



From the kitchen window, Dorothy Kwan saw a crow picking at the carcass of a seagull in the lane. The backyard was overgrown with dandelions and alien-looking pigweed covered in strange blisters. If you let the pigweed's milky sap touch your skin, it would burn and irritate you, Dorothy knew. She sipped yesterday's gunpowder tea and ate an aged English muffin with Malkin's blackberry jam. From the breakfast nook, Dorothy let her gaze wander over the untended garden. Tomatoes spoiled on the vine. A sagging garage slept in the heat. From the boughs of a crippled hawthorn hung torn red paper lanterns from a long-ago party. She said aloud to no one, "Labour Day. They should call it 'Entropy Day' instead."

Dorothy put down her teacup carefully, turning the handle the way she'd been taught.

The kitchen was nice and cool in the old house, her home. Hers now, hers alone. Upstairs were three bedrooms, one chock-a-block with sewing machines, fabrics, and accoutrements. Dorothy slept there on a hide-a-bed; as a child she'd thought they were Indian—"Haida beds"—and pictured taking the couch's cushions off and pulling out a Native man in a robe and cedar mask. She couldn't bear the idea of sleeping in her parents' bedroom. Last month, in the interests of economy, she'd placed an ad in the *Georgia Straight* and rented out her childhood room to a female foreign-exchange student enrolled at the university for the fall semester.

Dorothy didn't need the money but remained too strongly her mother's daughter. She'd thought that a little undeclarable cash income would be worth the inconvenience of sharing the large house, but becoming a landlady had created unforeseen, irritating problems. Her boarder was late with the rent. It appeared Dorothy had committed an error. The

signs were not encouraging, and Dorothy hadn't seen the girl around the house for days.

"*Hai ah*," she muttered.

Her half-cup of tea had cooled, and the crow was gone from its meal. A cuckoo clock in the living room came to life and cried out nine times.

This house, she thought, *this haunted house*. She knew it inside and out, too well, and for the thousandth time wondered what to do. Should she keep it as it was? Renting out a room had been her first small act of change; perhaps it would have been better to auction everything off and start fresh somewhere else. Travel, explore. But that chance had passed her by, it seemed, and now she feared being trapped here forever, caretaker of a museum to her parents' memory and her own living past. Dorothy wasn't strong enough to scatter the carefully laid coloured sand of the mandala into the sea. Not yet.

She climbed upstairs and looked into her tenant's room. A Duran Duran poster had been taped to the wall above an unmade bed. Dorothy peered in to see clothes on the floor and one of those Russian nesting dolls on the vanity. What were they called? She shook her head at the mess and pursed her lips, then went to her room, the sewing room, to prepare for the day ahead.

First Dorothy put on a dove-grey conservative skirt suit and white silk blouse, a strand of imitation pearls, beige nylons, and black Mary Janes. In front of a mirror, she twisted her long jet hair up into a tidy knot with an ivory clip and strung the chain of a pair of her mother's half spectacles around her neck. Their lenses were nothing more than clear glass. Using a bristle brush, Dorothy carefully streaked her hair, starting at the temples, with white shoe polish. Next, she accentuated the faint wrinkles at the corners of her eyes and mouth with an eyebrow pencil. Finished, she examined herself critically in the mirror, and allowed herself a rare, close-lipped smile. Dorothy was now twenty-six going on sixty-five, give or take a decade. Standing up, she allowed her shoulders to slouch, then

straightened again. For a moment or two she debated adding a cane to the ensemble, but decided against it.

“Too much. Just a little too much,” she said aloud to the empty house.

Dorothy now had everything she needed. She picked up a black plastic purse and left the house, carefully securing the door behind her and tripping down the stairs almost gaily. The heat of the day already burned fiercely. A sickly pink rose trailed onto the concrete of the patio, and an untended clematis wound around a trellis. The house was on an odd bluff shielded from the street by thick cedar hedges. Dorothy descended another set of switchback stairs to the sidewalk. The next block over, a small Portuguese grocery did an excellent trade in buns and coffee, and Jimmy’s, an Italian mom-and-pop two blocks west, was great for cheese and sliced meat. Dorothy went north instead, humming “Heart of Glass.”

