



Gorden Schweers

**PROMISCUOUS**

*Christmas is a tough time to be alone,  
Dr. Virgil had said.*

On the wall of the small waiting room at the back of the old mansion on the main thoroughfare, Clyde had noted the large diploma belonging to his counselor, Dr. T.E. Virgil. In a swirl of gold letters and a red wax stamp, it announced that he had earned his PhD at the University of Glasgow in psychology. Clyde wasn't the least bit impressed and even less so intimidated. It wasn't his idea to come here in the first place. But still, taking the advice of Dr. Faust in Emergency, he had agreed to "seek help". When Faust was stitching up his split knuckles, the usual questions brought back the events that had lead up to Clyde slamming his fist down on the hood of his car just as the commuter jet lifted off of the tarmac, heading for Edmonton. The doctor paused for a few seconds while Clyde related how he had been upset that his son, Gabriel, a kid of nine years, had been taken away from him. He only had custody for a week at Christmas. With the week over on December 10<sup>th</sup>, Clyde had taken the up to the airport with his small Avengers back pack and his identity card pinned to his

winter coat. They had done this before, father and son, a few times in the last year. This time, after he had handed over his son to the stewardess at the main gate, Clyde had stood behind the glass wall in the waiting room, waiting for Gabriel to turn for one last time towards his father and wave *Good Bye Dad, I love you!* But it never happened. The boy did not turn back. The rest of the passengers filed like clones in through the open air tight door on the plane's smooth skin. Clyde searched the portholes for a small white hand waving back at him, as Gabriel had done once before in July, but that too never materialized. It was Clyde's own fault the boy did not feel any regrets on leaving him, stranded at the airport, alone for Christmas with his broken heart. They had had a miserable time together during this period of his 25/75 per cent custody allowance but as far as Clyde was concerned, it was the boy's own fault. At least, until he got out to the parking lot, and with his back turned, he heard the roar of the jet engine and turning saw that slim metal bird take off in to oblivion. His son was gone again! Suddenly he was mad not at the boy, or the judgment of the divorce, nor his former wife. Clyde was furious with himself, his lack of fatherhood, and he had struck out at the nearest thing to himself, the hood on his rusted Toyota 4 Runner. Blood gushed out his clenched fist. He

stood there in shock, looking at the open wound. He was bleeding! What happened? He had to go back inside the airport to get some toilet paper to staunch the wound, but it was his heart that felt like it was bleeding, not his fist.

On his way to the men's room, one of the attendants noticed the blood that was on his long overcoat, and she called to him, "Sir, are you alright?" Clyde was not above asking for sympathy. He showed her the bleeding wound he still held as an open gash in a tight fist, and told her, "I think I need a doctor." One of the airport staff was trained in First Aid and attended to the preliminaries before he was driven by another male staff member to the emergency. On the way there, the staffer asked, "I saw you see a boy off. Is that your son?"

It was the wrong question. Even as he sat in the passenger's side, looking over the crested waves of the Strait in a storm, Clyde poured out the details of his divorce. Getting married, he said, was the best thing that ever happened to him. But he said, Debbie had "ripped off his sperm". It was all a game, he told his chauffeur; marriage was a game that women used to have kids and then get alimony, child support, and so on. At one point in his diatribe, Clyde looked at the other man who sat spinning the wheel and flipping the signals and wipers off and on like an automaton. Normally a

reticent man when it came to sharing his feelings, Clyde saw in an instant that the other man was feeling intimidated by the intensity of his out pouring.

“You got family?” Clyde asked, trying to apologize in his own way.

“Yes and no,” said the man.

“Divorced?” asked Clyde, feeling ashamed of his own egocentricity.

“That’s right,” said the man in a sullen tone. “Been ten years for me. I know how you feel but still, it’s the way things are.”

*The way things are.* That was right. Clyde had told the lawyer he paid to plead his case before the judge how much he loved his son, more than anything he could imagine, but Clyde failed to recognize that he looked more like a biker type than a devoted parent. He’d lose his case, just on the appearance of the goat like beard hanging down from his face that was meant to hide the double chin he had always had, for as long as he could remember. The lawyer had tried to soften him up for the inevitable assault he’d face in the courtroom by telling him trite like “*Divorce is the right of passage for the modern male.*” No, thought Clyde later, much later, ‘*Loneliness is the so called right of passage*’. Who was the lawyer trying to

fool? And it cost him a bundle too, on top of it all. A bundle of money to get screwed so Debbie could run off with some creep called Dandy Bullock.

Their car wheeled in to the area of the hospital that was marked with a big EMERGENCY sign in red letters. In front of them, the doors of an ambulance were open as a stretcher was pulled out, the white sheets covered in the blood of a recent traffic accident. Nodding towards the victim in the wheeled stretcher, the airport employee said –

“Things could be worse...”

