

John Tavares

Year 2000 Problem

Char shot her boyfriend during the previous autumn's hunting season. The young man died of the gunshot injuries from her rifle, after an agonizing few weeks in the intensive care unit in Thunder Bay, where he was flown by air ambulance. During their moose hunting trip, Char brandished a vintage Canadian army rifle, which she inherited from her father, along with his Northwest Grocer store, which she first managed after her father retired. Shauna, well versed in the gossip and rumors around town, from her perch in the elevated office above Amelia's Food Pantry store, told her partner Char had become estranged from her father, because of accusations, she said, she made against him. In any event, Char's boyfriend's death had been ruled an accident. Amelia felt dubious the young man was even her boyfriend. If they were involved in an intimate as opposed to professional relationship, Amelia believed it was of an idiosyncratic Platonic nature. Amelia didn't like to gossip about love lives and local affairs, but, earlier, Shauna persisted in asking her questions about their relationship and forced her to speculate. Shauna wanted to try recruiting Antin, a twentysomething newcomer with a degree in business administration, to manage the student and part-time employees in their grocery store. Despite her memories, Amelia flatly said Char was probably still a virgin—a remark which made Shauna wonder. After the accidental shooting, Char didn't face criminal charges; the old school commander of the local police detachment remained mindful of the fact she was the daughter of a World War Two bomber pilot. Her father had been commended for his courage while flying a crippled, bullet-riddled, shrapnel-ridden Lancaster

over bombing targets in industrial Germany. Likewise, as founder of the Northwest Grocer store, which Char inherited, her father was considered a pillar of the community, who donated money for the Catholic church roof and the town beach park. The police commander even complimented Char on her diligence and care in firearms handling. Her boyfriend had been her right-hand man, a young man half her age, who worked as her assistant manager. The local police commander asked Amelia about Antin as if he was a suspect instead of an alleged victim of an accidental discharge of a .303 bullet from Char's father's bolt-action military rifle during a hunting expedition. Amelia said she grew up with Char and still liked her after all these years, but she was the competition now. She hardly ever spoke to her, except at Rotary Club meetings and Chamber of Commerce dinners and banquets, and even there Char was usually curt and dismissive. Amelia suspected Char was suffering from mental illness, particularly after the death of her so-called boyfriend and then the death of her terminally ill father. Shauna told her Char had personally disconnected her father's life support, including his oxygen. Now, with her deep-set frown, her tired demeanor, Amelia thought Char always looked unhappy and miserable. Amelia believed she had become a recluse and remained skeptical of the nature of her relationship with the young man, who lived at a separate house, which Char owned. Amelia suspected Char had never been involved in an intimate relationship with Antin. She believed their connection was probably more small-town rumor and gossip, of the kind in which Shauna enjoyed partaking with meticulous devotion and enthusiasm. Amelia recalled Antin, who lived down the street in their neighborhood, near the golf course and curling club, had even installed closed circuit cameras—no small expense—above the driveway and front door after this small backyard house he rented from Char was vandalized.

Knowing Char, Amelia couldn't resist speculating she was somehow behind the incident, even though she owned the house. As the daughter of Portuguese immigrants, Amelia grew up with Char, attended the same Catholic elementary school and the same public high school. The pair even developed a close relationship in middle school. Char constantly invited her to her house to play baseball and football. She remembered how hard she threw the baseball at her. One late spring evening when she walked to her house, she stopped to chat with Jess, a mutual classmate, now the owner and manager of a local travel agency, as she strolled on the sidewalk past Char's house. Char kept calling to her impatiently from her upstairs bedroom window. Afterwards, Char wouldn't admit she was jealous, but she was surprised how much harder she threw the

baseball at her that late spring evening. Char threw the ball, not a softball but a smaller dense baseball, hard and fast, and she persistently increased the velocity of each throw. Once, she feared, her pitch broke the small bones in her hand when she managed to catch the fastball she whipped at her. Still, she nurtured an affection for Char; she wasn't feminine or effeminate or weak, and she considered her beautiful. She thought she didn't have to worry about touching her, or saying the wrong thing, or offending her unintentionally. Char was tomboyish and easily shrugged off most of the girlish and boyish stuff, pranks, and antics in which she engaged, alongside friends.

