

WATER DAMAGE

-a young adult novel

by

DIANA LYNN WILKES

B.Ed., Simon Fraser University, 1997

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(Children's Literature)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

August 2006

© Diana Lynn Wilkes, 2006

Abstract

When her mom suddenly leaves home in Vernon to seek a job in Vancouver, Tracey's self-centred world is rocked. She reluctantly begins journal writing to try to express her inner turmoil. Consumed with anger, she is left caring for an irresponsible father and a troubled younger brother. But as relationships with her friends and responsibilities at school also deteriorate, Tracey is thrust into confrontation with the mom she hates.

Meanwhile, Mom's day planner reveals her hectic schedule—working two jobs to set up a new home for her kids and paying off her husband's gambling debts. Through her notes, Victoria expresses personal struggles and doesn't understand her daughter. Together they are tested with financial, employment, housing, and relationship issues. Victoria is time-starved and stressed in trying to achieve her goals.

Tracey experiences the challenges of city life and develops empathy for the homeless as she becomes lost in the Downtown Eastside and befriends a mysterious old man. Her growing maturity is revealed as she begins to accept responsibilities for herself, her family and her school but she also makes errors in judgment that damage her integrity. Throughout her trials, Tracey's love of country music develops into her creative outlet—writing fosters the expression of her healing soul.

The primary question is the definition of home. After living in a variety of places, Tracey must decide where she ultimately belongs—with Mom in Vancouver or Dad in Vernon. When unfortunate events affect well-laid plans and it seems she has no choice, Tracey finds a solution that benefits more than just her. She reveals that damage in many relationships can be repaired when forgiveness, love and the giving *and* accepting of help is shared.

Written in counterpoint journals— interspersed with phone messages, letters, lists, lyrics, recipes, and rental advertisements—the two narrators in this novel experience some of the same events but often with varying points of view. As they try to live together and work through misunderstandings, mother and daughter discover a deep appreciation of each other's strengths and abilities in the universal theme of relationships.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iv
Dedication.....	v
Acknowledgements.....	vi
<i>Water Damage</i>	1

Dedication

I dedicate this novel to all teenage daughters who struggle to understand their mothers.
And to all mothers who think they know their daughters but are pleasantly surprised by their
strength of character.

Acknowledgements

This thesis is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in Children's Literature offered by the University of British Columbia's multidisciplinary Master of Arts in Children's Literature Program. This program is offered jointly by the School of Library, Archival and Information Studies, the Department of English, the Department of Language and Literacy Education and the Department of Theatre, Film and Creative Writing.

Thank you to my thesis supervisor, Alison Acheson, and members of my thesis committee, Linda Svendsen and Margot Filipenko. I thank Judi Saltman for her guidance. I thank Maggie DeVries and Christy Goerzen for their early encouragement. I thank Debby for asking me to represent her. I thank Barry Hickman and Tracy Eso for their respective expertise in policing matters and insurance policy. I thank Joy Parsons and Leslie Warner for permission to include their anecdotes. I thank my daughter, Elizabeth Wilkes, for her many insights as well as details regarding serving practices and Vancouver locales. I thank my husband, Doug Wilkes, for his male perspective and constant encouragement and support. I also thank the younger readers who guided me with thoughtful perspective: nieces Meg Larsen, Hannah Larsen, and friend, Vanessa Calabrigo.

And to all who have asked me, "How's the novel coming? When can I read it?" —thank you for your interest and patient support. It means the world to me!

Monday Night, October 4

Journal—not “Dear Journal” and definitely *not* “Dear Diary,”

My English teacher, Ms. Singh, is impressed with my “poetic writing” in class even though I hate writing poems. She gave me this fake-leather book and tried to convince me that, “If you commit to writing something everyday, it will develop your creativity *and* help you deal with your feelings.” I guess by my *outstanding* classroom behaviour she’s picked up that something’s going on with me. “Student with anger issues,” as they say.

I’ve got plenty of feelings these days—I’m just not sure I can put them into words. Besides, Ms. Singh is missing the point—dealing with how *I* feel won’t change anything.

Tracey Ann Waters

Tuesday, Oct. 5

Journal,

I don’t know what to write about. She told me if I’m stuck I should just describe what I see.

Okay. I *see* the grubby jeans I’m wearing and wore all last week and I’m stuck with mismatched socks because no one knows how to work the stupid washer. Three days worth of dishes pile up on the counter while some have spilled into the cold greasy water to soak. *I’m not*

doing them again! Empty pizza boxes stack up against the fridge waiting to be thrown out. The garbage under the sink overflows because no one bothers to take it out even though we all smell it getting ripe. The sticky floor and mildewy towels left in the bathroom disgust me, and dog hair piles up along the baseboards in the hall. There's more. Some idiot bent up the front room blinds on one side and now they are stuck halfway down. On the desk, stacks of bills cover the phone that flashes unwanted messages—most of them from *her*.

But the worst part of this house is what you can't see. It's the emptiness you can hear. Coming into the house after school again today, it was just me. The silence was as deep and cold as the sea.

Tracey

Thursday night, October 7

Journal,

I just read what I wrote Tuesday. It sucks! I don't know why I even bother to keep writing in here—I sound so pathetic. I did manage to make a pun—Ms. Singh = missing—and a rhyme at the end—me, sea. Maybe I'm a poet who doesn't know it. Ha!

I didn't write yesterday because I was playing my new CD and had a ton of homework. Then Dad made us clean the stupid kitchen! I already described that dump, so I'll write about who is downstairs and why I'm up here.

Brady hasn't changed his clothes in days. He needs a haircut. Who knows when he last had a bath—he stinks. He plays Xbox, nonstop. I just asked him about his homework but he grunted something and stuck out his tongue. Eight year old boys are so ignorant. Why do I care about his education anyway? I'm not his mother.

Dad acts like a zombie these days. I had never seen him cry before, but now his eyes are all washed out and his clothes hang on him like an old man's. I feel sorry for him but I don't know what to do. See the damage she's done?

She's gone! Just like Montgomery Gentry's song.

Good riddance! She cleared out her clothes. She wrapped her grandmother's good china. She packed some other boxes of her stuff too. Then she crammed everything into the old Toyota.

It's been two weeks now and I don't care. Why should I? I mean, if she wants to get a dumb job and live alone in Vancouver, *so what?* It's not like she was doing us any favours by staying here. She was stressed and crabby and she cried all the time. She tried to share her feelings with me once, but it was too weird. She and Dad argued more and more and you can't blame him. Everything was just fine before. How could she just abandon our family like this? She doesn't even *deserve* to be called "Mom" anymore if she isn't going to *act* like one!

Trace

Monday, October 11

Journal,

Okay, I got kind of intense in my last entry. The pen actually tore through the paper, but it's okay. I taped the back. You can still read it.

I wasn't going to waste my time writing in here. But after this stupid Thanksgiving weekend, I can't deal with my homework. And I don't think it's fair that *I* have to do all the dishes. After all, *I* cooked the stupid turkey!

Our first Thanksgiving without her. I begged Dad to buy a small turkey so we could still have a proper Thanksgiving dinner. I would do it myself. *How hard could it be?* It was still pretty frozen. I didn't know there was a disgusting little bag of "treats" inside either. What are

they thinking when they package these birds? Who eats that crap anyway? They should just chuck it out! I didn't know how to make stuffing or whatever so I just tore off the plastic and threw the bird in the biggest pan I could find. Then I cranked the oven up to 400°F to heat up faster and cook in time for supper. An hour later smoke filled the kitchen and the detector screamed. We all knew something was wrong.

Thanksgiving? What's there to be thankful for?

t

"Hi. You've reached the Waters: Pete, Vicki, Tracey, Brady and Buster. We can't come to the phone right now but leave a message and we'll call you right back. 'Bye for now."

At the tone, please record your message. When you have finished recording, you may hang up or press one for more options.

"This message is for Mr. Peter Waters. I'm calling from Stanfield's Autoparts. There's an overdue account in your name for a total of \$876.45. It needs to be paid as soon as possible. We've sent several bills to your address with no response. If payment is not received by the 15th of October, we will be forced to forward your account to a collection agency. If this bill has already been paid, please disregard this message."

Wednesday, October 13, 9:17 a.m.

Late Thursday night, Oct. 14

Journal,

Dad wanted to talk tonight. Brady was up in his room with Buster. I was washing the pots and pans and leftover dishes that I couldn't cram in the full dishwasher. He picked up a towel and started drying. At first, he did his usual tease: "If you keep standing in that manure pile, girl, you're going to be taller than your old man."

Like we had "rehearsed" for years, I looked under each foot. "What? This crap?"

We sort of laughed. The joke is getting old but I'm still getting taller. He rambled on and on for a while about nothing then he took a big breath. "Trace, honey, I need to tell you something."

I didn't know what was coming but I still had a week's worth of pots and pans to scrub—no escape.

"I want you to know about what happened—why your mother left. We had some money troubles over the years but it got pretty bad the last while—that's what finally got to her, you see. Just before Vicki...I mean your mom...left, she blew up at me saying I didn't provide enough for you all and I put the family at risk."

What?

"Now, we're certainly not rich...but we've always had a good home and everything we need, don't you think? And didn't I buy you that nice stereo last year? I've always had a job at the sawmill and didn't want her to work outside the home. It was her job to take care of the house and you kids. That was our deal. But she said I wasn't holding up my end of the bargain. What do you think, Tracey? I just don't know what to do."

I didn't know what to say. My dad is the greatest!

Every summer, Dad takes us camping or fishing on the lake. When Brady or I have a game or practice, *he* usually takes us. Not her. He was even Brady's ball coach a couple of years

ago—until his own team made playoffs and had tournaments around the province. Dad's an awesome pitcher—at least he was. His buddies try to get him to go to practice, but Dad hasn't gone for weeks. He doesn't seem interested in working on the old truck either. Now he barely gets off the couch except when they schedule him to work the odd shift and when he tries his luck at the casino. But he doesn't look very lucky these days. She's done some damage!

"Dad, *you* haven't done anything wrong! Don't worry. We'll do just fine without her."

"I'm so sorry, honey."