“Sure,” said Clyde. “I’m sorry I ranted like that.”

“Been there, done that,” said the other man. “Just make sure you get that hand of yours stitched up. If you need a ride back to your truck, just call the airport and ask for Jimmy. Jimmy Peters. I’ll come back for you, okay?” Clyde said thanks under his breath.

Once in the infirmary, he told the doctor the truth about his injury. Clyde just could not stop feeling sorry for himself. And the self pity came out as a sour distaste for every word he had said to his son recently on his precious visit. With a block injected in to his hand so they could stitch it up, Clyde had used his fear of needles to retell the injustice of his divorce for the second time that day. It felt as if his tongue had its own

independence and all he could do was sit back and look at the expressions of the people he was upsetting. But Doctor Faust was a born healer in his own right.

He had asked to see Clyde before he was discharged. In the cramped office, with paperwork piled on the desk, it was this young compassionate doctor who suggested that Clyde get the help he needed to resolve his anxiety and anger.

“I’m not angry,” said Clyde.

“Well, you were angry enough to open up your fist,” said the doctor.

“Its not like I hurt anybody,” he said, defending himself.

“You’re an important person, Clyde. I can get you five sessions with Dr. Virgil. He’s an outstanding psychologist. A very down to earth professional. You’ll enjoy talking to him, man to man.”

Gabriel thought over the offer and finally shrugged, “I guess it won’t do any harm.”

“Good,” said the doctor. He wrote out a few notes on a white paper, tearing it off from a pile of sheets, and told Clyde to give it to the receptionist at the front desk. Clyde thanked him and left the office. In the hallway stood a long lineup of people waiting to see a doctor. That was when Clyde decided to follow up on his suggestion, seeing how the young doctor

had spent his invaluable time shooting the breeze with him in his office. It was the first time he felt okay about himself that whole week. It had started when Gabriel had made that comment.

With snow on the ground and the dates of his visit marked out on the December calendar: **December 2<sup>nd</sup>** --- marked in red all the way to --- **December 10<sup>th</sup>**, Clyde had a long list of activities ready to do with his son. Snow packed the distant mountains. They could strap the old toboggan in to the bed of the Toyota and head up there like real buddies, shooting down the Turnpike that everyone raved about as the best run in the area. Then he'd take Gabriel to the indoor horse show at the equestrian centre on the outskirts of the town. Gabriel had always loved horses and cowboys. On the following weekend he planned to take the kid to the Christmas Variety Show and sale held in town and then, maybe, to a movie or two. There was only one theatre in town but the video stores were full of movies so he'd steer Gabriel in that direction, putting everything on Visa if he had to.

The jet landed as usual at the airport and Gabe came out with his oversized pack sack and his mittens hanging out of his winter parka on a string. The boy's face was flushed red with

the cold, or the change in the temperature. Clyde was surprised how young and healthy the boy looked. He had not taken after anyone on Clyde's side of the family, nor himself for that matter. But nevertheless, he was his son and he loved the boy deeply.

“How are things with you?” Clyde asked him when they were in the Toyota again, alone, driving back to the small bungalow that Clyde had tried to clean up for his arrival.

“Do I have to sleep on the couch again, Dad?” the boy asked.

“What's wrong with the couch?” Clyde snorted.

“At home I have my own bed and room. When I come to see you it's what the other kids call ‘couch surfing’.

“You are home; this is your home,” Clyde corrected him.

“Then why don't I have my own room?”

“Okay, you can have my room, and I'll sleep on the couch this week.”

They were both silent for a short while until Clyde told the boy how he had taken a week off from driving taxi so he could spend the time having fun with him.

“You wanna go tobogganing with me tomorrow?” he asked the boy.

“Sure,” said Gabriel, “that would be awesome.” Clyde held out his hand and his son slapped the calloused surface as hard as he could.

“Wait to you see the big sled I got from the Sally Ann for twenty bucks! I had to repair it a little but its okay. And I coated the bottom so we can really take off down the Turnpike.”

Gabriel’s eyes got larger at the mention of shooting down a cliff face, like it was something he could go back to school and tell the other kids about as the most far out adventure of his life. Then Gabriel said, “I’m hungry, Dad.” They had just passed a fast food outlet and Gabriel knew his father would stop if he asked him, just like he would do most of the things he asked him to do, as if to win some contest he as his father was having with his mother, even though the two adults were hundreds of miles and a mountain chain apart. But Clyde said,

“I got lunch waiting for us at home.”

“Augh “said the boy. “I don’t like your cooking!”

“It ain’t my cooking, kid. Got it from the frozen pizza section at the Superstore.”

“Pizza! I love pizza,” rejoined Gabe. “What type of pizza?”