Later that summer, they agreed to meet at the public library. There she found their mutual classmate, Jess. Char started reading outdoor and hunting and fishing and women's magazines with her, laughing, joking, nudging, rubbing, knocking, and kicking their legs together beneath the library table. After browsing through hardcover books in the stacks, Char felt stunned when she borrowed a gothic romantic mystery paperback book at the circulation desk and saw Amelia at a table with Jess; she didn't think other classmates, aside from boys, socialized with her. Still, she invited her over to the house later that evening. They sipped iced tea on her house steps in the unseasonably warm late spring sun. When the mosquitoes became annoying, the duo moved to the gazebo. Amelia wondered aloud if Char was upset with her, because she didn't have much to say, but they played catch afterwards. Char pitched and hurtled the hard baseball at her at extremely high speed. Amelia never played baseball with anyone her age, male or female, who could pitch the ball so hard and fast and with such an accurate aim. Still, she managed to catch every throw she pitched at her. Each time the ball landed in the worn leather baseball gloves with a slap. When she checked her hand, she noticed the force of the ball striking her hand bruised her palm. Then Char wound up and the vigor of her windup and the intensity of her facial expression should have warned Amelia, before she threw the baseball and struck her in the groin. Amelia dropped like a rock, clutching her crotch, screaming in agony. Afterwards, when she went to the washroom and tried to urinate, she was stricken with pain and her vagina was bruised and swollen and blood streaked her urine. She walked around, in pain and discomfort, with a limp for several days afterwards.

Char laughed after she struck her, although her mother first insisted on calling the ambulance. When Amelia refused that help, Char's mom tried calling the family doctor, a neighbor, with whom she was friends.

Amelia thanked Char's mom for her concern, but waved her off, and walked her bicycle home, sobbing softly, convinced Char aimed the ball at her privates deliberately.

Still, they continued to spend time together, playing catch, taking walks. The very last time Amelia dropped by her house, Char was arguing fiercely with her father, who, retreating from the slaps of his daughter, literally threw coins at her—money to get ice cream cones at the corner convenience store, which was near Amelia's house. The convenience store had a restaurant and dining area where Amelia liked to drink coffee and hot chocolate and play on the pinball machines and read magazines, comic books, and used paperback books available on the bookshelves. Char told Amelia her father had seen her take a Playboy magazine from the magazine rack one night. Char added her mother didn't want her hanging around her, but she didn't care. They argued over who should pay for the soft ice cream cones, and they playfully fought over the packet of crushed peanuts and colored chocolate candy sprinkles. Char said she could pay for the ice cream during their next outing, except, as events developed, Amelia never had the opportunity to repay her. They walked along Fair Street, and Amelia showed her the first house, a small bungalow, which her parents bought after they first immigrated to Canada and landed in town, where her father worked as a track maintainer on the railroad. Amelia said the house was small, but she had fond memories of growing up in the bungalow and wandering the trails in the nearby bushes. Char insisted she take her down the trails she liked to explore. They walked along the trail to where she earlier built a treehouse with her friends, in the forest near the fence that fringed the municipal airport.

"Is this where you read your dirty girlie magazines," Char said mischievously, with a titter, which caused Amelia to blanch and then blush. Char reached down between Amelia's belt and her denim pants. Amelia always wore boy's blue jeans and Char figured that was because she had four considerably older brothers and wore their hand-me-downs. Char groped her and tried to finger her, but Amelia was wearing a pair of briefs beneath her insulated long underwear and her denim pants. Amelia's boyish clothing style left her confounded, amazed at all those layers of under garments and underwear, long johns and briefs, some kind of Northern Ontario chastity belt, she wore in the warm sweaty weather. In a Catholic panic, Amelia clenched Char's wrist and pulled her hand away from her underwear, where her thumb hooked and scraped on her belt and the front of her pants. Amelia even pushed her hand and twisted her arm away. Amelia later wondered if she gripped

Char's wrist too firmly; she certainly had intended to grapple and wrangle with her. Char turned around and belted her, punching her with her balled fist harder than anyone, friend, or foe, had ever slapped or struck her, including her mother, or any teachers. Then Char hurried down the bush trail and rushed home down the street alone, while Amelia chased after her, trying to keep up to her, trying to apologize. Afterwards, Char stopped calling her and inviting her over to her house. She thought that blow effectively ended their extracurricular relationship.