He hugged me and started to cry. But it was too tight and too long. I didn't know how to handle all the emotion.

I had to break away.

Tracey



Happy birthday Dad!

We "bet" your "luck" is "flush"

and "paired" with "runs" in a "full house."

You're the best Dad ever!

Love, Tracey and Brady—

the best kids ever!!!!



Saturday morning, Oct. 16

Journal,

It's Dad's birthday and I almost forgot! Grandma Rose phoned from Edmonton to wish her "Petey" a happy birthday but he was still sleeping it off. His friends took him out last night and brought him home late. I know—they woke me up with their singing and Buster started barking. I guess they had fun.

It's okay because it gives me time to get something organized to make a special day for him. Brady and I made a pretty neat card and then I found some leftover bridal shower streamers and balloons in the cupboard and told Brady to blow them up and decorate the living room—they're prissy pink and purple but they'll make it a party. Now I'm sitting here with my back against the warm oven door waiting for the cake to do its thing and writing the story of my life. Ha!

I've never actually baked a cake from scratch but how hard can it be? I've watched her do it before and everyone ate the cookies and muffins I made in Life Skills class. No one died. She took all her cookbooks but in this magazine, I found a cool picture of a fabulous chocolate cake with six layers so I thought I'd give it a try. I cranked up the stereo and got started.

I was halfway through mixing the ingredients on the list when I noticed that dry and wet were supposed to be separate—does that really matter? They're going to get mixed together anyway. Keeping the egg yolks and egg whites separate doesn't make a lot of sense to me either—especially after two rolled off the counter and didn't survive the drop. I had no choice but to use them. I picked most of the shells out of the bowl but it's hard to get them all out with the flour already in there. The mixer's tricky to use and sprayed batter pretty far on high speed. Finally I got the mixture looking right by adding some more water and then more flour and when it looked ready, poured it into the pans. The recipe said to use "prepared pans" which just means clean. They are, pretty much.

Six Layer Chocolate Cream Dream Cake

Preheat oven to 350°F.

Sift together into bowl.....	2 ½ cups sifted flour
	1 cup sugar
	3 tsp. baking powder
	1 tsp. salt
Mix together	⅓ cup cooking oil
	½ cup milk
	1 ½ tsp. vanilla
Add to dry ingredients.	
Beat 1 minute and add.....	½ cup milk
	2 egg yolks
Beat 1 more minute.	
Fold in very stiff meringue of	2 egg whites
	½ cup sugar

Fold in 2 squares unsweetened chocolate grated medium fine.

Pour into 2 prepared 8" pans. Bake at 350°F for 40 minutes or until cake tests done. Cool completely.

Slice each layer crosswise into 3 layers and spread with Cocoa Fluff Topping (see below) between layers and over top and sides of cake.

Cocoa Cream Topping

Mix in chilled bowl.....	2 cups chilled whipping cream
	1 cup sifted confectioners' sugar
	½ cup cocoa
	dash of salt

Beat until stiff peaks are formed. Spread over cake with a chilled knife. Sprinkle with chocolate shavings.

Saturday afternoon

The cake's ruined! *Baking sucks!*

It still didn't look done after almost two hours so I took it out. Something was seriously wrong. The cake was still mucky in the middle, crusty on top and burnt onto the pans. It tastes disgusting! Even Brady wouldn't eat it. I think I used baking *soda* instead of baking *powder*. Why didn't I check?

He whined about a treat for Dad. I told him to shut up. He watched me make orange Jello with a can of fruit cocktail added. I hope it sets before Dad gets up.

I scraped the chocolate slop down the garburator.

I didn't let Brady see me cry.

Tracey

Washing Procedures

- Read the **Operating Instructions** card for operating your specific model and follow fabric care and laundry product labels carefully.

1. Pretreat stains and heavily soiled items.
2. Add sorted laundry to washer. Do not overload.
3. Add detergent, bleach, fabric softener as needed.
4. Set cycle selector knob and washer controls according to type, size, and soil level of each load and start the washer.

!WARNING! To reduce the risk of fire, electrical shock, or injury to persons, read Important Safety Instructions, pages 2-5, before operating this washer.

Sunday, afternoon, Oct. 17

J for Journal,

I'm trying to write again. I'm in the basement—sitting up on the washer while it goes through its spin cycle. *Whoa! Ride 'em cowboy!* I've got the music on—I'm into country tunes mostly. That probably sounds pretty lame to some people but I like the lyrics and the music, for the fast songs especially. The instrumental parts are cool too—the bass and the quick picking. I'd *love* to learn to play the guitar sometime.

I'm taking a break from my stupid homework. After phoning the math geek in my class, I think I got it okay, but the socials assignment just went right over my head.

Oh, and I finally found the instruction manual and figured out the washer—not that the instructions were that helpful! Now, by default, I get to do *all* the laundry! Yahoo. I guess I didn't sort the clothes right, though. My red tank top dyed all the whites. Now we all have pink socks, underwear, and other stuff. I don't care—it's a cool, smudgy pink. But of course Dad and Brady don't like it and were all freaked out because they think I dyed their stuff on purpose. I didn't, but if I'd thought of it I *might* have. It's sweet revenge for getting stuck washing all their grubby clothes because I'm the only girl at home. What am I, their slave?

Truly Tracey

P.S. "Suds in the Bucket" is playing... Just like the girl in the song—I wish *I* could get outta here!

"Hi. You've reached the Waters: Pete, Vicki, Tracey, Brady and Buster. We can't come to the phone right now but leave a message and we'll call you right back. 'Bye for now."

At the tone, please record your message. When you have finished recording, hang up or press one for more options.

"Hiya, Trace. I know you're there so pick up or call me back. . . Pick up, pick up! We've got to plan the Hallowe'en party and I need to ask you something. Hey, I want to talk about math class today too. Did you see how much homework he gave us *again*? Oh my God—it's four pages! Like, who does he think he is? I *do* have a life, you know. Hey, I know you're not answering calls but it's just me—Mel. Call me girl!"

Wednesday, October 20, 4:10 p.m.

Wednesday after school, Oct. 20

J,

The clock reads 3:41. Once again, I had to rush home after school to be here for Brady but he's late. My last class is out by 2:30 and I'm almost thirty minutes away—unless I can beg a ride. His school is only ten minutes away and he's out at three. He's supposed to ride his bike straight home but Brady's been later and later. It's so unfair! Dad doesn't want Brady coming home to an empty house when he's out. Now I can't even stay after school for music club.

At school, no one knows for sure, though Ms. Singh and Mr. Anderson might have guessed. She's read my other "thoughtful" writing assignments, and he can sniff out trouble wherever it is. I guess that's why he's a high school counselor—it must be the training, right? I'll die before I tell him that she left us. Ms. Singh reminded me about my overdue paper. Then she asked me how the journal is going and I think she actually wanted to *read* it! Yeah, right! I'm not even giving her the satisfaction of knowing I *do* write in it and usually keep it with me in the side pocket of my backpack. It even fits in the back pocket of my jeans—if I suck in my belly first. It doesn't have a lock and I don't trust Brady snooping in my room.

I kind of had to tell my best friend Melissa but she can keep a secret. Besides, her parents split up when she was six, so she's had lots of experience. In fact, Mel says she gets spoiled because both parents are now fighting for custody. They knock themselves out trying to one up each other with special gifts, trips, privileges and stuff. You should see the sweet car Mel's getting for her birthday next March! It isn't like that for me. Dad doesn't have that kind of money and I haven't even *seen* her since she walked out.

Middle of the night

Nightmares wake me up most nights and I can't get back to sleep for ages. Tonight I dreamt about trying to rescue stranded puppies before the tide washed them away. The more I

picked up and held in my arms, the more helpless pups appeared, whimpering on the sand.

Waves crashed higher and higher. I struggled to run but I could never save them all. . .

After the nightmares, I usually wake up in a sweat with the sound of crying in my ears.

Sometimes I know they're my own sobs. Other times the sounds come from down the hall.

t

Thinking of you across the miles . . .

Though distance is between us,

You are ever close to my heart.

Dear Tracey and Brady,

Hello my darlings—how are you? I think of you everyday and hope that you are doing okay at home and at school.

I'm working long hours at my new job but enjoying it. Life in the city is very exciting and so different from Vernon. I would love to show you around beautiful Vancouver—there are so many fun things to do.

Last weekend I walked along Jericho Beach and even though it was stormy, the wind was so refreshing. Tracey, you'd love it! I saw a dog there that looked like Buster. How's he doing, Brady? I haven't been able to speak with either of you but I have left lots of messages on the answering machine. Did you get my other letter? Here is a little money for you two to share. I know it isn't much but I will send more after my next payday in a couple of weeks.

Buy something special or go to a movie or something together. I want you two to stay strong during this time. I promise it won't be long before you can come live with me.

Hugs, kisses and all my love,

Mom

P.S. Don't forget my phone number is

Thursday, Oct. 21

J,

I finally decided to open the card she sent. I knew it was from her—with some Vancouver address and her stupid, flowery writing on the envelope. It was a guilt card from Hallmark—all sucky and sweet. I actually thought I was going to be sick when I read it—my stomach knotted so tight. What does she mean, “*Come live with me?*” I’m not showing it to Brady because it will just upset him.

He’s in a funk these days—I think he’s really missing her. She used to do everything around here and I’m trying my best to pick up the slack. My cooking and laundry skills aren’t great but good enough. Dad and Brady do some of the cleaning but it’s really up to me to get it done right. And I have so much homework! Grade ten is brutal with provincial exams and all. I don’t think it’s fair that I have to cover for her *and* take care of all my own stuff.

She did include twenty bucks which isn’t much but it beats what I have in my wallet these days—zip! She wants us to share but I’m not sure how I’d explain to Brady about the money without telling him what the card said. I’ll decide what to do with the twenty and maybe I’ll buy him a treat to show what a *wonderful* big sister he has. I figure I deserve a little appreciation for all the hard work I’m doing around here!