Clyde smiled at the boy slyly and said, “Vegetarian.” The both laughed together. It was Debbie who was the vegetarian in the family, always dieting or trying to cut out the intake of calories and fat, to keep herself slim. She had in fact succeeded. At one point, she had dragged out the dress she had worn to the high school prom and it still fit her! She had modeled it for Clyde and Gabriel during the happier times of their family life together. A year later, the worse and most unexpected happened. Clyde had come home from driving city bus and found the door locked. It was his home and yet the police had arrived when Debbie reported he was breaking and entering. Clyde had spent the night in a jail cell.

That was the start of his nightmare. He wanted it to be over with desperately but in fact it would never be over. Instead his son flew in to the airport once in a while after he left Edmonton and resettled on the island. Every time Gabriel arrived, it was painful to see that he had grown again, and that somehow, in spite of these brief visits, they two of them were growing apart. This last visit saw the shit hit the fan. Clyde blamed that bitch he had married (and always thought and dreamed about) for doing this to their relationship. It wasn't the boy's fault. Nevertheless Gabriel was the conduit between his estranged parents.

Up early, while it was still dark, they strapped the toboggan in to the bed and on to the roof of the Toyota. In exceptionally good humor, acting like conspirators rather than father and son, they shoveled down some cold cereal and burnt toast then raced each other to the truck. In less than ten minutes, they were out of city traffic and on the upper highway, rolling along at 120 klicks. This was the season of black ice but Clyde took the chance, feeling invincible for a change.

“You want to learn to drive?” asked Clyde of his son. When Gabriel replied, “Sure, Dad”, he let go of the wheel and said, “Okay, grab the wheel. Quick! We’re crossing the white line!”

Young Gabriel grabbed one side of the steering wheel and held it fast, as Clyde moved the wheels of the truck with his other hand on the lower part of the steering wheel. “You feel the momentum of the truck, eh,” he said. “That’s how you learn to drive. You get to feel whole car. Engine, wheels, transmission – the whole thing, just by holding on to the steering wheel.”

The Toyota rolled down the double lane/one way road, occasionally sliding over the white line or on to the shoulder so that the wheels went bump/bump/bump until Clyde

corrected their direction. Finally they turned off, heading up to the mountains and the chalet that served the people who arrived to ski and toboggan. It was great. First they sent the toboggan up the lift, trailing on a rope, and then they joined up, dangling their legs out from under the ski lift chair and singing their favorite song from The Wizard of Oz. Once at the top of the Turnpike, the bottom looked a long way away and Gabriel was a little edgy but since they were buddies and out for a good time, they hopped on and took off down the steep hill. They went faster and faster until Clyde shouted, “Bail out!” and they both tumbled off the toboggan in to the snow, rolling over and over and laughing. Gabriel got back up on his feet, his face and snow suit covered in snow, and Clyde hit him with a handful of dry snow. They both could not stop laughing. It was just like old times again, when Gabriel had ridden around on his dad’s shoulders, holding on to his lions mane head of hair to stop from slipping off.

Then Gabriel lied a little, saying, “Dandy is a gas too, Dad. You’d really like the guy.” It was as if someone had deliberately given Clyde a thousand volt shock. Just the mention of Debbie’s new live-in lover instantly transformed Clyde’s personality. It was a foaming concoction that once touching his lips sent him in to a vengeance driven state of

mind. Clyde's face dropped as the two of them, father and, stood out in the snow. Gabriel noticed immediately but said nothing, unaware of what had happened or how he had precipitated the change. He was in fact afraid of his father, alone with this man who seemed to be becoming more and more of a stranger to him as the years passed. But too he wanted to be with his *real* father and never failed to feel disdain for his mother when she left him at the airport, saying she'd miss him dearly, yet walking away with a big smile on her face. Gabriel didn't like being lied to, not even by his mother. Like his father, he was jealous in his own way of the time his mother spent alone with her latest, the construction worker who walked around the house in his jockey shorts and patted his mother on her bum in the kitchen. Gabriel wanted to escape. First he wanted to escape from his mother and her lover boy, Dandy Bullock. Then, with his father Clyde, when he became moody like this for no apparent reason, Gabriel wanted to be back again with his mother where he was not threatened, at least until Dandy had moved in with them. As a child, he was trying to be non-judgmental in both of the relationships. On the other hand, the anxiety he felt with the betrayal of the divorce left him afraid of his own feelings which as a boy he was forced to deny again and again, until he

couldn't admit he felt - anything. Except perhaps fear and disappointment. And worst of all, the feeling of wanting to reach out to the important adults, his mother Debbie and his father Clyde, in his life without either of them pushing him away.

Gabriel said, "You okay, Dad?"

Clyde brushed the snow off of his clothes and looked around for where the toboggan had stopped its downward spiral. "Let's go find the toboggan," he said.