After she graduated from high school, Amelia went to work for the owner of the grocery store, Food Pantry, which competed with Char's father's Northwest Grocer. Amelia's boss eventually sold his store to her, after a few decades of loyal employment, during which she worked as cashier, clerk, produce manager, dairy merchandiser, butcher, floor manager. So, Amelia became Char's commercial competitor and friendly rival.

As they matured, Amelia couldn't escape the conclusion Charmain, attractive, hardworking, intelligent, suffered from mental illness. After her father went into heart failure and suffered from Alzheimer's, she took over management of her father's grocery store—but, Amelia thought, she always looked unhappy and worn down. Earlier she heard rumors—about fights and arguments with her parents, during which she brandished a knife or a rifle. She heard she made accusations against her father, but, when Shauna pressed her for details, Amelia didn't think it appropriate to discuss them. When Amelia went to her high school reunion, which Char didn't bother to attend, she saw her former classmate in a bikini swimming alone at the beach; she became smitten and infatuated with her again until she concluded it was better for everybody's mental health if she forgot. She realized she was happiest and most content with her *Playboy* and *Playgirl* magazines; with pictorials she had no worries or complications with women, children, diseases, odors, all the messy things in life and love that drove adults to unhappiness, drink, and self-destruction. She could find her escape in beautiful nude women in a glossy magazine and return to her life as a grocer, after a shower and a bath and obsessively washing her vagina and hands.

Anyway, now she had Shauna, who she originally hired as office manager, doing the store payroll, accounting, and human resources, after she moved from Winnipeg. Eventually, Shauna and Amelia started spending time together. Since she couldn't find an affordable and a respectable and decent apartment, she offered Shauna her furnished basement, which Shauna said she liked when she went to the house to retrieve

accounting records from Amelia's home office. So, Shauna moved into Amelia's house, and eventually Amelia's accountant became her partner. But Shauna didn't want to have sex. Oddly enough, after a time, it didn't matter; Amelia still had her *Playboy* and *Playgirl* magazines.

On this particular day, Amelia wasn't quite certain why Char visited her store. She observed her through the window in her office, where she perused and closely examined her fresh produce, green bananas, oranges, and apples. Amelia heard her grocery store had run into financial problems; some had said she made bad decisions around the time of Y2K—investing in expensive computer equipment and security systems for her store. Char even bought a brand-new assault rifle, which could be modified into a fully automatic weapon, on top of the armory of rifles, shotguns, and sidearms she already owned. For Y2K, she camped in the business office of her store overnight on December 31, 1999, expecting riots, mayhem, and cyber warfare at the toll of midnight and the dawning of the New Millennium, but nothing happened. She stood on guard in her office when the year 2000 rolled around, expecting the apocalypse, instead of being at the Legion celebrating the New Year with the rest of the leading members of the community, but she had always been the odd person out. She also rejected Amelia's offer to buy her store. Now not only was Char struggling to compete with Amelia, but also with the new big box stores and discounters in Dryden.

Now, since Amelia feared her encounter with her would cause her stress, she took a nitroglycerin tablet and went down to the produce department. Amelia strolled down to the main floor of the supermarket, where Char examined the apples and oranges in the produce section. Amelia said a courteous hello and asked her how she was doing, but Char merely glared at her, as if she offended her in some disreputable way. Char took a leisurely stroll out of the store, taking a huge bite from the large apple, tossing, and catching the shiny Red Delicious apple like a baseball, as she whizzed past the checkout counter, while the cashier stared at her as she passed through the automated door. Amelia merely shrugged and returned to her office.

Later that day, Shauna said her rival Northwest Grocer, which Char had inherited from her father, had just went out of business and the front doors were padlocked. The manager was in the middle of closing Char's small business accounts when Shauna made the daily Food Pantry deposits and receipts at the bank.

That night, after she closed her Food Pantry store, Amelia drove downtown to the site of Char's Northwest Grocer on Front Street. When she saw the storefront was dark, she stepped out of her pickup truck.