Trace

Friday after school, Oct. 22

J,

Hey! After supper tonight, me and about three other friends are meeting Melissa at her dad's. She managed to get us all invited to this guy's party—Kevin, who works at the sporting goods store at the mall. Mel has a huge crush on his friend Chad but doesn't want to go alone so we're getting ready for it together. Dad thinks we're just staying at Mel's overnight watching DVDs. I don't think he'd go for us partying with guys who already finished school. Especially if Dad knew about all the pot they smoke. But then I don't know with Dad—he didn't even ask me the usual parent questions that *she* always asked.

With the cash that was in the card, I bought me and Mel a bottle of Coke each and a big bag of chips to share. I felt a bit guilty about spending the twenty without getting something for Brady so I also bought some Twizzlers and root beer to give to him later. He'll be happy with that.

I don't need to bring much else except my toothbrush. Melissa has all the hair stuff and Hannah has some great makeup. Meg said she'd bring her music and Kelly is hoping to come too. I'll get Mel to do something cool with my hair and see what new stuff Hannah has to try.

Melissa has a ton of great clothes I can wear. We always borrow each other's stuff—well, I mostly borrow hers—but we have this thing we do with a deep blue cashmere sweater. After reading *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* by Ann Brashares, we decided to share this fabulous sweater we both wanted, just like the girls share the pants. Her mom, Bonnie, bought the sweater for us because it was super expensive. We call it our "lucky sweater" and trade it back and forth because we both know it's good luck. Melissa was asked out by a guy who plays centre on the basketball team and was voted onto student council when she wore the sweater for the election. I've passed every test I've written wearing it and met this hot guy at the mall who

asked for my number. He hasn't called yet but that was only last week. It's my turn to wear it tonight!

Trace

P.S. If Meg brings some tunes like "Here for the Party" and "Play Something Country" for us while we're getting ready then we'll be good to go!

Sunday morning, Oct. 24

J,

Oh my God! The party was a nightmare. I can't concentrate on my homework or anything. Ms. Singh said writing would help with emotional situations. Maybe I'll feel better. I spent all day yesterday in bed. That didn't help at all. I'm *so* dreading school.

Friday night started out okay, at least. We did each other's hair in loose up-dos or something different. I'm tall enough—especially with boots—so Mel just cut and spiked mine. I wore the sweater and borrowed Mel's tight, white jeans and cowboy boots but we decided to pass on the hats. When Hannah did my eyes for me, I looked at least eighteen years old and rockin' country. The others wouldn't do it but Mel and I added her dad's rum to our cokes. We were ready to party—*so we thought*.

At first the five of us hung out together because we didn't know many others there. Mel was practically panting as she pointed out Chad—and we all agreed he was *really* good looking. She'd been talking about him all night at her place so we knew she was set on making a move on him. I wasn't looking for any one on one action—I just wanted to have fun.

The party rocked with a ton of people and great music. I drank my "Coke" and forgot it wasn't just Coke but I made sure I didn't leave it unattended. Even though most of the guys don't like to, we got some people dancing a little and we were all goofing off and having fun. I

got hit on with my new look and danced quite a lot—especially with two guys who are around twenty.

Then, before I knew what was going on, Chad grabbed me and started dancing real close.

“I thought I might see you here. You’re the one from the mall last weekend, right?

Outside Kevin’s store?”

“Yeah, me and my friends were there.”

“Baby, you’ve got the longest legs I’ve ever seen! And in those jeans—ooh, I’d like to be the one huggin’ those hips.”

I just laughed. My height always gets noticed by guys.

Chad two-stepped a clumsy turn then gave up and led me over to the low couch. When I followed him I could appreciate how hot he looked with his Stetson and tight blue jeans! At first we were just sitting there drinking—my rum and Coke, his beer—talking and stuff. I wasn’t leading him on, *honest*. Then he moved even closer and started stroking my thigh and whispered something about hooking up. I could smell the beer on his breath. He licked his lips and gave me a sloppy kiss with a clear message. I started to panic and my stomach clenched. I felt woozy and hot. I knew I was going to be sick but I didn’t want Chad to know. I seriously wondered if I could even get myself up on my feet. So I did what I had to do. When someone called Chad and he looked the other way, I opened the wide neck of the sweater and discretely barfed down the inside. *I had to!* It felt absolutely disgusting as it slid down my chest and into my bra—but at least it was warm. I *thought* no one saw what I did but not everyone was as wasted as me and they could *smell* and eventually *see* the evidence.

When Chad made a face and asked what that disgusting smell was, I climbed out of the couch and stumbled to the bathroom holding the bottom of the sweater closed. There were no towels and the toilet had overflowed so I couldn’t even do much to clean myself up except

empty out the sweater, rinse out my bra and put it back on wet. My makeup was smudged all over my face—I looked like a freak. The damage was done.

I hadn't seen Mel in a while but she must have been watching us on the couch—and probably dancing before. When I came out of the bathroom she was suddenly in my face and screaming her head off.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing? Chad’s my guy! I said I was going for him and then you move in? What kind of a friend are you? I would never have brought you to this party if I thought you’d betray me. Tracey Waters, you’re cut!”

I was feeling nasty—I couldn't get everything she said but it was pretty clear she thought I had tried to get with “her” guy. Mel was furious and managed to get the others to side with her too. I got no sympathy from any of them for being sick either. They shunned me. I had no choice but to phone Dad. He was mad that I woke him up—he lectured me all the way home in the car and grounded me for a week. But without friends, I won't have much to do anyway. Some country chick I've turned out to be!

RE: party

Melissa Landstrom

To:

To Tracey Waters,

I just want you to know that what you did at the party is unforgivable. I told you I was interested in Chad and so you made a move on him just to tick me off! Thanks a lot! Then you got really drunk and ruined my clothes. I expect you to clean and return them. They probably need dry cleaning. If they're already ruined, you'll have to replace them.

I can't believe how stupid you looked trying to hook up with those guys. I'm never bringing you out with me again and just so we're clear—you are NOT invited to my party this weekend.

Melissa, your X-best friend

Sunday night, Oct. 24

J,

Melissa's email is harsh! I figured she wouldn't want me at her party—even though I helped her plan it. But I can't believe that she would blame me for *everything* at Kevin's party! Chad made the moves on *me*! What was I supposed to do? And then the truth is that *Mel* stole her dad's rum and *willingly* lent me her clothes. I just got sick—it was an *accident*! I can't afford to have them dry cleaned let alone replaced! I already wiped off the boots and they're okay with just a few water marks. I washed the jeans about five times, with lots of bleach too. The stains are gone but some of the seams look frayed and are coming apart a little. I hope she won't notice the bleach damage.

But I'm not sure what to do about the sweater—it's a real mess. The label says it definitely can't be washed so I wiped it up the best I could but it still stinks and looks matted. Before *she* left I never saw what she did with fussy clothes like cashmere—maybe she never had anything that nice. I decided to take a risk washing it on the gentle cycle—after reading through the entire washing procedure manual! It looked okay when I took it out but smelled like a wet cat. Hopefully the dryer sheet will fix that.

*

It's ruined! When I took it out of the dryer, it was the size of a baby sweater. She should be here to help with stuff like this! That's what mothers are for. How was I supposed to know what to do?

T

Monday afternoon, Oct. 25

J

Today at school was brutal—Dad *made* me go.

Everyone knows what happened even if they weren't at the party—rumour has it:

"Tracey Waters stole Melissa Landstrom's guy." I did not *steal* him. Besides, he wasn't hers yet.

I met Chad the same day she did but never thought he'd be interested in me.

Melissa hates me and kept ignoring me all day. I saw her in the hall and tried to explain what really happened but she glared at me as she walked by with her student council groupies. My other friends avoided me too. They'd only talk to me to "clarify the facts" and to laugh at how disgustingly drunk I was. At lunch I scanned the cafeteria but didn't see anyone who wanted to sit with me. I left and ate my sandwich sitting on a toilet in the girls' can. I just let the tears come.

I have no friends. I hate my life.

t

"Hi. You've reached the Waters: Pete, Vicki, Tracey, Brady and Buster. We can't come to the phone right now but leave a message and we'll call you right back. 'Bye for now.'"

At the tone, please record your message. When you have finished recording, hang up or press one for more options.

"Hello Mr. and Mrs. Waters. Once again this is Mr. Polson, the principal at Creekside Elementary School. I'm calling with regards to an altercation between Brady and some other boys on the playground today. It is imperative that we speak about this incident as soon as possible to determine an appropriate course of action. Please call me at the school as soon as you get this message and I'll try calling again later as well. Thank you and have a good day."

Thursday, October 28, 2:14 p.m.

Thurs. night, Oct. 28

J,

Brady came home from school with a bloody nose and I cleaned him up—once I found the rubber gloves. Disgusting! His principal must have called three or four times. He left messages because Dad's not home much and I hate answering the phone with people asking for bills to be paid. I thought it was that brain, Daryl from math, calling me back with homework help, so I picked up. Big mistake! When I told Polson my parents were unavailable this weekend, I had to listen to "the principal talk" and promise to "speak to Brady about the inappropriate behaviour of bullying on the playground." Yada yada. Like *I* can talk to that kid. Even though I gave him those treats, he won't listen to me at all.

I think he's moping about Hallowe'en. *She* used to make these really cool costumes for us, but of course, he doesn't have one this year. I tried to get him to try on a pirate outfit or a skeleton or something that I used to wear, but he won't even look at the old stuff in the box downstairs. It'd be okay for a guy to wear one of those but no, Brady is being stubborn and says he won't go.

Obviously I'm not going to Melissa's party but Kelly actually invited me to hers on Saturday night. I don't think I'll go though. Her parents will most likely be there but they're okay. Dad would probably let me go too, even though he said I'm grounded. It's just that I don't know if I can face everyone at a party just yet. But a third-grader skipping trick-or-treats? I'm starting to worry about Brady. Dad doesn't seem to notice what's going on so I have to talk to him. He's the dad—he should do something to help.

Tracey

"Hi. You've reached the Waters: Pete, Vicki, Tracey, Brady and Buster. We can't come to the phone right now but leave a message and we'll call you right back. 'Bye for now."

At the tone, please record your message. When you have finished recording, hang up or press one for more options.

