck was her only jewelry.

“I had to come,” he said at last. He sat down beside her.

Her smile was pure magic. “I’m glad you did,” she said. “Why are you all dressed up?”

He flipped open his formal jacket as if noticing it for the first time. The shirt underneath was white and ruffled. “Rehearsal dinner,” he explained. “I . . . slipped away.”

Now her voice was concerned. “Will you get in trouble? Will Cheryl notice?”

He shrugged. “Probably. It doesn’t matter. I had to see you again.”

She laid a hand on his knee; her fingernails glistened like mother-of-pearl. “I don’t want to get you in trouble. But I am so glad you came.”

“Nerissa, I – ” he began, but she shook her head.

“Not so soon,” she protested. She leaned her head against his shoulder. “Let’s sit and watch the water for a while.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes, watching the waves, listening to the gentle pulse of water lapping the shore. Before them lay the ocean, smooth-surfaced and deep, all its mysteries hidden below. Behind them the land rose upward, treed and rock-strewn and complicated. They

sat on the sandy interface between two worlds, warmed by the sun on their backs, cooled by the breeze on their faces. The sun slipped a little closer to the trees.

“Can you see the stars out here?” she asked, when the sea had begun to turn bronze in the sun.

“Of course. We’re a long way from any city lights that spoil the night sky. On a clear night you can see stars all across the sky. It’s spectacular.”

“I would love to see that, even once,” she murmured. “I could stay. We could spend tonight together, watching the stars – I could stay.”

He shook his head. “You would be in pain.”

“I wouldn’t mind. The pain – it goes away after a while.” She kicked the sand with one bare foot. “I so want to stay with you.”

“And I would love to stay with you.” His voice was heavy with regret.

She lifted her head, fixed him with those deep blue eyes. “Then let’s do it. Let’s stay here all night and watch the stars. Let me stay with you. Forever.”

He heaved a great sigh. “Nerissa, you know you can’t stay past sundown. Your people – it’s forbidden.”

“I don’t care about that!” Her eyes flashed. “I don’t care about rules and tradition or anything. I love my family and I love my world but I will leave it all behind to be with you. Just say you’ll let me stay.”

He was silent for a long time. When he spoke again, his voice was soft and sad. He said, “Nerissa, in the past few weeks I have learned a couple of important lessons about life. The first is that the human heart is vast. It is possible for a man to love two women at once, to love them both deeply and honestly and equally. You saved my life, Nerissa. I was drowning. I would have drowned, right here on this beach, but for you. You brought me back to life, to land, to breathing air and seeing the sun. You showed me sacrifice and kindness when I thought there was none left in the world. Then you kept coming back to see me, to make sure I was all right, to spend time with me and listen to me and my selfish pain. You did this even though you didn’t have to and your family disapproved and your culture forbids it – and it hurt you every time.

She said nothing. She was looking down, not meeting his eyes.

“But you see, there’s more to it. I was already drowning, you know, even before that day when I decided to walk into the sea. I was drowning in my own sorrow and my shattered expectations and my deepening conviction that life was shallow and pointless and full of pain. It was Cheryl who saved me from that, saved me from drowning in my own self-pity. Cheryl came back after I thought she had gone forever, and mended a heart I thought was forever broken. She showed me a better world, a world where hope still lives and I can feel useful and worthwhile. I love you, Nerissa. I love Cheryl too.”

She wrapped her arms around him, shaking, and he knew she was crying. He said, “The other lesson I’ve learned is that life is full of choices, and most of them aren’t easy. A man can

love two women, I know that now, but he can only share a life with one. At some point he has to choose. There is so much between us, Nerissa. We come from different cultures, different peoples, different worlds. You are breaking all the rules just being here with me. And if you stay the night, if you are still here with me when the sun comes up – you can never go back.”

She looked up at him then. The tears sliding down her cheeks sparkled like diamonds in the low-angled sun. They shattered in prisms of colour on the sand below. She said, “I can accept not going back if I can stay here with you. Always.”