She walked further down the block, the main street abandoned, lending the main thoroughfare the bleak ethereal mood of a ghost town. When Amelia could see no sight of Char or anyone around, she walked back up the street and saw her sign, "Closed: Gone shopping to Dryden." Amelia supposed that was a dig towards all her former patrons who no longer shopped local but drove the sixty miles to Dryden to shop at the supermarkets and discount stores, the Walmarts and the Safeways, in the mill town on the TransCanada highway. Through the gaps in the butcher paper and grocery store flyers, advertising deboned chicken breasts for .99 cents a pound, and whole grain sliced bread for 1.99 a loaf, which covered the Front Street facing display windows, she could see the mostly empty supermarket shelves. Amelia realized her competition, around for the past forty years, before she even assumed ownership of her Food Pantry store, which she bought from her former employer, who even co-signed the bank loans, was closed, probably forever. She felt sympathy for Char, but she no longer had to worry about local competition, and hunting season had started, and moose hunting was her favorite form of recreation. Amelia needed the fresh air and stress relief of the outdoors and decided the following day, a Sunday, she would hunt. She thought she shouldn't be surprised if she saw her on the trails, since, taking after her father, from whom she inherited Northwest Grocer, she enjoyed hunting on the logging and country roads, long abandoned, and trails outside of town. Sometimes Amelia even came across her, with her high-powered rifle, in her blaze orange vest and orange toque.

That Sunday morning, Amelia skipped church and parked her four-wheel drive pickup truck near the creek and beaver dam, when she realized she risked getting stuck in the mud and ruts of the worn logging road. Besides, she didn't want to scratch the paint job on her pickup truck, which she also used as a company vehicle. She sometimes asked the stock boys to make home deliveries of groceries to a few select, high-paying customers, with her brand-new pickup truck. She figured Char couldn't afford to make deliveries of groceries, although when her father owned the store, the old man did make deliveries, if the customer requested and bought plenty of groceries. Anyway, Amelia didn't want the rough twigs and branches growing thickly alongside the narrow logging road, damaging the exterior of her truck, scratching the fresh paint. She parked beside a creek and beaver dam, and, as she walked along the logging road, the quietness and serenity of the surroundings in the bush had a tranquilizing effect. Her peaceful state of mind was interrupted when she saw Char's mud coated red Jeep, which she had inherited from her father and used for hunting, hauling fire wood,

and walleye and smallmouth bass fishing. Char was also hunting along Lost Lake Road, a few kilometers from where Amelia parked her pickup truck. The details and surroundings were so sharp and in focus—the greyness of late fall foliage, the brightness of the patches of white snow, the stillness of the coniferous forests, the greyness of the skies. Amelia experienced a sense of oneness with nature. Amelia told Shauna she worried about Char, after her father died and she was forced to close her store, when the business went bankrupt, a victim of competition from the big box stores and the new discount supermarkets in Dryden.

Amelia munched on a sausage and crusty bun, wrapped in tinfoil, from the bakery department in her supermarket, as she hiked along the logging road. Despite her lack of diligence as a hunter, she still expected to spot a moose. Then Amelia spotted a moose, but, noisily chewing bread and pulled pork, she startled the young bull with the noise from her food wrapper. The young bull moose quickly crashed ahead into the bushes at the side of the logging road. Amelia tried to trail the moose, but the late autumn snow was melting and the tracks faded in the foliage and undergrowth. She continued to peer through the brush, trying to locate the tracks of the moose hooves, in the heavy foliage and patches of snow, but she didn't want to get lost. She returned to the road and continued to walk along, the blood pounding in her head and heavily in her chest. She remembered her doctor reminded her that she suffered from high blood pressure; that she was morbidly obese and needed to lose an unfathomable amount of body weight; that she needed to change her diet and reduce her cholesterol before she suffered another heart attack. When she spotted the moose again, she became so excited her diseased heart tortured her with pain. Ever so silently she popped a nitroglycerine tablet from her medication bottle while she gently balanced her .308 rifle between her hands and knees. The medication gently popped and fizzed underneath her tongue. She allowed the effects of the nitroglycerin to work on her, on the diseased arteries of her overexerted and overexcited heart. After a few suspenseful minutes transpired, she caught a glimpse of a patch of brown. She drew the iron sights of her Remington pump action .308 on the shifting patches of grey rustling in the twigs and branches of spruce and pine trees—she was unknowingly aiming her rifle muzzle at Char. She pulled the trigger and felt the recoil pad slam against her down-filled shoulder. Hearing a stirring in the bushes, she figured that certainly she had caught her game. For good measure, she shot another bullet into the bushes. She didn't want to find herself in the path of a charging bull moose.