"Hi kids, it's Mom! I'm so excited today. I got a new evening job with wages *and* tips! I'm going to try to keep both jobs and should be able to rent a bigger place now. Isn't that great? Bet you didn't think your Mom would be able to land two jobs in just over one month! Is everything going great with you too? Having fun? Are you getting your homework done and staying out of mischief? I miss you both very much! Be good. Have a happy Hallowe'en but don't stay out too late—remember it's a school night. Oh, remind your father to buy candy for the trick-or-treaters.

"I have to go catch the bus to start my shift now. Yes, I had to sell the car. I don't really need it here in the city, anyway. Well, 'bye sweethearts . . . kiss, kiss."

Friday, October 29, 4:38 p.m.

Saturday afternoon, Oct. 30

J,

I still don't know about Kelly's party. It'd probably be okay but I'm just not feeling in the party mood. I don't think anyone will miss me anyway. Maybe I'll rent a couple scary movies or something. I've still got a bit leftover from the \$20.

Now that Dad's payday is finally here, I got Brady to figure out the grocery list and the two of them went off shopping together. I suggested they go for lunch too and have a little chat but Dad looked at me like I was mental. I had to take him outside and fill him in about how depressed Brady's been and what I think he should do. With that little problem fixed and

groceries on the way, I have the house to myself for a while. But on his way out the door, Dad suggested that *I* could be helpful by cleaning the bathrooms. I HATE cleaning bathrooms, especially with the way guys always miss the toilet! It is so disgusting in there. I'll do the sink and the tub but I am NOT touching their pee!

Trace

Brady's Grocery List:

Chocolate milk (a big jug)
Pop (NOT orange)
Bread (the white kind)
Kraft Dinner (lots)
Chips – 4 or 5 bags
Wieners (in a package)
T. P. 1 or 2 rolls
Cereal (the good kind)
Salsa (the real kind)
Mustard (yellow not brown)
Eggs (in a box)
Cheese (orange)
Oreo cookies – 2 or 3 bags
Ice cream (rocky road or cookie dough, please)
Hallowe'en candy (mini chocolate bars – lots, please)

Hallowe'en Night, I think.

J,

The Waters family experienced public humiliation so I don't even know for sure what time it is.

This morning we slept in because we haven't been going to church lately and Dad had been out late. Again. But they managed to get a cheap costume for Brady at the drugstore and considering it was last minute, the Spiderman one looked pretty awesome if a little too small and plasticky. He was happy, so that's the main thing.

Every year for Hallowe'en our neighbourhood has a block party with fireworks, hot chocolate and hot dogs. We meet at the end of the street at eight o'clock and it usually wraps up an hour or two later. When I was little I loved waving sparklers around in the night and eating burnt wieners with my new candy. Hallowe'en was my favourite holiday and I was always so excited about my costume—which was usually a princess or fairy or something pretty. I became more freaky or funky as I grew up. Last year I was a florescent yellow glow worm and I made most of it myself.

This year I felt too old to go trick-or-treating and I didn't go to Kelly's party last night either. I heard it was actually pretty fun—Mel didn't have her own party after all but crashed Kelly's instead! Typical. I volunteered to hand out candy at our door while Dad took Brady around, even though he thinks he's old enough to go on his own. I think Dad likes the excuse to put on a scary mask and wander up and down the streets like a big kid. Half the time he'd lose us kids anyway. I didn't mind doing the door—it's just that you can't do anything else but sit there and wait so you might as well just write off the evening.

The first weird thing that I noticed was that Brady and Dad had been gone for almost an hour before anyone came to our door. Later, when the two of them came back to get ready for the party, there were still lots of kids running up and down the driveways. Dad hurried and

pushed our propane BBQ and wieners down the street to set up by eight. But no one came. We waited on the curb but were just heading back when the neighbours started coming. I didn't blame Dad for being pissed off.

"Hey, you guys are late! We've been set up and waiting for almost an hour. I don't have time to waste."

That's when Mr. Bickle laughed and reminded him, "Waters, you were supposed to turn your clocks back last night—to *Standard Time*. It's the last Saturday in October, *every* year. Ha ha ha!"

Boy, did we feel stupid. That's one more thing that *she* always did.

When we got back to the house, we each went around and changed the clocks but some got changed twice and some got missed so they all say a different time. Brady is so oblivious with his huge stash—I made him give me all the little Mars bars—and Dad is so embarrassed after the public ridicule that no one even cares what time it really is. If I'm late for school tomorrow, I'll have a good excuse.

If I go at all.

Trace

Monday night, November 1

J,

Administration didn't buy my time excuse. I was marked "absent" for three classes this morning. I don't care. I don't have my assignments done and no one talks to me anyway. It was a crappy day—all the talk about how great Kelly's party was or hanging at the park and lighting firecrackers. How juvenile. I waited at Melissa's locker during lunch hoping to talk with her. When she finally showed up she rolled her eyes and asked me to move. That's all I got.

Then this afternoon, Mr. Steele announced in Socials class that there's a field trip to an exhibit in Seattle planned for three days in December that he'd like everyone to go on. Since it's over a weekend and is pretty expensive, it's optional, though. Everyone, especially Melissa, sounded excited as the permission forms were handed out but I won't even bother asking Dad. Money is pretty scarce around our house these days. I'm sick of eating Kraft Dinner every other night!

Kraft Dinner

Directions:

1. Stir pasta into 6 cups (1.5L) of boiling salted water. Boil rapidly, stirring occasionally, 8-9 min. or to desired tenderness. Drain.
2. Add 3 Tbsp (45 ml) butter or margarine, ¼ cup (50 ml) milk and cheese sauce mix. Stir until pasta is well coated.

Thursday night, Nov. 4

J,

I can't believe it! Dad says he has to sell our house! Apparently he's having serious money trouble and hasn't been able to make the mortgage payments. The bank said something about foreclosure? He says it's just temporary—so why does he have to sell the house and make it *permanent*? Dad doesn't actually blame her but we all know how things have changed now that she's gone. She never worked but somehow there was enough money. We made it work when she did *her* share. Now we have to rent something and he's looking into a smaller place all the way across town near the casino and the motels. Even though my friends have pretty much ditched me for the time being, doesn't he know that changing schools in the middle of grade ten would be social suicide?

TW

FOR SALE:

3 Bedroom Family Home

2 Baths with Unfinished Basement

1800 square feet

Fenced yard

Close to schools

Friday noon, Nov. 5

J,

Last night I had another nightmare. I dreamed I was lost and couldn't find my way home. Everywhere I turned was a dead end and the walls narrowed in on me like a maze. Then, around every corner was someone from school laughing and telling me to go in a different direction. I couldn't breathe and felt hot and constricted but I kept running, around and around. I woke up with my sheets twisted all around me and Dad shaking me awake. I guess my yelling woke him up this time.

I tried to go back to sleep but couldn't and was too tired to bother with school today. I'm not actually sick like I told Dad but my head aches and I'm exhausted so I'd probably fall asleep in class again anyway. I'm just going to veg and see what's on TV.

T

Saturday morning, Nov. 6

J,

I caught Brady *reading* my journal! I usually keep it with me but I wasn't dressed yet—still in my PJs. I don't know how long he'd had it open but the way he jumped when I walked in my room told me he'd read enough to feel guilty. That's my private stuff! I screamed and grabbed it out of his hands, then started pounding him. He fought back and we had a full on fight. The screaming brought Dad in and he started yelling too. He hurt my arms when he pulled me off Brady and then accused me—like it was my fault! He wouldn't listen to my side of the story but took Brady off to bandage his scratches. My cheek is still stinging where Brady kicked me but I'm staying in here with the door locked. I'll never forgive him for invading my privacy. Brady can rot for all I care!

TW

Sunday afternoon, Nov. 7

J,

I'm bored. I played around with my hair for a while—I thought maybe they'd notice and stop ignoring me. It's not quite the way I wanted—I cut it myself in textured layers all over—which is hard to do on your own. Mel usually does stuff for me like the blonde streaks that turned orange a couple weeks ago. Now my hair is a bit chunky in the back. The front is really short now but looks more even once I leveled out the bangs. It's quite a new look so I'll see what kind of reaction I get when I show up at school tomorrow. I could tell Dad wasn't very impressed but what do dads know about style?

Tracer-girl

Monday, November 8

Note to student: Tracey Waters (gr. 10)

See me during Block D regarding your current academic status. Bring your agenda.

Mr. Anderson

Counseling Offices

Monday, Nov. 8

J,

It must be “gang up on Tracey” day. First, Mr. Johnstone called me up to his desk during math class and lectured me about my “poor performance” on the last three tests. He said this loud enough for the whole class to hear while they were supposed to be working *silently*. They were silent but they’re never working—they were enjoying the entertainment. I got razzed for it later and it’s not like I’m the only one failing math! At the end of English class, Ms. Singh “reminded” me that many assignments are NHI—I just found out it means “not handed in”—and I’m at risk of failing the term. In English? Give me a break—that’s my best subject! I’m writing practically every day in this journal she gave me! What does she expect? Yeah, I’ll get them done. Whatever. Class is so boring, anyway. We’re supposed to be reading this novel, *Theories of Relativity*. It was nominated for some award but it sounds like geek-material. I haven’t even started. I’ll just Google the title and find something clever to write. I don’t care. I’m sick of this school and I’ll probably have to move to a new one anyway. What’s the point of all this?

Trace

"Hi. You've reached the Waters: Pete, Vicki, Tracey, Brady and Buster. We can't come to the phone right now but leave a message and we'll call you right back. 'Bye for now."

At the tone, please record your message. When you have finished recording, hang up or press one for more options.

"Hi, Tracey, Brady. . .it's me, Mom. I think you should change that outgoing message . . . Anyway, I miss you. . . I hope school is going great for each of you. Are you doing fun things with your friends? Well, I'm still working my two jobs and saving up my money. And I've got some more good news. I found a new place away from the downtown, in an area called Kitsilano, and I can move in at the end of the month. Isn't that exciting? It's a two bedroom basement suite so there will be a room for you when you come to stay! I miss you kids very much . . . (sniff) . . . I . . . want to see you and talk to you. Did you get my letters? The card with the money I sent? I understand that you might still be a little bit angry but . . . could you just call to let me know you're okay? Tracey, sweetheart, I haven't talked to you in such a long time. You can always phone me at —even just a message. I miss you and love you both very much. Be good. . . 'Bye."