He shook his head. “You say that now, and I know you mean it, but it cannot last. Sooner or later you would regret your decision. You would miss your family, your people, your life. Everything here is foreign to you, and it always will be. We live in different worlds. You must return to yours. I must try to find purpose and happiness in mine.”

For many heartbeats the only sound was the waves sliding over the sand. More tears sparkled on her cheeks. Then: “Cheryl, does she make you happy?”

“Yes. Yes she does. She is my match in every way. I think it is magic that she even found me. Magic of a different kind.”

Nerissa fingered the blue stone hanging around her neck. It glowed as if lit from within. “I think I always knew this couldn’t last,” she said. “Love like ours is utterly taboo among my people. Still I hoped – I hoped that somehow – we could stay together – and see the stars.” The rainbow of tears began falling again.

He held her close, sharing her sorrow. Her breathing was the rhythm of waves along the shore. At length he whispered, “The sun is almost down.” Long shadows draped across the sand.

She nodded. She sat up straight. She touched his face with one hand. “It’s time for me to go” she said. “May you and Cheryl find much happiness. But God knows I will always love you.” She leaned over to plant a single kiss on his cheek.

Then she rose to her feet, clutching the blue stone in one hand. She tossed off her wrap, let it drift down onto the wet sand. She strode into the sea. Her hair slid out of its braid as she walked, until it was falling in thick, free tresses like a golden waterfall down her shoulders and into the water. She looked back only once, fixing him with those ocean-deep eyes when the waves were swirling around her waist. Then she steeped her hands above her head and dove gracefully into the sea. He caught a glimpse of golden scales shimmering in the last rays of the sun. Then he was alone.

He stayed there on the driftwood log for a long time, looking out over the waves, until the sun set entirely and night shadows began to grow across the sand. He picked up her discarded wrap, pressed it against his face for a few seconds, then carried it with him as he walked back to the car.



Cache and Carry

by Barry R. Taylor

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Mirel stepped off the bus and began to make her way down the street. Her destination was a chain grocery store about a block away. The day was cold, with patchy rain. Mirel didn't mind. Wet weather gave her reason to wear her heavy black coat. She watched people come and go through the glass doors as she crossed the parking lot. The store was busy. She had timed her arrival carefully.

She passed through the doors into the artificial world of the store. She selected a small cart, set her handbag and her tote bags in it, and began to work her way down the aisles. The other shoppers around her noticed only a small, older woman with a slight stoop and a deliberate gait, wild black hair touched with grey, if they noticed her at all. The anonymity suited Mirel's purpose. She didn't want to stand out.

Mirel had been on the planet for almost six decades and none of them had been easy. She lived alone in an adequate, rent-controlled apartment and travelled by bus or on foot. She got by on social assistance, part-time work and her wits. She had been on an aeroplane once in her life, and that had been decades earlier. The new world had never quite lived up to the promise that induced her to leave the old one.

Food was always a problem. Rent and utilities ate up much of her slender income, leaving too little for other necessities. She used every device to extend her diet. Herbs crowded her windowsills. She worked a community garden plot, and another, secret plot behind her building. She gathered berries and wild mushrooms. She used the food bank only in desperation: she disliked hand-outs.

Meat was generally too expensive, but she had devised a work-around for that too. She stopped to examine a small package of ground beef. She held it up to the light, peering at the label. Too costly. She shook her head as she set it back in the rack. At the same time, her free hand picked up a second package and slipped into one of the big pockets inside her coat. She continued on her way.

Mirel's progress through the store was a running calculation of several tallies at once. She mentally summed the total cost of the items in her cart, while also monitoring the bulk and mass she would have to carry to the bus stop. She simultaneously made quick decisions about when to slip something into her coat. The pockets were capacious.