Pushing through the thick grass and brush, Char emerged from the bushes with her plastic bottle of Diet Coke, her rifle, and the snowshoe hare she had shot. With cold, steely eyes, she stared her straight in the face—Char, owner, and manager of the Northwest Grocer, now shuttered, formerly Amelia’s chief competitor for sixty miles, her sole rival in the cutthroat food retailing business in town. The muzzle of her rifle rested against the blood-stained cloth of her plaid wool coat. Her face exuded a healthy natural glow and her eyes eerily froze into a stare locked on Amelia. Char drank from the plastic bottle of Diet Coke, into which she had poured a triple shot of spiced dark rum. Amelia was surprised to see her drinking, and she knew she was drinking because she could smell the spiced rum. Amelia was surprised; she never knew Char to be a drinker. Shauna told her that employees at Char’s store, particularly her female cashiers became concerned about her. They noticed the former teetotaler had started drinking. They smelled the alcohol on Char’s breath, and noticed the erratic behavior of the boss they always knew to abstain from alcohol. For her part, Char now found that spiced rum and a sublingual Ativan helped her cope with anxiety after first Antin and then her father died.

“Char, I’m sorry to hear about your father.”

“He was old and sick and he wanted to die.” Char took a sip of her spiced rum and Diet Coke. “People die.” Char sipped her Diet Coke again; her drinking struck Amelia as some sort of tic or mannerism. Amelia didn’t ever remember her drinking alcoholic beverages before and could barely conceal her disapproval. Char waved the plastic bottle of rum-and-Diet-Coke, as if offering a drink. “Everybody told me he was a great man, a war hero—he was an effing bomber pilot—he killed civilians. He couldn’t shake the conviction, couldn’t live with killing civilians, so you never heard him bragging. He started as a bush pilot when he was a teenager, but after the war he was suddenly afraid to fly and couldn’t pilot planes. Christ, he dumped tons of bombs on German cities and innocent people. You call that a hero?”

“Yes,” Amelia said. “Plenty of local boys served in bombers during the war.”

“He told me the night they bombed Dresden was the most incredible and amazing thing he ever saw in his life—this great baroque city lit up by a hurricane of fire. I could never understand how my father, this kid from Northwestern Ontario, landed in the cockpit of a Lancaster dropping tons of bombs in a huge formation of RAF planes, creating a firestorm in Germany. I could never understand how a teenager, a bush pilot, who wound up flying bombers in the world’s biggest war could go back to a normal life.”

“That’s why he was a grocer in a small northern town. No better way to lead a quiet productive life than in your hometown.” Char set the plastic bottle of rum and Diet Coke on a rock and swung the long bloody carcass of the rabbit over her shoulder. She appeared intoxicated, and Amelia realized this was the longest conversation they transacted in a few decades, and she needed to tread carefully. “I’m sorry about the store.”

Char lifted her rifle in anger. “That’s none of your business.”

“I might be still interested in buying the building,” Amelia said spontaneously.

“You have nerve.” Char poked the air with her rifle.

Earlier, during pillow talk, Shauna told her if Char inherited the bulk of her father’s estate, she would have the liquidity to stay in the grocery business. Her financial losses would extend deeper over the long term, though. She might have already burned through her inheritance trying to keep the store afloat; she simply couldn’t compete with the big box stores and discounters in the neighboring town, where local residents drove every weekend.

“Do you need money?” Amelia asked.

Char laughed a long, heckling laugh. “Are you my sugar momma? You really do have a lot of nerve.”

Her chest pains were causing her distraction. “You didn’t show up at the Chamber of Commerce or the Rotary Club meeting.”

“What’s it to you? I have obligations.”

Char held up the bloody snowshoe hare, decapitated by the mushroom bullets shot from her high-powered rifle, and admired the small game as it dangled from her hand. The rabbit’s raw bloody carcass stained the side of her plaid coat. Amelia couldn’t help noticing she wasn’t wearing anything like her own blaze orange vest and toque, so she would be visible to fellow hunters with weapons.

“I was worried the bullet that I just fired...,” Amelia said, her voice trailing off. Amelia was filled with remorse and contrition, but Char glared and then smiled when she saw her fear. Amelia also saw that age only made Char more alluring. Despite her late age onset drinking, she managed to stay fit and strong. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry?”