Tuesday, November 9, 4:23 p.m.

Tuesday night, Nov. 9

J,

We don't talk about her now. Each of us, in our own way, has moved on since she left almost seven weeks ago. She's sent letters I don't want to read and a card with some money—twenty bucks, big deal! She promised more but it hasn't come. I know Dad and Brady have talked to her a few times when she's phoned but I won't. She keeps leaving messages on the answering machine too. Man, it's weird to hear her fake-cheerful voice, like everything is awesome and *normal*. I don't get it though—why keep two jobs? Why the money problem? Why

sell the car? She loved that old thing. She says she's made a happy, new life for herself and wants Brady and me to go live down there with her. Yeah, right. As if that's going to happen. Like Jo Dee Messina says, "My Give A Damn's Busted!"

T

Thursday night, Nov. 11

Remembrance

Dear Journal,

Downstairs the realtor is taking a "nice family" through our house. Brady and Dad are out of the way, grocery shopping. I refuse to leave or let anyone in my room. The door is locked and my stereo is cranked way up.

I remember how perfect it used to be in our family. No one worried about anything. We only fought about things like who had the remote, walking the dog, and doing the dishes. I slept through the night without nightmares. I breezed through my classes. I had fun weekends with all my friends. It's not that way anymore.

Now Dad makes me stay with Brady until he gets home—which is often late—so I don't do anything but hang around here. And no one calls. Even though I returned the white jeans—you can hardly see the stains—and boots, Mel is still mad about the sweater. And the thing with me and Chad. She's also busy being "Miss Student Council Grade Ten Rep." I miss her and wish we could have fun times like we used to.

I've got to fix this.

I'm so tired from the nightmares that I can't concentrate so I don't bother going to half my classes. Usually, now I just stay in my room—writing stuff in this journal and playing my CDs. Zoning out to music distracts me. I've even tried writing my own lyrics because some songs just repeat verses and they don't even have to rhyme every time. Ha! I kind of like writing

now and it does sort of help. When I'm really upset, I feel better when I write, sometimes late into the night, pouring thoughts and pains, like blood from my veins.

Despite all my "poetic healing" in this journal, I know my life is ruined and will never be the same. This house doesn't feel like home anymore either. I've done some stupid stuff but there is really only one person to blame. When I think of her abandoning us, I know two things for certain—I would *never* do that to my family and I will *always* hate her.

Truly, Trace

*

*

*

*

"Hello, you've reached Victoria but I can't take your call right now. Just leave your name, phone number and a brief message and I'll be sure to get back to you right away. Thanks and have a great day."

At the tone, please record your message. When you have finished recording, hang up or press one for more options.

"Vicki...it's Pete. There's some trouble with Tracey. We both got called to the school counselor's office today. He was pretty nosey about our family situation but Ms. Singh was very nice. Anyway, I found out Tracey's been skipping most of her classes and not doing her school work. She might actually fail the term. I convinced them I'd make sure she got to school every day. They've given her a warning but she has to work hard to finish all her overdue assignments.

"I'm doing my best, Vicki, but she's causing trouble at home too. She was helping out at first but now she's been fighting with Brady, staying locked in her room, and wrecking the laundry. And she's done something weird to her hair. She's got real attitude now. I didn't tell you but she got drunk at some kid's party a few weeks ago too. I don't know where she got the booze but she sure reeked of sick when I went to get her. I'm sorry to just leave a message but I figured you'd want to know how your little girl is doing since you're not here to see for yourself."

Friday, November 19, 5:54 p.m.

Victoria's Day Planner: Friday, November 19

6:00 a.m. – 9:00 a.m., 11:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m. split shift @ T.H.

5:30 p.m. Meet the Bank Loans Manager

Notes:

PU boxes, paper—start packing!

Check work schedule for next week.

Bring budget and financial papers to Bank

Call Sally—at social services to reschedule goal setting

Buy groceries:

milk, bread, bananas, pasta, soup

Phone Tracey ASAP

Victoria's Day Planner: Tuesday, November 23

9:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m. shift @ T.H.

6:00 p.m. – 10:00 p.m. @ Oyster Bar

Notes:

Work—get longer shifts (talk to T.H.'s supervisor)

Find cheaper laundromat

Shop for work shoes—sale at Shoemart

Victoria's Day Planner: Friday, November 26

11:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m. shift @ T.H.

5:00 p.m. – 12:00 p.m. @ Oyster Bar

Notes:

Goal # 9 Register for painting classes

—phone for “Studio in Watercolours” starting January

Pack: get on with it!

Victoria's Day Planner: Monday, November 29

6:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m. shift @ T. H.

2:00 p.m. Meet with Sally

6:00 p.m. – 11:00 p.m. @ Oyster Bar

Notes:

Redirect & PU mail—BILLS!

Meet with Sally—review goals, personal planning, arrange next meeting

Sally said we don't have to meet on a regular schedule anymore! She suggests I continue to set goals and plan to keep my life on track; maybe even continue to write a journal. I like that idea—I can write whatever I want, especially when I know she won't be reading it!

“Hello, you've reached Victoria but I can't take your call right now. Just leave your name, phone number and a brief message and I'll be sure to get back to you right away. Thanks and have a great day.”

At the tone, please record your message. When you have finished recording, hang up or press one for more options.

“Hey, Vicki. It's me, Pete, again. When are you getting home? I've already left two messages for you to call but didn't hear back so I'll just tell you what's happened.

“Yesterday Tracey was caught shoplifting a really expensive sweater at the mall. The RCMP lectured and fingerprinted her and everything. But now she's madder than ever.

"Vicki, I don't know what to do with her these days! She's angry *all* the time! Maybe she should stay with you for a while. Maybe you can straighten her out. Sorry, Vicki, I tried.

"There's a bus that leaves here around 10:00 Monday morning and I can get her on that before my shift in the afternoon. We need to talk. Call me back so I know you'll be there to pick her up. Okay? 'Bye for now."

Saturday, November 27, 8:54 p.m.

* * * * *

Sunday morning, Nov. 28

Journal,

I can't believe I did that! It was *stupid* and I should have known I'd get caught. It's not like I planned it though. Stupid impulse! I was just looking—to see if I could find a cheap one that looked kind of the same. But the one I found was pricey—a cool hundred and sixty. The store was busy so it was easy to go unnoticed in there. I thought about what I was doing for a brief guilty moment but pushed my conscience away. I figured it was the only way, stuffed it under my hoodie and walked out. I didn't know there was a security tag attached so when the alarm sounded just behind me I jumped a foot but kept going—faster. The security guard spotted me and it didn't take long for a crowd of people—lots from school—to gather around and take in the action. When he made me pull the sweater out, I could have shriveled up and died. Some guys started laughing and others were giving me a look—like I'd killed someone.

The store manager took me to the back and stood with her hands on her hips in front of me while the guard stood too close behind. She lectured me about working people and small businesses and earning a living and on and on. I get it. But when the RCMP constable walked in to replace the guard I really freaked.

He took me downtown to be questioned—lectured again, really—and a report was filed. I wasn't formally charged but they weren't nice either—I had to sit in this room by myself for ages. I never want to go through that again! Especially when Dad showed up. It was his silence that got to me the most. I almost wish he'd yelled or something.

I know it was wrong to do that but I just *had* to have that sweater for Mel! She's still holding a grudge and I'm desperate to make it up to her. I have no money to pay for it and neither does Dad. I hate not having enough money for things I need!

Tracey

* * * * *

Victoria's Day Planner: Monday, November 29

6:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. @ T.H.

6:00 p.m. – 11:00 p.m. @ Oysters

Notes:

Pack—finish

Clean apartment: bathroom, kitchen (oven and fridge)

Rent carpet cleaner

Get security deposit from manager (\$500)

Mail cheque (post date to the 2nd)

Remember—phone will be disconnected in suite

Pick up Tracey @ 4:00 Greyhound bus depot

Tracey's here (locked in the bathroom). She's angry about being sent to stay with me. I'm shocked at how Tracey has changed. She's very pale and has lost weight but is even taller.

Her beautiful brown hair is cut in chunks and she's put ugly orange stripes all through it. She's wearing heavy eye makeup but also has dark circles under her eyes. I am frightened for her.

Victoria's Day Planner: Tuesday, November 30

Day off at Tim Hortons—good!

6:00 p.m. – 11:00 p.m. @ Oysters

Notes:

I couldn't change my shift last night. So I made dinner, and left out the movie I picked up for her as well as a copy of the teen magazine she likes. I had a one-sided conversation through the bathroom door and left. I hated doing that but sometimes a mother doesn't have a choice.

I came home just before midnight. She'd barely touched the dinner and was asleep on the couch. It was well after two o'clock before I could fall asleep. I was listening for her quiet breathing—like when she was a baby in the cradle beside my bed.

Now it's after ten in the morning and she's still asleep. The smell of breakfast cooking should wake her up. We'll talk about her problems once we're on friendlier terms. I could really use her help with the move today.

* * * * *

Tuesday, Nov. 30

J,

Oh my God. I can't believe I'm stuck in this crappy one room apartment with *her*. When I woke up she was sitting there *staring* at me—freak me out or what? I'm in the bathroom now—writing. Last night was terrible. Before she left, she managed to say my hair looked “rather odd,” my body looked “tall and thin” and my friends were “not a good influence.” I bit my tongue the

whole time so at first I was glad when she left. There's nothing to do in this prison, so I finally watched a stupid kiddy movie because she doesn't even have cable. Some life!

She's so proud of herself that she's making a "home cooked" breakfast with eggs and toast and everything this morning. I guess she's trying to win points and make everything okay but she doesn't even remember that I don't *eat* eggs.

T

* * * * *

Victoria's Day Planner: Tuesday, November 30

Oh, I'm so upset! Once she finally came out of the washroom, not looking any cleaner in yesterday's clothes, she finally spoke to me. However, it quickly became a very heated conversation that went something like this:

"No. I don't want *eggs*. Don't you have any decent cereal?"

"But I thought you'd like a home-cooked breakfast for a change."