Most of Dorothy’s life had been spent here in Strathcona, an old neighbourhood just east of Vancouver’s Chinatown, first settled by a mix of Chinese and Italian immigrants from the early railroad days of the city. She walked past elders practicing Tai Chi on the field at MacLean Park. Two small Italian boys, enjoying their last day of freedom before starting grade one, ran by screaming, “*Acqua fresca! Vino puro! Fica stretta! Cazzo duro!*”

At the corner of Hastings and Hawks, in front of the Astoria, Dorothy caught the trolley bus downtown. She gave way for two tiny ladies carrying baskets. They could have been sisters, both draped in shapeless black widow’s weeds, though one was a swamp Hakka from Weihaiwei, while the other hailed from the hills near Monte Cimone in Emilia-Romagna. Dorothy paid her fare with dimes and found a seat on the shady side with a window that opened fully, allowing in fresh air. The bus was nearly empty on this holiday morning, and for that small mercy Dorothy was grateful.

East Hastings was a jungle of low-rent hotels, beer parlours, greasy spoons, pawnshops, and newsstands all the way to Victory Square.

There were loggers in Mac jackets, railroad tramps, knots of old drunks loitering on the corners without a single permanent mailing address between them, panhandling Indians, and even a hooker or two this early in the morning. The electric bus carried her through the mire and eventually turned south on Granville and went up a pedestrian mall. As Dorothy passed the James Inglis Reid butcher shop, she whispered aloud its slogan, her private ritual, "We hae meat that ye can eat!"

At Georgia Street, Dorothy got off after the two tiny ladies, her own shoulders now stooped again, her steps hesitant and shuffling. The block between Georgia and Robson was almost entirely taken up by the Eaton's department store, a huge, six-storey blank behemoth, its exterior completely clad in some kind of blank white stone. From her purse Dorothy unfolded a strong paper bag with rope handles from Eaton's eternal competitor, kitty-corner across Georgia: the Hudson's Bay Company. It was now slightly after eleven o'clock. Dorothy entered the air-conditioned, Muzak-filled store. She made her way haltingly to the third floor, ladies' fashion.

A perennial feature of the Eaton's chain was its chronic understaffing, holiday or not. Already items hung haphazardly from racks, and a line-up had formed at the only cashier. Dorothy moved slowly through the field of clothing, stroking Taiwanese polyester blends and checking price tags reflexively. She spied convex security mirrors in the far corners and marked bulky grey fixed closed-circuit cameras. A harried employee rushed by with an armful of dress slacks. Dorothy breathed.

On Saturday she'd done a reconnaissance and was now satisfied that all remained as it had been. The quality of the inventory at Eaton's was generally a good step above the Bay and one below Holt's. Amongst the usual mass-market dross of mid-range brands were a few half-decent lines: Liz Claiborne, Anne Klein, Nygård. Sometimes, though, gold could be picked from the racks. Givenchy. Chanel. Whether it was by accident or oversight, Dorothy didn't know. She moved to a corner where two items waited hidden amongst twin sets. There they were: a pair of beautiful

Christian Dior dresses hanging lonely together by an emergency exit. One navy, one black. Each her size, a European 28, each individually priced at \$1,500, enough to overdraw a splurging wife's chequing account. That didn't matter to Dorothy, not one tiny bit.

"So far, so good," she mouthed silently.

For all the world and the security cameras, Dorothy was a quintessential senior citizen, bent over by osteoporosis. She came here once or twice a month and varied her disguise each time. This identity was her favourite. Westerners had an odd blind spot for Orientals, especially little old Chinese ladies. Gliding along the rack and making a final survey of her line of sight, Dorothy opened her purse. Now it was important not to meet anyone's gaze. She felt that the eye sought out the eye. It was necessary to calmly will herself into transparent obscurity. With practiced ease she let her fingers slip up and down the seams of the dresses, finding at the hem what she sought. From out of her purse she took a small pair of strong metal clippers. With a quick snip, off came the electronic tags. Dorothy felt her pulse speed up, a well-remembered arpeggio of excitement and fear. *Good, she thought. Stay fluid, dance the steps to the music.* The Muzak overhead played a weak version of "The Girl from Ipanema."