During the long awkward pause, her vintage bolt action Canadian Army rifle rested against her thigh with her thin bony finger, in a thick wedding band, wrapped around the trigger. Christ, Amelia rationalized, if

she hadn't fired first she might have become game herself. Although she feared she would fire a bullet in retaliation, Amelia decided she would simply try to walk away, lest the unfortunate encounter turn into a confrontation. Amelia turned and left the tall woman standing at the side of the muddy road in the tall dead grass. She quickly strolled along the roadway towards Char's red Jeep. As she, short of breath, puffing, sweating, strode down the logging road, past a huge uprooted tree stump, in the direction of the red Jeep, Char raised her rifle. Amelia pretended she didn't hear the click of Char's bolt action rifle, but as she neared her Jeep, a bullet whizzed over her head. Amelia took cover behind the Jeep, which irked and aggravated Char to no end. Raw with emotion, overcome with anger, she shouted at her incoherently. When Amelia raised her head above the hood and engine compartment, she saw her fierce expression. She realized there was no quelling or assuaging her rage.

"I'm going to give you a dose of your own medicine!" Char said.

Amelia emerged from behind the Jeep. "Char, you've been grieving your loss, you're under stress, you've been drinking—please calm down."

Char pointed the rifle at Amelia, who again retreated to the cover of the Jeep. "Stand back—away from my jeep!"

Couldn't she understand she fired in error, Amelia said, in the excitement of the moment, in her enthusiasm for hunting moose? If she understood, the point seemed moot now; Char was preoccupied with protecting the territorial imperative of her sturdy vintage Jeep. Amelia turned around and saw her shining smooth skin, her long thick dark hair, and her pinched, stressed expression as she raised her rifle. Char quickly swung and aimed her rifle around and fired. With the sharp cracking retort of her rifle, a bullet whizzed above her head again. Gripping the rifle with shaking hands, she pointed the muzzle to some indeterminate point above her head. Amelia thought the most prudent move at this point was to simply flee. Every time, she tried to take shelter behind her Jeep, she made threatening motions and ordered her to move away or step from her Jeep, as if she intended to steal or vandalize her rugged off-road vehicle. Amelia decided she would try to make a run for her own pickup truck further down the logging road but, with her diseased heart and sclerotic coronary arteries, she wasn't confident in her own ability to hurry. She feared, expected, Char would shoot her. Whether her bullets found their mark, or whether she would aim to kill her was another of her wonders. But she also

feared Char, in a self-destructive mood, wanted Amelia to shoot her. Amelia remembered back to the days when they played catch. Later, when Amelia revealed a few details of their youthful relationship to Shauna, she told her she was a numbskull. Of course, Char nurtured a crush for her and wanted to be her girlfriend, but she didn't reciprocate. While Char might have wanted Amelia to be her girlfriend, it was easier for her, even then, to have her *Playboy* and *Playgirl* magazines. Also, even as a girl she was an avid outdoorsman, hunting with a pellet rifle and fishing winter, spring, and fall.

Now Amelia crouched on the roadside, concealing herself, protecting her body behind Char's Jeep, crouching to avoid her potshots, near the bushes alongside the logging road.

"Are you going to shoot me, because, if you are, I'm ready to defend myself, I'm ready to die."

"Char, I'm sorry about your store."

Ravens wheeled and flew overhead – Char figured someone had shot a moose and its carcass lay nearby, which was why she had stepped into the bushes to investigate. Amelia decided it was too dangerous to stay and safer to leave; besides, she wasn't in the mood for waiting for Char to calm down, and she didn't like being held hostage. She stepped from behind the Jeep.

"Stand back from the Jeep!" Char pointed her rifle at her. Standing in the dried mud of tire treads, Char aimed her rifle and fired. Reflexively Amelia pointed and aimed her gun in a combination of raw emotion, retaliation, and self-defense. When she fired again, Amelia reacted instinctively and impulsively. In return, Amelia pulled the trigger on her own rifle, whose chamber she had left loaded, with the safety set to fire, after she saw the moose earlier. Char collapsed in the deep ruts of the logging road. When she realized Char became a casualty of her shot, Amelia walked over to where she lay on the ground, her chest heaving, gasping. The bullet ripped through the bones and soft tissues of her chest, leaving a bloody wound in the middle of her torso. Char, gasping, struggling to breathe, barely managed to force the words beyond her bloody lips and mouth.

"I got you, motherfucker." Blood dripped down her aquiline chin. "Now leave me alone to die in peace."