Mirel's problem was that of the small fish, which faces the dilemma of obtaining its own food while avoiding being eaten by a big fish. The big fish here, of course, was store security. Mirel had learned well how to be inconspicuous. She spread her shopping among half a dozen stores, some of them long bus rides away. She shopped when the stores were busy, hiding

herself in the school of other fish. She made herself seem frail and harmless. She turned her back on security cameras and made her moves beneath the cover of her coat. She paid for anything bulky, smelly or noisy.

Her daughter Lucia, who still called almost every day, had tried to convince her that she was stealing. Mirel would have none of it. “When the crows ate the corn seeds in our fields, did we call them thieves?” she demanded.

“Yes!” Lucia replied.

“Nonsense. They were hungry animals trying to feed themselves. That is not stealing. Besides, if the stores don’t want people to take things why do they lay everything out in the open, under bright lights and all. Practically begging people to help themselves.”

“Mama,” said Lucia, and Mirel could hear her sighing from two provinces away, “the stores are trusting you and everybody else to not steal stuff. When you violate that trust you make food more expensive for everybody.”

“Oh go on. These stores are all gigantic conglomerates! They can’t possibly care if a few bits go missing.”

Another sigh, longer this time. “I’ll send some money as soon as I can, Mama.”

Lucia did send money whenever she could, but she had her own rent to pay. And soon she would have Mirel’s grandchild to feed. Mirel saw her overcoat discounts as essential frugality.

She finished gathering as many essentials as she could carry and afford in a few minutes. The next step was deciding which checkout line to join. Mirel never used self-checkout and always paid in cash. The clerk was critical: she needed someone who wouldn’t look too closely at the stiff way she moved or how heavily her coat hung on her small frame. A young man, probably a student working part time, was at the till in the third lane. He was processing groceries with bored efficiency, hardly looking at the customers. Perfect. She joined the short queue.

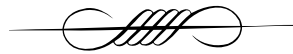
When her turn came, Mirel loaded her groceries onto the belt, then immediately moved to the other end. “I’ll pack them myself, thank you,” she said to the clerk, who barely looked up. Loading her own totes gave Mirel a reason to turn away from the clerk, so her open coat wouldn’t betray her. High summer, when her coat itself would look out of place, was a meatless season.

The clerk read out the total. It more or less matched her running tally, but still made her wince. She paid quickly, took the receipt and then immediately hefted her tote bags. “Need a hand with those?” the clerk asked, surprising her.

“I’m fine, thank you,” she replied, somewhat tartly, although the bags were heavy. She began to make her way toward the door. Experience taught her to avoid complacency. Once, crossing the parking lot after shopping, she had been tagged by a store employee who must have seen something as she walked out. Mirel had been forced to use surprise, the last-ditch defense

of the small fish: she turned on the young guard and let fly a stream of shrill invective in Romani that struck him like a physical slap. The guard backed off. Mirel didn't go back to that store for a long time.

She heaved her two totes to the exit. Outside it was raining. It would be a long, cold walk to the bus stop, then another walk at the other end. She would have a bit of meat this week. Mirel pulled a plastic head-cover out of her purse, pulled it down over her tangled hair, tied the strings below her chin. She drew a deep breath, picked up her bags, and headed out into the world.



Home-Made Soup

by Barry R. Taylor

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“Thanks for helping prepare the vegetables, Claire” Glenda said, “It does make it go faster.”

“No problem, Mum,” her daughter replied. “Are you sure you remember the recipe?” She wiped her hands on a towel and sat down at the kitchen table.

Glenda said, “Of course I do. I’ve been making vegetable soup since before you were born. I’m hardly going to forget now. This soup is your father’s favourite. Especially this time of year, when we have everything fresh from the garden.”

Her husband, Gerald, did not respond to the mention of his name. That was typical, of course. He seldom intruded when ‘his girls’ were chatting. He preferred to sit quietly in his seat at the end of the table, scanning the newspaper.