At the chalet, before going down the lift again to the parking lot, Gabriel sipped the hot cocoa that his father had bought for him. But Clyde was in a sour mood, back fighting the internal ghosts that had plagued him since the gavel fell on his attempts to be a father and husband. He resented with the utmost venom the interference of strangers, liars, in the court system. They too sensed his disdain and contempt, and he had lost his case. He couldn't live in Edmonton any longer and had always wanted to move to the coast. But the change in location did not help Clyde overcome his bad memories. Now that he was alone, living in a damp flat roofed bungalow, he lacked the self esteem to stop the growth of the jealousy he felt for his wife, her new love affairs, and it threatened to destroy

him. First however, it ruined the rest of the week he was to spend with his son.

In the evening after they had pizza together and watched a video on the TV, Gabriel went to go in to the bedroom with its unmade bed but Clyde stopped him, saying, “Where are you going?”

The boy had turned and said, “I’m going to bed, Dad.”

“No,” his father said, “You’re going to sleep on the couch like always.”

“But you said...”

”I don’t care what I said before. I have to pay the rent on this dump. I need a good night’s sleep. You’re young and can get sleep anytime.”

Gabriel reluctantly made his bed up in the living room while the TV blared out its noise and instantaneous images, flashes of psychedelic light bouncing off the dark walls as Clyde flipped through the late shows. Finally Gabriel woke up with the TV still on in the dark room. His father was not in the room, having gone to bed with his clothes on. Gabriel went back to the TV and turned it off. In the morning Clyde woke up with his son lying beside him in his own bed.

After the equestrian show came their trip to the Variety sale for Christmas. With the bus station near his house, Clyde

insisted that they take the bus in to town. A cold wind was still skipping across the open sea along the highway but a kiosk had been build to shelter those who waited for the bus to arrive. Clyde was still hostile towards the presence of the other “father” in his son’s life. Every time he spoke there was an edge on his voice and patience. Gabriel stood outside the kiosk, in the wind and rain, preferring to be as far away from his father’s temper as possible. Finally the bus arrived and they took their seats. Clyde was dressed in the long oilskin overcoat that his wife had given to him on the last Christmas they had spent together. Debbie had Gabriel help her wrap the package and place it under the tree. The boy remembered the occasion clearly but his father seemed to have forgotten about the situation and the origin of his overcoat. While the bus rocked along on its route, Clyde asked his son, “How is your school going?” Gabriel hesitated and then said, “Not very good.”

“What do you mean, not very good?” demanded his father.

“Mr. Lemley said if I don’t do more homework, I won’t pass,” he confided.

“Then do more homework,” his father insisted. But it wasn’t that easy. Back home in Edmonton, his own room was too cold to study in so he had been doing his school work in

the kitchen, next to the oil stove. But Dandy, the new master of the house, had put an end to that. Seeing the boy studying on the kitchen table, he had told him to get out of the kitchen, go play Nintendo instead. Gabriel said that he needed to do his homework, but his surrogate father had refused to listen to him, instead telling him that books were a bunch of nonsense. “You don’t have to have any fancy diploma to make lots of money in this country. All that stuff in books is just so much crap!” His mother was in the kitchen then too but said nothing, deferring to the new male in her life, even if he belittled her son’s school work. So Gabriel had reluctantly left the warm kitchen, and tried to do his home work in his bed, under a blanket with a flash light. He was falling behind the other kids. He was failing Grade Four.

Now, sitting with his real Dad on the bus, he could not find the words to tell Clyde the truth. It seemed that every time he mentioned the other man, Dandy, his father became defensive. On the one hand, he wanted to stay with the same friends in school but on the other hand, the only resolution he could get had to come from either of his parents. But they weren’t communicating with each other or him anymore.

Gabriel was amazed that their camaraderie had ended so quickly on the mountain. All he had to do was mention the

situation back in Edmonton and his father turned in to a Mr. Hyde. But he needed to talk things over with his father, with Clyde. They were on their way back to the bungalow after the Variety Show, on a return bus, when Gabriel asked his father if he could come and stay with him permanently. Clyde was stunned by the question.

“What are you talking about?” he asked in surprise. The boy sat on the pipe benches with a few passengers coming and leaving the bus but said nothing in response. If he couldn’t tell him what was happening to him with his mother, that he was failing school with the other man in the house, then he couldn’t tell his father the simplest thing. Finally, Clyde said, “I don’t like it any more than you do. But the courts said we have to share your time. That means you live for the most part with your mother, the rest with me. I don’t like it either.”

“I’m not living with my mother,” Gabriel said, adding finally, “I’m living with my mother and the construction foreman.”

“That guy ain’t no foreman,” his father quipped. “Nobody in their right mind would be bossed around by an asshole like that for very long.”

It was true. In order to impress his new concubine, Dandy had told Debbie that he was a foreman on the construction site.