Knowing there was no way she could survive, no way first responders, paramedics, could arrive in time, no way she could help, Amelia watched her die. It was suicide, like suicide by cop, she kept telling herself. Char wanted to die and thought Amelia would be the perfect means to fulfil her end by euthanasia. Amelia was overcome by powerful emotion and a sense of urgency, as well as the need to act defensively, self-protectively.

Then she felt a fear and a need to evacuate her bowels and bladder and empty her stomach in the aftermath of her own rash action and recklessness. She could hear a voice in her head explaining to a lawyer she had merely taken extreme measures as an act of self-defense. She vomited into some bushes.

Amelia popped another nitroglycerine tablet under her tongue and broke into a middle-aged trot. She walked as fast as her heavy weight and lack of fitness would allow. After several false starts, she gunned the engine of the four-wheel drive pickup truck, with which she sometimes ordered the stockboys to make home deliveries of groceries to a few select, high-paying customers. She drove several kilometers through the meandering network of logging roads until she finally reached the secondary highway. November's snow had turned to frozen rain that pelted the windshield.

Instead of driving towards town, she turned east on the highway, and drove to the bend in the hardtop and gravel roadway to the single lane bridge over Sturgeon River. She stopped her pickup truck in the middle of the bridge and checked vigilantly around her, up and down the length of the highway on both sides, along the lengths of the river to their bends. She grabbed her rifle from the box of her pickup truck and threw it over the guardrail of the one lane bridge into Sturgeon River. Instead of a splashing in the water, she heard the rifle clatter on cement. When she looked down at the river, she saw the rifle resting on the cement abutment of the bridge. She drove her truck to the top of the trail and clambered down the embankment to the river shore beneath the bridge. She tried wading into the water, but she realized the water was too cold and she would suffer hypothermia or give herself a heart attack from the cold water, if she tried swimming. She looked up to the top of the bridge and remembered how her friends would dive from the bridge during summers. A friend had even doused his coat in gasoline, lit it, and dove into the water. Then she remembered her .22 caliber rifle. She went to her trunk, took the rifle from its case behind the seat, and took potshots at the laminated walnut stock of the high-powered rifle, until a bullet hit the pump-action rifle and managed to knock it off the bridge support into the water. She glanced around the river and the highway and the bridge, but there was still no late season boaters, anglers, or motorists or pedestrians around and she tossed the .22 rifle into the river as well. She figured this would be her last season hunting.

She went through two nitroglycerine tablets on the drive along Highway 642 back to town, passing a few rural houses, skidding several times, almost landing her truck in the swamp or ditches at the side of the road, as she sped recklessly, although she repeatedly told herself not to panic and to calm down. She drove by a few trucks along the whole length of the highway, noticing a few small game and moose hunters in blaze orange. Business as usual, she muttered, scanning the radio channels, and almost lurching off the road as she listened to her Food Pantry commercial and jingle on the radio station from Dryden. As she drove underneath a railroad underpass, she decided she would skip supper with Shauna, the woman less than half her age with whom she had taken to breaking bread occasionally. Instead, she stopped at a gas station and hotel and convenience store. She bought a *Playboy* magazine from the magazine stand, and at the self-serve station she topped her gas tank for twenty dollars.

Amelia checked into the motel and called Shauna, telling her she had an emergency business meeting in Dryden, sixty miles away. Over the telephone, she reassured her everything was all right. She reassured her they would very soon take that trip to the Azores, her parents' homeland—a vacation she had promised her for the past several months. After she bought some shampoo and hand soap from the confectionery, she sat in the warm tub lost in thought and remorse for over an hour before she showered. She went into the bar attached to the motel, her chest shuddering from the disco music. She popped another nitroglycerine tablet, and ordered a straight double rye, which she, a teetotaler, gulped as quickly as she would cod liver oil. Her eyes watered as the heaviness in her chest persisted. She thought she was having a heart attack, albeit a minor heart attack, which would be her third minor heart attack. She told herself to relax and ordered another shot of rye, which she drank quickly, even though she usually liked to sip and savor rich food and drink. Soon the pounding stopped in her forehead and she felt a heaviness in her chest and she wrapped her arms around her large breasts. The pain was not in her breasts, but radiated from the middle of her chest. She paid her bar tab, with a generous tip, stumbled back to her motel room, and napped for a few hours in her motel bed.