“Almost everything,” Claire rejoined, smiling. “We’re still using frozen peas and corn.”

“Oh, don’t quibble. Most everything is from the garden, as it should be.” She checked the pot heating on the stove. The butter was melted and just beginning to bubble. Glenda found the bowl of sliced onions and slid them into the pot. They began to sizzle at once. She added chopped carrots and celery, then stirred the mixture about with a wooden spoon.

“Those need about five minutes,” she murmured. She found the pile of green beans, tossed them onto a cutting board, picked up a paring knife and began to efficiently slice off the stems and flower ends. Then she sliced each bean in two along a long diagonal. She stopped from time to time to check the vegetables in the pot.

“Want a hand with that?” Claire asked.

“No. You relax and let me cook.” Her reply was terse. Sometimes her daughter’s solicitousness was excessive. Glenda knew her way around her own kitchen. She had been making vegetable soup from scratch for forty years. It was Gerald’s favourite soup. He always said so. No matter how deeply he was buried in the newspaper, when Glenda set a bowl of steaming vegetable soup in front of him he would set the paper aside and dig in.

She checked the pot. The onions were turning golden. Time to add the next ingredients.

She had the cutting board with the beans on it in her hand when she noticed the three peeled garlic cloves sitting on the counter. “Oh for goodness sake,” she said out loud. She had forgotten to add the garlic. Well, a mistake easily corrected. She set down the beans and picked up a paring knife. She sliced the garlic into tiny white medallions, chopped each one into strips, then chopped the strips crosswise into smaller bits.

She slid the diced garlic into the pot, stirred it around. Gerald insisted that something as tiny as a few bits of garlic could not possibly alter the taste of a whole pot of soup, but Glenda knew better. Subtle nuances of flavour separated ordinary soup from truly good soup.

She gave the garlic a minute to saute, then added the cut beans, along with frozen corn and peas that Claire had already measured out. The mix sizzled as the frozen kernels hit the hot pot. Glenda mixed everything with the wooden spoon.

“The spuds, Mum,” said Claire.

Only then did Glenda notice the four large, unpeeled potatoes sitting at the back of the counter. She shook her head. Screw you brain on, Glenda. She picked up the paring knife again and began cutting the potatoes, first in half lengthwise, then lengthwise again, then crosswise to make half-inch cubes. She never peeled them.

The tedium of it did not bother her. Chopping vegetables was routine work, yet in some way she found it deeply satisfying: the steady chop-chop-chop rhythm of the blade descending, the revelation of moist, flavourful flesh with each stroke, the transformation beneath her hands of something raw and earthy into food for the plate. Did Claire understand that feeling? Glenda suspected she did: Claire enjoyed preparing wholesome meals for her family. Gerald, of course, so rooted in the practical, would not understand, nor could Glenda explain it to him. She dumped the potatoes into the pot.

“I’ll make the broth,” said Claire. She was already moving before Glenda could stop her. She emptied several packages of dehydrated broth into a bowl of water and heated it in the microwave oven. That was a bit of a cheat, in Glenda’s mind, but it did save time. When the broth was hot Glenda added it to the pot in a dramatic burst of boiling and steam. That was the moment that a mix of vegetables began to become soup. She followed the broth with finely chopped tomatoes, the first of the season, picked red and ripe that morning.

Now seasonings. She was about to open the spice cupboard when she noticed the line of bottles sitting on the counter: bay leaves, thyme, rosemary. A plate nearby held parsley and basil leaves from the garden, neatly chopped.

“Oh,” Glenda said out loud. “We got these ready beforehand, didn’t we.” Now she remembered picking the parsley and basil. Had she chopped it, or had Claire done that? No matter. Everything was ready. She tossed a bit of salt and pepper into the pot, then measured out small aliquots of the dried spices. The parsley and basil leaves went in last.