But it was ridiculous. The rest of the workforce would have walked off of the job if Dandy, the all show/no go bigmouth, was made their foreman. Yet, for Gabriel, all that mattered, was for his father to rescue him so that he wouldn't fail the Fourth Grade. Failing was the worst thing he could imagine, as bad as seeing his parents fighting with each other. But the topic was dropped. Gabriel assumed that his father, Clyde, didn't want him either. His mother didn't want him and Dandy, the surrogate, was getting more abusive with him. Last week, before flying off to the YVR, Dandy had left a bruise on Gabriel's arm. Things were just going to get worse for him. He had broached the question with his father however. He'd rather live on the couch and get his school work done on time, and pass, than stay with his mother and fail. Clyde sat in the bus, staring across the aisle, at the islands and whitecaps but said nothing. Yet his son hoped he was thinking the situation over. Later that night, during one of the TV commercials which he muted, his father asked him, "Were you serious about coming to stay with me, Gabe?"

"Yeah, yeah I was," he said. Clyde aimed the channel changer at the TV and instead of returning the volume, he blinked the whole TV off. The two of them sat in the darkness then, silent for a short while until his father asked, "Why

would you want to come here, when you have a good home with your mother? I thought you liked moving back and forth between us?”

Gabriel shrugged, discerning the outline of his father in the darkness of the room. A light had been left on in the kitchen. “It was fun at first but it’s not fun anymore.”

“I’d have to go back to court, maybe hire a lawyer. I don’t have the money anymore,” he told his son. And another reason which he did not share with his son was that he was afraid of the courts and the types of people who judged others from high platforms, making men like Clyde feel as insignificant as insects. He could withstand that feeling least of all of the many that were the outcome of his divorce.

“Dad.....,” his son said in the darkness.

Finally, reluctantly, Clyde said, “I’ll see what I can do.”

Then inexplicably, the days marked in Red on the calendar arrived at **DECEMBER 10<sup>th</sup>**. Gabriel had to return on the plane to the winter deep freeze of Alberta. The boy didn’t want to go back to his mother’s house. Clyde knew that if the boy stayed with him in Campbell River, the RCMP would soon be on his doorstep, asking questions and perhaps getting rough with him. Clyde couldn’t face the possibility of getting in trouble with the police. Yet his son was putting him in a

difficult situation where his fear of authority was stronger than his loneliness. Gabriel was too disappointed to say goodbye to his father at the airport and Clyde, feeling the irrevocable loss of his son, had split open his fist on the car hood, in the airport parking lot.

Now Clyde, on the advice of young Doctor Faust, was sitting through his first session with Dr. Virgil, the Welsh psychologist. The room held a faded leather sofa in which Clyde sprawled while Virgil sat at his desk, swiveling on a chair from side to side, making short notes as they talked. In this first session, Clyde had delivered a lengthy monologue about the divorce and how he felt betrayed by 'his Debbie' and her family. Soon enough he found out she had another guy, this Dandy creep, but with 'No Fault Divorce' he couldn't do a damn thing about it. She sued him for a divorce when he hadn't done anything wrong, he complained, throwing his hands open before himself while the psychologist jotted down another note. It was because he couldn't handle himself around a bunch of smart ass professionals like his wife could, he told Virgil, that he had lost custody of his son. The psychologist had considered his complaints and eventually said, "Yes, life is not a fair place. What are you going to do to

deal with this loss – I mean your son, Gabriel – that was his name?”

“Not much I can do,” said Clyde, close to tears, cradling his injured right hand with his left.

“Well, okay. You do have visits from the boy and he seems to need you. Come back next week and we’ll talk more. Christmas is a tough time to be alone. I want you to take care of yourself in the meanwhile. No drinking or drugs, okay?”

Clyde shook his head with its mane of hair. “I don’t touch that stuff,” he confessed. The session was over and it was time to move along. When both men got up, Dr. Virgil extended his hand to him, as if he was pleased to shake hands with a man he respected. He smiled warmly at the taxi driver as they shook hands for Christmas, Clyde extending his left hand rather than his bandaged right one.

“You did say you’ve donated your time with the taxi company to drive seniors around town for free on Christmas weekend. That’s good. You have a good heart.”

“Sometimes it feels as if I don’t have a heart at all, like that tin fool in the Wizard of Oz.”

“No, no,” replied Virgil. “Those characters (the lion, the scarecrow, the tin man) they had what it takes. You do too,

Clyde,” he said, sincerely, summing up his analysis of their therapy session.

“Gee,” said Clyde, “thanks...”

Just as he was putting on his blood stained overcoat and about to leave, Virgil asked, almost as an afterthought, “What have you bought your son for Christmas?” Clyde looked stunned for a split second and then asked, “Should I?”

“But of course. Remember when you were his age?”

“Yeah,” said Clyde. “Sure thing.”

“And for Debbie too,” Virgil said, smiling.

“No Way!” retorted Clyde. “I wouldn’t give that bitch the time of the day.”