"Yeah, but this isn't *home*."

"Oh, Tracey. . . I know. I'm trying to make your stay pleasant."

"You weren't being very pleasant to me last night. First you asked me question after question about *Brady*. Then you criticized *everything* about me!"

"Did I? I'm sorry. I certainly didn't mean to. I've really missed both of you, sweetheart."

"Then why did you leave us?"

"I . . . umm, I . . . had to."

"What possible reason could you have to abandon your children?"

Is that really what she thinks?

“Oh honey, that’s not what happened. I had to get my life together so that you could live with me. This separation from you kids is just temporary. That’s what I was trying to tell you and Brady.”

“You practically left without warning. You barely said goodbye. What kind of mother *does* that?”

“Didn’t you read the letter I left you? I had to leave quickly without your father finding out. You see, Tracey, I didn’t have a choice with what he had done. I won’t go into all the reasons now . . .”

“*Everyone* has a choice! And leave Dad out of it! He hasn’t done *anything* wrong.”

“You don’t know the whole story and I don’t expect you to understand it yet. I don’t want to bad-mouth your father but I needed to break away to fix things. It’s the only way I knew how. I hope one day you can learn to forgive me. Now, we’ll talk more about that later. Sit down and eat your breakfast.”

“No! I’m not eating *your* food. *Everything’s* ruined and you’re the one to blame. You screwed up. *Big time*. Nothing you say will *ever* make up for what you did to us. I’ll *never* forgive you!”

Tracey kicked a hole in the wall before she slammed the door on her way out of the apartment. It was a terrible argument but I tried to keep calm and be the adult. I wanted to scream and shake her though! Why is she so angry? I imagined our reunion going so differently. Will she ever understand?

I just looked at the clock and it’s after eleven. She’s been gone for almost an hour and I see she hasn’t got her backpack or her jacket. Where has she gone?

"Hi. You've reached the Waters: Pete, Vicki, Tracey, Brady and Buster. We can't come to the phone right now but leave a message and we'll call you right back. 'Bye for now."

At the tone, please record your message. When you have finished recording, hang up or press one for more options.

"Oh, Pete! It's Victoria...ah, Vicki. I hate to leave you a message but my phone's been disconnected with my move today and I'm phoning from a payphone, and . . .you need to know what's going on. *Tracey ran away!* She got here safely last night but in a foul mood and this morning she picked a fight with me and ran off. It's been six hours or so now and the thing is, she didn't take anything with her, not even her jacket—and it's freezing cold and raining really, really hard now. And the worst of it is I don't think she knows the address to the apartment and now with no phone she can't reach me if she tries. I'm hoping she'll call you or contact the police. I've reported her missing but with so many teen runaways...*but it's been six hours!* I gave them her photo and they're on alert for her during patrols. But I just couldn't tell them about her shoplifting—she's not likely to seek out the help of *any* police officer after that. They say they're looking for her but if she doesn't come back tomorrow, they may take a DNA sample from her hairbrush for a missing person file! Oh, God help us! I'll call when I have more news."

Tuesday, November 30, 5:13 p.m.

*

"Hello! You've reached the Oyster Bar on Granville Island—for the freshest seafood in the city! We're open this evening for fine dining at 6:00 p.m. Leave a message if you need more info."

At the tone, please record your message. When you have finished recording, hang up or press one for more options.

"Um . . . Allan? This is Victoria Waters. I am really sorry but . . . there's a family emergency. I can't start my shift at six o'clock and likely won't be able to make it at all tonight. The schedule has me on for

tomorrow night as well but don't know if I'll be able to come in then either. I am also in the middle of moving and my phone has been disconnected so have to leave this message. I am very sorry to do this to you, Allan. I'll call or come in to explain as soon as I can. Goodbye."

Tuesday, November 30, 5:19 p.m.

* * * * *

Tuesday afternoon, Nov. 30

J,

Ah—my fingers are finally thawed enough to write. I'm in this dingy coffee shop somewhere near Chinatown trying to make this cup of coffee last—at least till I warm up. It's all I could get for a dollar. Everyone else's lunch smells so good—fries, grilled cheese, burgers, soup. My stomach knows it's way past lunch. I wish I'd eaten those eggs.

I dumped in about six packets of sugar and all the creamers on the table. The guy at the counter keeps watching me—probably wondering how long I'll take up this booth. I'm a paying customer! There are other empty seats too—he can take a hike!

My journal and pen were crammed in my back pocket when I took off otherwise I wouldn't have anything to do. But I was so mad at her I didn't even pick up my jacket or backpack with my other stuff. Stupid!

It's her fault anyway. I hate her! I had to get out of that hole and away from her so I just ran. *Anywhere.*

I ran—not seeing or caring where I went. I avoided buses and cars but horns blasted me a couple of times. I stopped to catch my breath and walked—crossing whichever street had a green light. I've been gone for at least a couple of hours, I figure. I'm not headed anywhere special, just away from her. I'm not staying there and she can't make me!

After a while, I could see Chinese writing on signs and store fronts. Obviously I'm in Vancouver's Chinatown even though I've never been here before. I decided to check it out. The sidewalks are busy with all kinds of people, many speaking Chinese. Sometimes it's like being in the middle of a flock of crows with all the chatter and black hair. I'm so tall I feel like a scarecrow around some of them.

I walked under an impressive Oriental arch that stretches over the street to mark the entrance to this neighborhood. It's really beautiful and made me wonder who built it and why. Nothing this exotic is in Vernon. The streets are lined with storerooms in old brick buildings. Many have wide windows full of tiny jade figurines, paper ornaments, wicker and other things for sale piled on tables out front. A man was sweeping litter away from his import store. A jewelry shop with bars on the windows displayed sparkling diamonds and coloured jewels in gold settings. The saleswoman watched me closely then nodded as I passed by. I stopped at the steamy window of a bakery with racks full of creamy cakes and pastries that look different but smell delicious. I want to buy something but have no money.

The market tables and bins along the sidewalks remind me of the Saturday farmers' market in Vernon. I'm curious about the Chinese brush strokes naming different kinds of fruits and vegetables—all bright colours and fresh smells. The lady behind one table called out in Chinese and encouraged me to smell what I think is a tangerine. It's spicy smelling but I couldn't buy it either. Farther along the sidewalk, there were some gross chickens or ducks and some other dead things hanging in the window of one shop—the butcher's, I guess. I didn't look too closely there. I knew the fish shop was nearby because as I turned the corner—phew—the smell! But the window display has so many weird and interesting kinds of fish—whole with staring eyeballs, and sliced pieces. I'm not sure what each kind is called but I recognize clams, lobsters, crabs, mounds of shrimp or prawns, and squiggly things that might be octopus or something

equally strange. They were all piled on mounds of ice. I started shivering and realized I was getting cold now that I wasn't running full out.

That's about when I heard the argument in front of the next building. An old woman was pulling a purse away from an even older lady and they were yelling in Chinese. In the struggle, the purse tipped over and coins spilled all over the sidewalk. One of the women threw her hands up and turned back into the store but the other bent down to pick up the money. I helped her collect it. With the coins back in the purse, she bowed to me then marched off in the other direction. She was gone by the time I spotted the loonie and dime against the side of the table. I slipped them into my jeans but didn't see the woman again. I was really cold by then so I'm glad I found this warm coffee shop called "Pender's."

I managed to get two refills of the strong, hot coffee and several more creamers from the guy who runs this place. I've been here for almost two hours and now he's standing at the booth beside me with his arms crossed. Since the place is full, I think I better leave. I hope it's not too cold out.

First another trip to the washroom—just in case. I know I'm somewhere on Pender Street around Chinatown but I just realized I have *no* idea where her apartment is even if I did want to go back.

still Tuesday, in the library

After the coffee shop, I wandered around for a while trying to figure out what to do. "Write what you see, Tracey." Okay, here's more of what I saw.

Some dark alleys between old brick buildings are littered with spilling dumpsters. I even saw two used needles dropped in a corner. There are rusty fire escapes in front of open windows where people lean out—having a smoke and looking out at their world. On the ground floor of most buildings are storefronts with boarded up windows in the back. In the shadows of one place

I saw people who looked like they might be doing drugs. On another street there was a bundle of dirty blankets in a doorway and I jumped when it moved. Who would sleep right on the street?

I started running again when a loud man turned the corner—he was definitely high on something. A video/DVD store looked safe so I went in. I walked up and down the aisles for a while then the guy behind the counter asked me what I wanted. I thought he'd let me stay—just to warm up—but he narrowed his eyes and accused me of trying to shoplift. *I only did it that one time!* Am I labeled for life now? I ran out of the store, my eyes stinging and my chest tight.

I kept walking to keep warm until I came to a big open square in front of the Vancouver Public Library. Wow, is this place ever impressive with curving walls and an inner courtyard, and several stories high. The best thing is I can keep warm and don't have to buy anything. I was glad to use the washroom and the water fountain too. There was a pimply-faced security guard standing by the door looking bored but he didn't stop me. I hung around looking for a quiet corner to myself but it was busy. I finally found an empty seat at a table with some other people so I flipped through some books for something to do. I especially liked the one about the ocean with gorgeous photos—I love seeing the waves spray the rocks. Once the table cleared and I had some privacy, I wrote some more. I've been in here for about three hours—my stomach is really grumbling. I've never been this hungry in my life. I need to find something to eat.

Later

It must be about six—I've been wandering around all day and need to sit for a rest. It's completely dark but the light over this doorstep helps a bit. My writing is messy because I'm really cold—my hand's shaking. Finally it stopped raining but I'm still wet. The food helped a bit.

After the library, I was on the street and in the rain. But I had a goal—food. I hurried along another wet street trying to stay under awnings but the rain soaked my hair and shoulders

anyway. I stepped into a wide doorway to keep dry but it reeked of pee. I kept walking until I saw one—a small corner store. I went in and could see the clerk was busy with a customer but I didn't need help. I was hoping for a Mars bar but they were too close to the counter. The chips would be too bulky and noisy so I decided on a bag of peanuts and a box of cookies that were close to the door. I don't think anyone saw me.