Then she drove through the night and snow, her spirits lifted by her plans for a visit to her parents' homeland in Azores, and the vision of escape, a jumbo jet streaking down a long wide runway and taking off into the gleaming sunset.

Several days later, she gave Shauna the airline tickets to Thunder Bay, Toronto, and Sao Miguel, Azores, which she bought from the local travel agency, where she heard more gossip from another former classmate and fellow business owner, her travel agent, Jess. Jess asked her didn't she think it shocking Char was reported missing. That same night Shauna heard from a former Northwest Grocer employee, Jess' daughter, who went to work for Food Pantry, Char was missing. After she packed their luggage, she settled down in bed besides Amelia. Shauna told her the night she graduated from high school she got drunk at her graduation after party with classmates and friends drinking and skinny dipping on the sandy beach at Abram Lake Park. At midnight they all stripped off their clothes and swimsuits and went swimming along the sandbar. Beneath the clear starry night sky, beside a campfire, she had sex with three classmates from her graduating class, her cheerleading squad classmate, her curling team classmate, and her home economics classmate, who played goaltender on the high school hockey team. She tried to reassure her the goaltender, despite his muscles and massive build, was effeminate and gay. Still, she had no regrets and enjoyed the experience and remembered the fling fondly. She belched loudly and proudly—she could burp incredibly loud and often showed off with her incredible eructations. Then she closed her eyes and slept soundly. While she snored, Amelia mused she had no compunctions about telling her about her partying and one-night stands and her sexual peccadilloes because she knew Amelia was practically and emotionally indifferent to her personal intimate history. Her tales of sexual escapades left her partially mystified and bemused. She felt impartial to her personal proclivities—she truly didn't care, as long as she kept the accounting books kosher and accurate so the revenue agency didn't ask probing questions and send auditors to the store.

Amelia read her *Playboy* magazine and remembered decades ago what had happened the night before Char had thrown the fastball that injured her groin, the incredibly fast and accurate pitch she made around the same time she stopped inviting her to her house. Shauna's snoring left her restless, frustrated, and struggling to sleep.

Days later, Amelia boarded the 737 jet with Shauna at Pearson International Airport. The passenger jet roared and streaked down the long wide runway of Pearson International Airport and took off into the mournful pastel sunset above the millions of lights illuminating sprawling Toronto. Later that night, while the

plane soared over the north Atlantic, Amelia grew frightened at the sight of the endless waves of the foreboding dark ocean thousands of feet below. She gloomily appraised the crowded jetliner interior, the crying babies, the dullness of her senses in the pressurized cabins, the Portuguese expats returning to their homeland for the first time in years, the excited tourists, and sensed impending doom. She feared catastrophe, an American Navy warship mistakenly launching a surface-to-air missile at the jetliner, a crash or ocean ditching of the passenger jet when its engines failed, or fuel was exhausted from a leak, and she grew panicky. Worried, Shauna commented Amelia was turning a bluish hue, while she sipped the rye and ginger ale the flight attendant gave her, after she wrote down her recipe for blueberry pie on a flight manual. The pain in Amelia's chest grew so severe she blacked out. When she regained consciousness, she had a translucent oxygen mask over her face. Shauna was sobbing, trembling, in a panic, as a flight attendant held her to comfort her, and muttered smooth words to sooth and console her in a time of distress. Another flight attendant stood over Amelia with the paddles of a portable automated external defibrillator.

“She’s gone,” Amelia said spontaneously.

“You’re going to be all right,” the flight attendant said.

Panicky, she pulled away the mouthpiece and oxygen mask from her face, but the flight attendant crouched over her, covering the parts of her exposed breasts with a blanket, as she bent to adjust the oxygen mask over her mouth and nose. The flight attendant stood above and astride her body, with a confident, assured poise and strong pose. She seemed to relish the moment, as the rows of passengers leaned forward and looked back to glance at the flight attendant standing above the middle-aged passenger, lying on the aisle. She held the paddles of the defibrillator against her firm smooth thighs. As Amelia looked up in a daze and a haze, she couldn't help noticing her strong bare pale legs, and her fit body. She tried to reassure her as she checked her pulse and blood pressure on the medical instrument attached to the defibrillator.

“She’s dead,” Amelia said.

“We all die,” the flight attendant said, “but you’re going to be all right.”