Dorothy palmed one of the tags and with a sweeping movement had the garments in the Bay bag, leaving the naked hangers behind. It's always foolish to go to the changing rooms, the most likely spot in a department store for covert theft. There are cameras just outside the entrance, and horny store detectives usually watch the closed-circuit screens hoping for an accidental free peek. No. Far better to move quickly and without indecision. Keep your confidence. Keep cool.

A harsh squawking from the loudspeaker overhead almost scared Dorothy out of her nylons.

"Attention shoppers. Would the owner of an eight-year-old boy, answering to the name of Michael Bubl , please claim him at the service desk of the toy department? Thank you."

The bag she carried was now heavyish. Dorothy walked to the escalator. Never take the elevator; too easy to be cornered in a box. How many times had she done this? Once or twice every other week in selected stores, cycling randomly and irregularly. Dorothy calmed herself, breathed, slowed her heartbeat, and rode the stairs smoothly down.

Ground floor. She moved a little more leisurely now, making a circuit around the shoe department, doubling back for followers, scanning for store detectives in sports blazers or any heavyset *gweilos*. Dorothy lingered a moment at the sunglasses, using the spinning racks with mirrors to check for stray furtive glances in her direction. A housewife had just finished having boots rung up at a till and headed to an exit. Dorothy bumped into her. The woman blurted, "Oh, I'm so sorry. Pardon me, ma'am."

Typical Canadian, thought Dorothy. *Apologizing when it's someone else's fault*. The housewife went to the northwest exit as Dorothy headed to the Robson Street side. Now there came the moment when Dorothy's nerves sang every time, a wicked, thrilling moment of pure will. Fear and bravado mingled with a touch of controlled panic, and a fatal consignment of her fate to the gods above and below. *Luck, give me luck*, she thought. At the Robson side, the electronic detectors were oddly placed and left a gap on the right. This exit also provided the best outside escape routes. If pursued she could run across the street through an alley to a parking garage and cut back through another alley and freedom. If she was fast enough. And Dorothy knew she was.

In the unlikely case of an overlooked tag, Dorothy swung the bag just outside the sensor column, let go, and caught it deftly on the other side. Nothing. As she pushed outside, she heard an alarm screech in another part of the store. The tag Dorothy had put in the polite housewife's bag went off. Her poor dupe. Dorothy stepped out into the hot air. At that moment the noon horn atop the BC Electric Building went off, the first four notes of "O Canada" rebounding throughout downtown Vancouver.

Dorothy walked along the courthouse side of Eaton's and crossed to the Hotel Georgia. She went into the ladies' room, unpinned her hair, and ran a wet comb through it to remove the shoe polish that had disguised her age, then wiped her face clean with cold cream. At the valet's desk, she stapled shut the Bay bag of stolen Dior dresses and checked it in with a note that read, "To be claimed by Mary Worthington."

The cocktail lounge was pleasantly dark and cool. Dorothy had a nice long Singapore Sling and beat off the advances of a good-looking American lawyer on his way back to the States. He'd just finished a salmon-fishing expedition up at Hakai Pass, near the Queen Charlottes.

"You should've seen how big it was," he said.

"What?" asked Dorothy, almost amused.

The lawyer held his hands about a foot apart and, with a twinkle in his eye said, "The one that got away."

Dorothy laughed. She let the American pay for her drink, accepted his business card, and had the valet hail her a cab.

"Strathcona," she commanded the driver.

In the backseat Dorothy held up her hand. Not a single tremor. The taxi sped east over the Georgia Viaduct onto Prior. She saw a green and red Puck painted on a wall, shilling for Money's Mushrooms, who said, "What food these morsels be!"

Two blocks from Union Street, Dorothy paid off the cab and walked home. She climbed the shielded concrete switchback steps to the patio, looked up, and froze. Two men stood on the front step watching her, one of them wearing a police uniform.