“Clyde, do it for Gabriel. He sounds like a good kid. Think it over! It might be the very thing you need to get rid of these feelings you have that are eating away at you.”

So when Clyde left, he had a few hours before he had to start driving cab again around the town. With the cold flurries drifting down from a muslin overcast, he wandered around the super large stores, looking for anything that might seem appropriate for his son. Cruising the long aisles from kitchen ware to garden and tool supplies, he finally found himself in the camping section. Everything was so expensive but, for his son, to allay the disappointment Gabriel had suffered when he

turned down his request, Clyde ignored the prices on things for a change. He picked up a well stitched baseball mitt that would fit his son's hands, and tossed it in to his plastic basket. Next he found some scout knives like Red Cross and Leathermans, and bought one of those for him too; and a survival blanket that he could carry off on any camping trips. In one section of the store, his breath was taken away when he found a plastic sculpture of a speckled bay with white tail and mane, pawing the earth with one hoof raised. It was perfect for Gabriel!

Finally his Christmas shopping was finished. Or almost finished. There was still the issue of buying Debbie something for Christmas. He detested the idea however. Every time he heard Virgil repeat, "*Think it over!*" in his head, he said, '**No, No, No!**' Yet when he passed another store window on the way to the parking lot he stopped and stared at a manikin dressed in a sheer transparent negligee. Clyde grinned ear to ear when he had the inspiration of what he intended to give to his former for Christmas.

The wench behind the counter was young, blonde, and attractive. She noted instantly however that Clyde was not wearing a wedding ring on his left hand when he entered her lingerie shop. Nevertheless still wanting to facilitate another

purchase in her store, she asked politely, “Can I help you, sir?” Her shop was small and narrow, a shoebox filled with an endless variety of sheer gowns and sexy undergarments for women. Clyde was dazzled, and stood looking around himself, distracted, staring at endless displays of garter belts and strapless bras, wondering if the gals he saw on the streets of Campbell River actually wore these outfits at some point in their lives. The sales lady repeated with a Cheshire grin, “Are you looking for something in particular, sir?”

Clyde felt he had the support of his two doctors, Dr. Virgil and Dr. Faust. He was convinced that he was doing the right thing. For a few moments, he just stood there in the lingerie shop, indulging his voyeurism, before saying to the woman, “I have a very special lady in my life who needs to have something very ...ah...ah....fancy given to her for Christmas. I wonder if you have what I am looking for?”

“What ‘fancy’ thing is the gentleman looking for?” she asked, with an inflexion.

“Panties, I think. Could I see what you have in panties?”

The sales lady directed Clyde to the back of the store where he could inspect the hundreds of panties she had on sale for Christmas. Finally, with her assistance, Clyde found the pair he was looking for. They were bright orange in color,

with frilly white lace compliments curving over each thigh. But what really attracted Clyde to these panties in particular was the fact that they were crotchless. The sales tag attached to them identified them as RED HOTS and had the logo of a man dressed as Lucifer and carrying a three pronged trident. Clyde ran his bandaged fist right up and through the centre of the panties and said, “Great, I’ll take these.”

The cost was twice what he had paid for all of Gabriel’s gifts in the other sporting goods department, but he willingly tossed down his visa card to have an imprint made. Back home again, he barely had time to scatter the packages on the kitchen table, grab a bite to eat, and head off for a long shift at the wheel of a city cab. Things didn’t bother him as much that evening, even when it was slow. With a few of his customers he even shared the insights he had gleaned from sharing his confidence with Dr. Virgil. Life had just gotten a whole lot better for him, no question. The next day, getting up late, he wrapped the gifts carefully and appropriately. Inside the baseball mitt, he stuffed a note to his son: *“I hope you get lots of good practice and fun with this mitt. Merry Christmas – Your Dad, Clyde”*

But when he came to the package for Debbie, he said with a sly smirk, “Merry Christmas, Lady Jezebel.” Then for cards

on each, he wrote out **To GABRIEL from DAD** and for Debbie, he wrote out noncommittally **To DEBBIE With Love**  
**CLYDE xxoo**

Finding a cardboard box in the back porch, he stuffed the gifts inside, taped the whole thing tightly closed, and rushed it off to the Purolator office. Even though he had to stand in line for a long time, he waited patiently until his Christmas package was measured, weighed, and stamped as Express. The whole episode was over and done with in less than an hour. Clyde stepped out of the shipping office feeling as if hundreds of pounds had dropped from his shoulders. That Doctor Virgil was a really smart guy after all.

In Edmonton, the package arrived when Gabriel and Debbie were out of the house. Dandy Bullock in his tee shirt and boxer shorts scrutinized the package carefully, seeing it was from that dead beat Clyde Repletion, his arch rival and the father of the brat he disliked intensely. No one else knew the package had arrived but himself so, after a few minutes, he took a knife to the tape around the edges of the box and opened it up. Inside he counted four presents in total. Three were for Gabriel and one for Debbie. In the first place, Dandy took objection to the parcel arriving at the house at all. True, the house had belonged to both Clyde and Debbie at one point.