Around the corner was a group of people at a bus shelter. They shuffled over to make room for me out of the rain. I sat on the edge of the bench and ate as calmly as I could until I saw a police cruiser drive toward me. I don't know if they're looking for me for taking the food so I turned toward a lady sitting beside me and offered her a cookie. She took one and smiled back. They drove right past.

I'm freezing cold, thirsty, still hungry, and getting scared. I figure it's too cold to stay out here and I should go back even though I still can't stand her. I don't know where her apartment is or even what the building looks like. This is her last night there and then she moves to the new place. All I know is it's somewhere in Kits...something. I'll never be able to track her down. I'm lost.

I scrounged a quarter in a sidewalk crack, so decided to phone her. I tried it a few times but couldn't get through—out of service? I'm not sure if the last number is right so I tried a 7 instead but got a kid's voice—wrong number. Now my quarter's gone. I tried calling Dad collect but no one was home or picking up.

I can't reach her or Dad and I *really* don't know what to do.

Later

The rain is now slush—it's near freezing. I keep walking to stay warm but I have to pee again, *badly*. There are no public washrooms anywhere downtown that I can find—unless you're a paying customer.

I'm sitting under a street light, on a wet bench in a sad little area called "Oppenheimer Park." Rumpled and wet people are wandering around, some watching me but most with vacant eyes. Many of them are lining up along a chain-link fence. The sign on the building says, "The Door is Open." I can smell something good coming from over there. I'll ask someone in line if this is free food.

Later still

It's a good thing I talked to the old man at the end of the line. He looked like a homeless person but I wasn't afraid of him.

"Excuse me, can you tell me why everyone's lined up here? Is there food or something?"

His face lit up in a smile. I saw that he didn't have any teeth but I could understand what he said.

"Yes, Miss. This is the line for the good sisters' evening meal. Every night they offer something for those of us who come."

"For free?"

He nodded his shaggy gray head and smiled with both humour and kindness.

"Oh, good. I'm really hungry."

"Well, are you now? Come to think of it...I'm real hungry too. Let's hope they have some of their beef barley soup, eh? It's their specialty and one of my favourites. You see the line here, waiting for their dinner reservations?"

I wasn't sure if he was kidding or what. Dinner reservations? Here?

"No, don't you worry, Miss. There's always room for more and plenty of good food. Soup, sandwiches, sometimes even cake!"

"And they're open every day?"

"Yes, that's why the centre's called "The Door is Open." We're just a little early. They serve us poor folk who live down here, in the shelters and boarding houses."

"Is this where you live?"

"Usually I stay at the Men's Shelter, just up the way. It's not far and I can go to the church everyday."

I looked around and saw the steps of the church next door. Someone was sleeping there. I hoped I wouldn't have to.

"I'm lost."

He nodded his head. "So, you're just like me."

He didn't seem to understand that being lost was different from being homeless.

He made a shaky bow and said, "Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Joseph. But now, I'm just Joe."

"Oh, I'm Tracey."

"Well now, Miss Tracey. I'm very pleased to make your acquaintance."

Joe bowed low and seemed to get swallowed in his rags. On the way up he noticed me shivering.

"Here now, you're cold. Put this on to keep the rain off."

Joe offered one of his trench coats—he was wearing two. It looked so dirty and smelled pretty bad but I was really cold and his watery eyes were so . . . *deep*. . . Joe draped it over my shoulders as if it were a king's robe. I was thankful for his gift and I think it made us both happy.

The line was long and moved slowly so we chatted—I was glad for the company and I think he was too. Joe didn't ask me any personal questions but told me stories about himself—in the olden days when he was a young man and worked on the construction of some of the city's great buildings. He pointed out one of them peeking between two old hotels and named others like the Marine Building and the Hudsons Bay Store.

Joe winked when he said, "Believe it or not, I was once a strapping young man, 'handsome' some said. Of course, that was when I still had my teeth." He showed me a wide gummy smile that made me laugh with him. I hadn't laughed in days.

Then his life-story became sad. The hard times came when he lost his life-savings through a few get-rich schemes. Joe gambled and lost his house and everything he owned. His wife had already passed away by then but his two sons were so angry they haven't spoken to him since. I let him talk and talk. I think he just wanted someone to hear him.

Finally we got to the open door. Inside the large and noisy dining room were rows of tables lined with metal stacking chairs. Everyone who had waited in line was handed a wrapped sandwich—choice of ham or turkey or peanut butter, a double scoop of brown vegetable soup in a bowl, and a cup of coffee or tea with a cookie. I was amazed at how many people there were—old and young, mostly men but some women and kids too. Most people sat down at the tables and ate. I sat beside Joe and I saw him make the sign of the cross before he started in. It made me wonder what he had to be thankful for.

The sisters were busy handing out food and kindness as they visited with the people. One gentle-looking nun smiled and came towards me but a woman and her little kid stopped her with hugs and someone else joined them. I would have told her I was lost but so many other people were asking the sisters for things that I never got a chance. When I finished eating supper, though, I was able to use the washroom and was almost as glad of that as the meal.

After carefully wiping his mouth with the paper napkin, Joe used it to wrap half of his sandwich and stuffed it into his coat pocket. As we left the warmth and cheer of the place, the cold, damp air hit us again. He shuffled toward the shelter and I walked beside him until we went our separate ways. I was going farther on, toward the area I thought the apartment was. Joe stopped and turned toward me.

"This is where I must leave you, Miss Tracey. I think you might want to head up that way. That's where you belong."

"Oh, Joe. Here's your coat back."

"No, Miss. You keep it to stay warm. See, I already have one. What would I do with two? Maybe it will bring you luck, eh? Maybe you'll think of Joe once in a while? Say a prayer for an old man who lost his way?"

Then he studied me closely with his intense blue eyes and said, "Don't give up hope, Tracey. You're a good girl. God loves you and forgives you. And I will look out for you too. You'll be okay."

He gently patted my cheek with his wrinkled old hand, wished me well and turned the corner. He was gone. And I was alone again.

I felt so much better with warm food in my stomach and a coat on my back but it was Joe's kindness that did me the most good. I will never forget him. Joe.

I'm not so mad anymore and know I have to find my way to her place. It wasn't my first choice of home but it was better than how I'd seen the street people living. I didn't want to belong here.

I headed up the way Joe suggested and walked for almost hour. Resting outside a Granville Street pawnshop I saw a guitar in the window—I wish I could play—and enjoyed the occasional blast of warm air when the door opened. I must look like a street person now with the big, dirty coat hanging almost to the ground and smelling like—I don't want to know. But it makes me smile to think of Joe.

I kept walking down the street because I thought I recognized some of the signs and buildings. Most of the shops were closed by this time and with the freezing rain, the streets were pretty well empty except for the wavy reflections of streetlights in the puddles. It's hard to find a

pay phone but when I did, I tried Dad and the voicemail clicked on again—doesn't he ever answer the phone? I even got brave and tried to flag down a passing police car but they didn't see me on the dark street.

No matter what I did, I couldn't find her place—now that I wanted to.

My feet hurt and I was about to sit on the curb for another rest when I noticed this guy about my age in shabby clothes and carrying a stuffed backpack. He entered a building at the end of the block. I followed him hoping it was a warm *and* safe place. The sign on the door says "Covenant House." I don't know what that means but with the symbol of a dove on a hand inside a house, it gives me a feeling of peace.

So here I am.

Tracey

* * * * *

Victoria's Day Planner: Tuesday, November 30

Tracey's back! It's late and I am exhausted but too wound up to sleep.

I went crazy waiting in the apartment. Then my prayers were answered. A police officer arrived just after eleven tonight with Tracey, wrapped in a dark, wool blanket. I thanked God that she was safe as I held her tight. She shivered but she let me.

I quickly made her something to eat and got a hot bath ready. She was wearing this filthy old coat and I was ready to throw it out but she pulled a fit. I wonder what that's about.

Tracey was smart to go to Covenant House. Once they confirmed that Tracey *was* trying to get home, they contacted the VPD, who had her file on alert. She didn't know that she was just around the corner from me!

* * * * *

Wednesday afternoon, Dec. 1

Joe—I'll think of you when I write from now on.

We're in the basement suite. Barely. There are still boxes around and stuff piled on the cheap rental furniture. It was weird moving her things in a taxi—I didn't think you could do that. But she doesn't have that much stuff. Something I was surprised to see was a box with a couple dusty, unfinished canvasses, paints and brushes. I don't think they're hers—I've never seen her paint.

She's finally gone to get groceries and I'm *allowed* to stay with orders to "keep warm and rest." She didn't want to leave me alone but I convinced her I was okay—just too tired to shop after our early morning start. I'm all wrapped up in a blanket on the single bed in "my room" and but I can't sleep. Since I got back last night, she's been fussing over me and driving me crazy! I answered most of her questions but only told her some of the stuff that happened—kind of in general terms so she wouldn't freak out too much. I also had to help her move but now I want to make sure I've got everything written down before I forget the details.

Reading over the nine or ten pages that I wrote yesterday it all seems surreal. So much happened in those 24 hours—to her too, I guess.

Most of all, I remember the faces of the people I saw on the streets. Some people creeped me out like the crazy-eyed guy who was high. Or the grumpy old lady, the coffee shop owner, and some of the store clerks who were kind of nasty. But then I think of the kind faces on some of the Chinese shop keepers, the people at the bus stop, the sisters at the mission, the guy with the backpack at Covenant House, and the police officer who questioned me about why I'd run away. And then, I see your face, Joe. *You* were the kindest of all and didn't ask anything in return. You gave me so much from the little you had. I'll never forget you.

Tracey

* * * * *

Victoria's Day Planner: Wednesday, December 1

6:00 p.m. – 10:00 p.m. shift @ Oysters

Notes:

Return keys & collect \$500 security deposit (try!)

Pick up new keys & pay December rent and deposit

Phone about tenant insurance

Confirm new phone connection by 10:00 am

Pick up groceries

Busy moving day! Talked to Pete and he was pretty good about what happened. I guess I can't blame him for everything going wrong with Tracey.