Now all that was needed was time. The soup needed to simmer to let the ingredients mingle and mesh. She stirred the mixture, letting the scented steam tickle her nose. Glenda always felt a sense of accomplishment from preparing a batch of good soup. Home-made vegetable soup was Gerald’s favourite.

“That needs about an hour,” she said, turning about to address her husband. He didn’t reply. Glenda stared at his empty chair. “Where – where’s Gerald?” she demanded.

“Dad’s gone, Mum” said Claire. She was standing close beside her. “Don’t you remember? A couple of months ago.”

“Oh. Yes, of course.” She sank into the nearest chair. “I made too much soup.”



Lighthouse

by Barry R. Taylor

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On a fine day in August, Kevin sat on a wooden bench, looking out to sea. Beside him, the white, octagonal tower of the Cape George lighthouse, with its ever-rotating light like a cyclops's eye, kept vigil over St. George's Bay. The lighthouse stood at the edge of a small park, sprinkled with benches and picnic tables. In mid-week there were few visitors besides Kevin.

"I hear you be wondering about the old lighthouse," someone said. "And how she burned down." Kevin looked up to see an old man, stooped and frail, settling onto the bench beside him. He was wearing workman's clothes, with a frayed cloth cap pulled down over his forehead. He was carrying something with a wire handle that he set on the ground beside the bench.

Kevin said, "Yes, that's right. Word gets around in a rural community, eh? Actually, I'm trying to write a piece on the lighthouse ghost. The local legend says the lighthouse keeper was killed in the fire and his spirit still wanders these grounds. But there's no proof there even was a fire. My publisher –"

"I don't know about any ghosts," the old man said. "I can tell you about the fire. She was real enough. Burned her right to the ground she did. 'Twasn't the lighthouse keeper who died in the fire. It was his son."

"His son?" I thought there were only –"

"He had a son. Old Alex MacEachern, the lighthouse keeper, he lived in the house with his family. His son it was who died. It was his father's fault, he's to blame for it. The fire, his own son's death, all of it. It was all the keeper's fault."

Kevin leaned closer. "Why do you say that?"

The old man shook his head. "The house wasn't even a proper lighthouse, was it. It was a plain house with a light on top. Built 'er right here on this bluff with a good view over the water. Three lamps set in a circle and an oil tank to fire each one. Built her in '61 they did, and I'm here to tell you the ships and the fishing boats coming in to the bay were right glad to see that light on the hill.

"But they didn't count on the wind, did they? She blows like the devil up here. Shook the whole house sometimes. The wind was a big problem. The wheel that turned the light ran on a pulley, you see, like a clock. The keeper had to wind up the weights, twice a day, to keep the light turning. But when the wind shook the house the turning gears didn't work. They put braces around the outside to keep the house steady, but she still shook like the palsy in the gales."

"Yes but what about the fire?"

The old man nodded. "April, 1907 that's when she was. The wind was blowin' right mean off the sea. Old MacEachern and his son, Owen, were working the lights, and they had a

job to do because the wind kept knocking about the gears and the light had to be turned by hand. Owen wasn't of a temper for bein' a lighthouse keeper. Didn't like living up on the bluff all alone. He had a great row with his father about what do about the light. The lad thought it was high time someone built a new lighthouse, a proper light on a cement tower, firm against the wind, so they wouldn't have to work all night turning the lamps.

"Well, old MacEachern, he had a temper on 'im. He told his son he was tired of his complainin' and if wanted a taste of real solitude he could spend a night on duty by himself. He stomped off and turned in for the night, leaving his son to turn the lamps alone, though it was weary work for one man. That was his sin, that was. There were always supposed to be two men awake during a storm. If MacEachern had stayed awake, the fire might have taken the building without taking any lives.