But now, as far as he was concerned, it belonged to Dandy Bullock and no one else. Secondly, he objected strenuously with any gifts coming in his house that did not have his approval. Thirdly, he objected to them arriving from that loathsome little slim bucket Clod Depletion. Fourthly, he objected to them being addressed to Gabriel, when he was that kid's father now, not some defunct hippie playing the castaway on Vancouver Island. And finally, he was furious when he saw the Christmas package addressed **To DEBBIE with Love CLYDE xxoo** (Dandy's lover baby whom he had nicknamed Curly for the wave in her pubic hair).

When he saw and read that dedication on the card to Debbie, Dandy said, "No-way-no-fucking-way." Christmas or no Christmas, he wanted to protect his turf at all costs. Off went the tags on the parcels and back on went his own tags, reading **To: Gabriel from Dandy** and **To: Debs (Curly) from your loving partner Dandy**. Before either of the other two could get back, he had slipped the packages under the Christmas tree and left them there for Christmas Day, congratulating himself with a smirk that this had been the least expensive Christmas he had lived through in a decade.

Christmas Day was cold and windswept. Dandy made a big deal about picking up Debbie's parents from a different

part of Edmonton, and chauffeuring them to his front door for a Christmas meal, drinks, and gift exchange. The two elder parents, Debbie's mother and father, were the guests of honor. Though they did not approve of Debbie's divorce, thinking of it as a family disgrace, they did not want to lose contact with their only grandson, and so held their peace. Debbie wore a short blue dress that complemented her long shapely legs. Finally, with drinks forced on to them by Dandy, the time came for the family to spread out in the living room and open their gifts. Dandy crawled under the Christmas tree and pulled out the four packages he had stuffed back in there for safe keeping. First, he handed three packages, all wrapped in the same silver tone snowflake paper, to Gabriel, saying – "Merry Christmas, Son". First Gabriel opened up the gift that was a beautiful dappled horse. His eyes were glowing when he saw the stallion for the first time, and he looked with tremendous gratitude at his step father.

"Oh Dandy," his mother gushed, "It's wonderful!"

"Sure," said Dandy, slightly drawling his words after inhaling his fifth dram of Hicks Liqueur. "It cost me a bomb but what the heck, it's for my son and best buddy...the one and only Gabe Repletion!"

Laying the horse aside carefully, Gabriel opened up the two other packages, also addressed to him from Dandy. In one package, a beautiful Swiss Army knife was neatly tucked away in a leather case. Again, Gabriel was most appreciative and said to Dandy, “How did you know?” Dandy tossed down another chaser and said, “Nothing is too good for a kid like you!” In the next package, the survival blanket spilled out and was grabbed by Gabriel who commenced reading the description of the blanket to all of those in the room. This was building up to the best Christmas Gabriel had ever dreamed of, thanks to his step father.

Dandy gave the largest of the packages a soft kick with his foot, guessing that it was something equally important, saying, “Try this one, kid!” But by now Gabriel’s eyes were lit up like the lights on their Christmas tree. Debbie was looking across the room at her parents, a smile on her face. Time and again her parents (and especially her mother) had voiced displeasure with her divorce, but now, with Dandy’s generosity and skill in knowing just what would please her son the most at Christmas, she felt fully vindicated. Finally Gabriel ripped open his last package. The expensive hand stitched baseball mitt tumbled down at his feet, on to the carpet. Everyone in the room let out an appreciative sound.

Debbie's white haired father said, "Let me look at that." Gabriel however had already slipped his hand in to the mitt and was punching his fist over and over again in to the leather palm. "This is awesome, awesome," Gabriel repeated.

"What do you say to your Dad?" Debbie said to her son.

Gabriel stopped for a moment, not really wanting to thank the man who patrolled the house like a panther most days, finally saying quietly, "Thanks...ah...Dad."

Dandy Bullock smirked and winked at his common law lover. This was the best ruse he had ever pulled off on the dupes he had to put up with to get what he wanted on a regular basis, more than once a night at times if he was insistent with Debbie. Finally, Dandy reached around the tree for the silver snowflake package that was addressed **To: Debs (Curly) from your loving partner Dandy.** Now Dandy made a big deal about handing this package to his lover in front of her parents, giving her a wet kiss on her knees, with one hand resting on her thigh as she sat in the chair opposite of her parents. He handed it to her saying aloud for all to hear, "Love ya, baby". Debbie's parents just sat there, like stone effigies, saying nothing but watching everything carefully. For his part, Mr. Williams was known to have a touch of Alzheimer's and hard of hearing, but he played that up to the hilt, mistakenly calling

the new boyfriend ‘Clyde’ and not ‘Dandy’, over and over again, no matter how many times his daughter corrected him.

“This is beautifully wrapped,” Debbie said as she picked open Dandy’s surprise Christmas present. For his part, Dandy beamed a great smile across the room. Like a flower with soft petals, she gingerly pulled the ribbons apart, the scotch tape, and the package opened in her lap. It was a bright orange color, like a very delicate scarf, and Debbie looked up at Dandy, smiling, before she even knew what it was, saying “Oh Thank You.” Then Debbie lifted the gift up in the room for all to see. Holding each corner in between her two fingers, she raised up the orange crotchless panties like a flag from a rogue state and held it for all to see, even before she herself understood. Mrs. Williams, her mother, screamed in shock, “Oh my God, Debbie!” And her father, the octogenarian, wheezed, “A little bit on the breezy side, don’t you think, Dandy Boy!” For his part, pleased as he was with his own gifts, Gabriel was equally shocked but not surprised that Dandy would give his mother a sleazy sex toy for a gift, since that was the only honey that attracted him in to their house in the first place. Now, with those panties, those exhibitionistic bloomers only working whores would consider appropriate, Dandy’s candid intentions were out on the table. No one in the

room said a thing. Debbie stared across the room with contempt in her eyes. Her complexion had reddened slowly until, rolling up the crotchless panties she threw them at Dandy without a word. Dandy had been looking away, at the Christmas tree or the wall, when the panties hit him squarely in the face. Poof, they hit his face and fell to the floor. “We’d best be going,” her mother said firmly after a minute of silence. “I’ll drive you,” said Dandy.

“No, I’ll drive them home,” affirmed Debbie. “You’ve had a few too many!”

When she got back in an hour the fight started. Gabriel had found a hard ball in his closet and was slapping the ball back and forth in to his new mitt, over and over again, while the fight between Dandy Boy and his mother raged in the kitchen. For once the kid liked seeing adults screaming at each other. This was different from the fights that had ensued between his Mom and his Dad during the divorce. This time Dandy Boy was getting everything he deserved. The crotchless panties were the tip of the ice berg. His mother raged at Dandy, telling him that he was ‘tearing at her vagina’ and that she had had it with his sexist chauvinism. Dandy’s free ride was over, plead as he would, until he tried to grab at Debbie in an embrace, but

she threw him to the floor. He would have hit her back, no problem, given her a black eye or two for a Christmas present, had not Gabriel thrown the hardball at his back, slamming in to him with the force of a professional boxer's fist. Dandy screamed out in pain as Debbie got physical with him once again, pushing him out of the door, out on to the cold back porch in his house slippers. He began to beat on the door but by the time he made his way to the front door, Debbie - who had been through this with another man (Clyde in fact) once before - had called the police. It was the same scene all over again. Only this time it was Dandy Boy who spent the night in jail, having been charged with assaulting a police officer after one of them punched him in his big drunken mouth for calling Debbie 'a filthy whore'. Finally, with Dandy Bullock sent packing and a court order against his return to the house, Gabriel could do his school work on the kitchen table. His concentration and marks improved. When the time came, he slid in to the home plate, passing Grade Four.

On his next trip over to see his father, Gabriel described the whole Christmas fiasco. How his grandparents had asked to leave when Dandy tried to get Mom in to a pair of sleazy panties. The whole of Christmas was ruined, Gabriel related

with a smile; and Debbie and Dandy had a big fight. Dandy Boy was sent packing, never to return. With Dandy gone, cooling his heels in the local lock up, he and his Mom (he told his real dad) had a great Christmas! “You won’t believe this Dad, but at one point Dandy Boy tried to blame the panties on you, but Mom wouldn’t believe him!” Father and son sat laughing in the living room of his bungalow, even harder when Gabriel passed him the note he had found in his baseball mitt, saying: *I hope you get lots of good practice and fun with this mitt. Merry Christmas – Your Dad, Clyde.* Without making any comment, Clyde raised up the palm of his right hand and his son slapped it as hard as he could. For dinner, his father reluctantly took him out to his favourite fast food restaurant. Gabriel continued over his super size:--

“When everything calmed down, I said to Mom – I wish Dad was here again.”

“What did your Mum say?” asked Clyde, bemused.

“Not much,” grinned Gabriel “Just something like – ‘Oh shut up’”

Going about his work after his son’s visit, people remarked on seeing Clyde laughing to himself. He had some special joke that he didn’t want to share. It was okay, however. It was good to work around someone so cheerful for a change. Every

time he thought of the shocked expression on Debbie's face when she lifted up those orange crotchless panties in front of her parents, he shook with laughter. This had to be the best Christmas tale he could remember in decades, up there with Dickens's Scrooge. Dr. Virgil was right after all. Showing forgiveness and regaining one's sense of humor after a great loss is what makes this crazy selfish world tick along.