"Sometime in the early morning the fire broke out. Probably started in the machinery room, right below the light tower, where the oil tanks were kept. Maybe it started from a used wick that wasn't properly snuffed. Old MacEachern had gotten lazy 'bout cleaning up, there were bits of wick all over the floor. Askin' for a fire, that was. The wind had calmed by then, but in a clapboard house fire spreads right quick. The dog smelled the smoke and started howling, waking everyone up. MacEachern's wife and daughters were on the ground floor and they cleared out double quick. The daughters rode off to get help from the neighbours. MacEachern, that hot-headed old fool, was asleep on the second floor, right below the machinery room, and he was almost trapped by the fire. He escaped out the back door in the nick of time.

"Owen was up in the light room, above the fire, but maybe he could have gotten out if someone were there to lead him through the smoke. His father could have done that, if he hadn't gone to sleep. God's mercy, why did he leave him there? Why didn't he save his own son? It was all his fault. He should have stayed awake. He shouldn't have let his son die."

Kevin was fascinated. "How do you know all this?"

"Because I was there, wasn't I!" His reedy voice was angry now. "I was right there on the ground with the fire crew and all the neighbours doing whatever we could do to stem the flames." He shook his head. "It was a lost cause. All we could do was let 'er burn, right to the ground, and make sure it didn't spread to the horse barn.

"Well, they built a new, proper lighthouse in '08, and MacEachern stayed on as keeper for a while. He was never the same though. He never got over the fire. Always talking about it, he was. He kept saying that Owen might have escaped, that he was still alive somehow. You see, there was a rope ladder in the light room, and if Owen were quick he could have climbed down the ladder two floors and jumped the rest of the way. They never found a body in the ashes, did they.

"MacEachern kept expecting his son to come back. He started asking where Owen was when the family sat down to dinner. Sometimes he would go out looking for him, stomping around the ruins of the old house, trying to find his lost son. His poor wife could never convince

him that Owen was gone. He started wandering the grounds at night, a lamp in one hand, searching everywhere for Owen. Fair weather or foul he was always out there, awake and searching, his wife could hardly stop him. They had to bring on a new fellow to help tend the light.

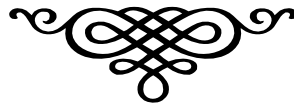
“One night a fog rolled in off the sea, thick as lies and cold as death. The new fellow was up in the tower running the light. MacEachern’s wife told him to stay inside but he snuck out with his lamp, wandering about the land looking for Owen. In the fog he couldn’t see the ground very well and it looks like he fell right over the edge of the bluff, into the forest down below.”

The old man shook his head, rueful. “I suppose that’s where the story of the ghost comes from, MacEachern wandering about with his lamp. Old fool. His own carelessness caused his son’s death, then his own too. Is it any wonder that his soul can’t rest, even after death?”

The old man stopped speaking. He sat very still, staring at the ground. He seemed profoundly sad.

Kevin was silent too, contemplating the old man’s tragic story. Then he frowned. He said, “Wait, wait a minute. Something doesn’t add up here. The fire was in 1907. If you were there, fighting the fire, you would have to be at least one hundred and forty – ”

He stopped. The bench beside him was empty. He looked around, but found no one. The summer sun shone down on a vacant park, a single car, and a stalwart white lighthouse, forever facing the sea.



Shamatha

by Barry R. Taylor

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This piece was all blue. It had to be sky. Cliff studied it by the light from the window, then began scanning positions, looking for a place for it. It didn't fit anywhere. He found another piece and tried again. The jigsaw puzzle had five hundred pieces. It would take a long time to complete.

The puzzle was scattered across the dining room table. Cliff hardly needed all that space for meals; he ate in the kitchen now. The box lid was propped up against a couple of old books. It showed a sunny alpine meadow with snow-covered mountains in the background and a cozy cabin in the foreground, puffing white smoke out the chimney. The five hundred puzzle pieces promised to become the picture on the box, if Cliff were patient enough. He had completed the outside frame, wobbly and one-piece wide, but little of the interior. His slow progress did not concern Cliff. He was seeking something deeper than a picture on cardboard.

He paused to choose a cracker, topped with a slice of cheese, from the plate to one side. The crackers were at once lunch and a way of avoiding making lunch. The cheese was Edam because that was what he found in the fridge. Tea in a white cup sat beside the crackers.

Crackers and cheese reminded him of Margaret, of course. Cliff's simple snack was nothing like the crackers that Margaret used to prepare, on which the neatly sliced cheese, the variety thoughtfully selected from among two dozen possibilities, might be augmented with capers, a dab of salsa, even a feather of dill. Margaret had understood the place of good, wholesome food as nurture for the body and the spirit. She could elevate a simple snack into a kind of sacrament: Eat, for this food is the labour of my hands, and therefore of my body and therefore of me. Drink, for we are creatures of water, and this tea will replenish your inner sea. For Cliff, crackers and tea had come to serve not as bread and wine, but as foci for internal contemplation.

Cliff had travelled widely when he was younger, studied many philosophies. He imagined a robed Buddhist monk, high in a Tibetan monastery, immersed in deep meditation. To free his mind from the distractions of the material world, the monk lets a simple object absorb all his attention: a rock, a statue, even his own breath. Mundane reality intrudes at every turn. Bells hung from a cornice tinkle in the mountain breeze. Trying to not hear them makes the bells sound louder. Only when he can learn to not hear the bells, when he can let them disappear along with the rest of the impermanent physical world, can the monk experience the state of inner calmness where worries and noise drift by but never cling, never disturb his peace.

The goal of Cliff's meditation was more modest than the monk's, yet perhaps equally challenging: to free his mind from thoughts of Margaret, when everything about him reminded

him of Margaret. Direct the mind inward, to simple things: the crunch of crackers; the taste of cheese; the tiny, tiny problem of where to find the next piece of a jigsaw puzzle. Reject the outside world; refuse to hear the bells.

Cliff nibbled his cracker as he set the next piece into the puzzle. The sky was mostly empty; it always filled last. He concentrated on the sound of the cracker crunching as he chewed. For a slight time it drowned out the ticking of the mantle clock, the sounds of the street, the hum of the refrigerator. Even a simple cracker could be an object for concentrated attention.

As if to challenge his meditative state, the telephone rang. Cliff frowned. The telephone was on a table in the hallway. The caller would be Jason or Pierce. One or the other called him nearly every day, to ask how he was doing. Cliff wondered if he should answer. How could he explain to his son what he was doing to get by when getting by was all he was doing? The time of acute grief was done. Now there was only loneliness, jigsaw puzzles, crackers with cheese.

He bit deep into a cracker. It sounded loud inside his head as he chewed. It drowned out the ringing of the telephone. Was that cheating? There were many levels of meditation; one must ascend one rung at a time. He drank tea. It was Earl Grey. Margaret had preferred Orange Pekoe.

The telephone rang again. Ignoring it made it louder. Mental calmness required discipline. The goal was not to be free of thoughts and worries, but to let them ebb and flow around him like waves on the shore, impermanent and ever-changing. He picked up a puzzle fragment, studied it for a few seconds. Perhaps it matched the deep green grass on the left edge. Try fitting it here and there. No good. Try this one instead. Have a sip of tea.

He bit into another cracker. He timed it to match the next ring of the phone. Everything changes, nothing is constant, not even the self. Moments flow into new moments as a river flows to the sea. Even ringing telephones come and go. The monk sits very still, meditating. The bells ring. Find that deep inner peace where ringing bells and telephones no longer matter, no longer intrude. Shamatha, that was the word for it.

Everything changes and Margaret is gone. The boys meant well. They could not understand that the only way Cliff could get along was to not think too much about how he was getting along. Cliff had jigsaw puzzles, each piece an object of deep attention. He had crackers and Earl Grey tea. He had Shamatha.

The telephone rang again. Soon the answering machine would take over. Cliff looked at his plate. There was only one cracker left.