The nasty scene with the apartment manager about the security deposit really upset me though. I thought we patched the hole just fine. I can't afford to lose the \$500! I need it for the deposit here. I'll see what I can do to butter them up. This two bedroom basement suite is dark and the furniture is old and no-frills-basic but it's all I can afford. It's in an old heritage house and most of the building has original materials and is quite charming.

Tracey and I only managed small talk today. She's napping now. I wish I could. I haven't been sleeping well. Yesterday took a lot out of her, *and me*. How will I stay on my feet serving tonight? That's *if* I still have the job. The phone's reconnected but I can't reach Allan at the Oyster Bar. I'll just go. First I need to fix myself up. With these bags under my eyes and my hair a mess, I look hideous!

* * * * *

Thursday morning, Dec. 2

Joe,

She was really upset last night when she came back early from the Oyster Bar. They fired her for not showing up on Tuesday night. It was a good job, pretty close by, and she was making good tips. Too bad for her.

I had just finished talking to Dad on the phone—he lectured me about running away—and was warming up a can of soup for dinner when she came around 6:30. She looked really tired and old. Why doesn't she do something with her hair? We ate together and I just listened to her babble on and on about her jobs and moving down here and everything. Yada yada. It was like a tap that wouldn't turn off. It was kind of good to see her just being honest for a change, though—instead of the false, cheerful crap. I don't think her wonderful life in Vancouver is quite so wonderful after all. *Her choice!* She isn't pressuring me to tell what's been going on at home, at school, the shoplifting thing, and running away, so that's good. I don't owe *her* an explanation anyway.

This morning she's working at Tim Hortons, I guess. I didn't hear her leave to catch the bus. I'm supposed to work on my school stuff to finish this humungous list of assignments before I can go back. We went over some of it last night and made a list of what has to be done first. Oh my God, she's really into schedules, planning, and setting goals now! I see her checking and scribbling in her day planner whenever she has a spare minute—which isn't very often. That's why she wants me organized too. She asked me about my journal and hinted that I share some stuff from it sometime. *Ha!* Like that's gonna happen!

My teachers each wrote out the assignments for me to catch up in their courses and I've got a ton of work to do. They don't really think I can do it on my own though—I'm only an average student. I had to lug all my school books from home on the bus in the bottom of my

suitcase. I might as well get started with reading the English novel, *Theories of Relativity*. With no cable, computer or stereo there's nothing else to do here.

I don't plan to stay for long.

Trace

* * * * *

Victoria's Day Planner: Thursday, Dec. 2

6:00 a.m. – 2:30 p.m. shift @ T.H.

Notes:

Goal # 3 – Set up a home for the kids

Call to meet Allan about job @ Oysters

Finish unpacking clothes, books, etc.

Confirm pay statement for T.H.

Try another insurance company for lower rates

Pay bills (the most overdue ones)

I can't believe that girl! I've been on my feet all day and when I got home at three there were dirty dishes still on the table from last night, her bed wasn't made, and it looked like she just got up because she was still in her pyjamas. She didn't flush the toilet properly and it's been running on and on. She doesn't care how much water is being wasted. Now she's curled in the chair with her head in a paperback—not even studying. I can see I have to lay down the law around here!

* * * * *

Thursday night, Dec. 2

Joe,

I hate it here! I just washed my hair with the cheap, no name brand crap she buys and it feels greasy already. It looks so gross!

Then she came home all pissed off. She must have PMS or something—she's extra crabby and picking at everything I do. There *is* nothing to do but study and I'm all alone. When she is here, she's so tired she zones out when I'm talking or asks really personal questions. I wish I could talk to *you*, Joe. I mean really talk—not just tell you stuff in here but hear what you have to say too. You know how to listen.

Before my friends at school were giving me a hard time, at least they were around and there was *someone* to talk to. That's the best part of school. This boring textbook blah blah blah, and math brain drain, and socials crap—it's all pointless. And she has no computer so I can't type my papers or access Internet for research or msn. She said I should go to the public library and use theirs but I'd have to take the bus and I don't want to get lost.

We're stuck on this deadbeat street in the basement of a rotting house with an overgrown garden. I guess some people would call it "heritage" or "funky" but I call it "decay-ville." The suite is dark and smells musty, like dirty socks. Maybe that has something to do with the brown stains on the ceiling in my room. I think they're water marks but one looks like a giant toad. The ancient toilet has a tricky handle that you have to jiggle just right so it will flush and then stop—it's such a pain in the ass! The walls are puke green with a shiny finish and the wallpaper is revolting with big pink flowers and curly green leaves. It's peeling off from the top edge in whole sections. There's only one electric plug in each room so I have to unplug something to plug in another. Either that or use extensions everywhere. The light switches click and pop when you turn them on and we've already blown a fuse twice. This is just a dumpy old house.

The Dixie Chicks' song, "I'm Not Ready to Make Nice" is exactly how I feel—and I'm going crazy without my music! I brought some of my CDs with me but she doesn't even have a CD player. She hasn't got anything! I wish I was home in my own room with all my stuff. Maybe I'll ask for an MP3 player for Christmas.

I wonder how Dad and Brady are doing without me. I bet the house is a real mess now! Who's doing their laundry? Feeding Buster? Cleaning the kitchen? Ha! Speaking of chores—now we have *rules* here. What is it with parents—they always give teenage daughters the endless job of "washing dishes?" She has only four plates, three forks, and five cups so they to be done after *every* meal. And she doesn't even have a dishwasher! I know she packed the good china from home but when I asked her where it was she said she left it with a friend for safe keeping. These mixed-up dishes look like she bought them at a garage sale or something.

One good thing is the novel I'm reading for English class—*Theories of Relativity* by Barbara Haworth-Attard. It's amazing! It's about this guy, Dylan, who's my age and living on the streets. It's cold—November, like now—and he tries to get a job but can't, then just struggles to stay alive. He meets all these different people. Some are really messed up like Twitch and Amber, some are out to get him like Lurch and this gang, some are really good like Glen and Ainsley, and he's in love with Jenna—who's also a runaway—but she's being controlled by a pimp named Vulture. Dylan's a pretty smart guy and manages to stay out of trouble mostly. His family is unbelievable, though. I can't imagine being kicked out of your own home!

I totally get some of the things that were going on with him on the streets. I wish I'd read the book before I got lost. Then maybe I would have known what to do, like Dylan did. Still, I managed. I stayed in the library and hung out at the coffee shop like he did. I found a shelter for food. But I never thought of panhandling. Maybe if I'd been stuck living out there for a while longer I would have. When Dylan *really* had to have something, he took it, like I did with the

cookies and peanuts when I was starving. He had a jacket and a sleeping bag though. Other than this journal, I didn't have anything.

I wonder if Melissa ever heard about the sweater I tried to get for her. I really didn't have a choice, Joe—I couldn't afford to pay for something that expensive.

T

* * * * *

Victoria's Day Planner: Friday, December 3

6:00 a.m. – 2:30 p.m. shift @ T.H.

5:00 p.m. – 12:00 p.m. shift @ Oysters!

Notes:

Call to meet with Allan about job @ Oysters (again)

Phone lawyer's office for appoint.

Oh, I am so lucky—blessed, actually. Allan was wonderful when I finally managed to meet with him over coffee. He explained that when I gave short notice about not coming in to work on Tuesday, he gave my shifts to someone else. He wasn't there when I went in on Wednesday or Thursday (he was skiing at Whistler!) so with all my shifts scratched out, the manager figured I'd been let go and made no effort to confirm for me. Allan didn't know I had a fifteen year old daughter (he looked quite shocked, actually) let alone that we were moving that weekend. He was most understanding about Tracey getting lost (I downplayed the fight and running away). I admitted that money was tight. Allan said he was impressed with my serving skills and smoothing over tricky customers, and promised to put me on more shifts if I wanted. Then we chatted for ages about my new place, changing the décor for the restaurant, his career in

the restaurant business (I thought he was the head manager but he's the owner!), my kids, and skiing. It was well worth the cost of two cappuccinos!

*

*

*

*

*

Saturday morning, Dec. 4

Joe,

I still have your coat, Joe. It's hanging up on the back of this bedroom door. She complains that it smells bad and I have to agree—would you mind if I washed it? I'll be careful. We're going to the laundromat today when she gets back from her morning shift at Timmies so she can wash her ugly brown uniform. I would hate to have to wear that thing but she says it beats having to buy your own work clothes that get ruined with coffee stains. Ha! I guess that's why it's *brown*! Then we're checking out the garage and yard sales to look for more pots and pans, bedding, and stuff for the apartment to make it look more "homey." I think our house in Vernon looks plenty homey but this place can use all the help it can get!

I've been working pretty hard with my school work. It's amazing how much you get done when there's no one to goof off with in class. I had to ask her for help a few times but she's hardly ever here with all the shifts she's working. It's pretty boring with nothing to do and no one to do it with. I feel like I'm waiting for something to happen.

She left her planner behind today which is funny because she always carries it in her purse. She writes in it almost as much as I write in mine. It's really just an ordinary, blue coil notepad with "Victoria's Day Planner" written on the front. I'm curious about what she's written in there—especially about me. I picked it up and started to flip through all her tightly written notes but then I remembered when Brady found mine and how furious I felt about him reading

my private stuff. Her book doesn't say "private" on the front but I know it must be. Reading about her feelings wouldn't change anything anyway.

I put it down exactly where it was and won't touch it again. But I can't help looking at it lying on the coffee table.

Tracey

* * * * *

Victoria's Day Planner: Sunday, December 5

5:00 p.m. – 11:00 p.m. @ Oysters

Notes:

Goal # 10 Have fun!

I am all dressed for church and hoping Tracey will wake up and come with me. I am so happy to have the day off today. It looks bright enough and the wind is blowing so maybe the rain clouds will clear off for a walk along the beach. Besides, it might be a good day to talk. We haven't had a chance to deal with some of the issues of last week.

Yesterday was great. After work, we decided to check out the garage sales that were accessible by bus. We got great deals on a frying pan, Tupperware, a nest of bowls, a rooster kitchen clock, pink bath towels, a blanket, a laundry basket, and a pretty blue vase. I don't think we spent more than thirty dollars!

I saw Tracey looking at a second hand CD player but it was pretty beat up and they wanted twenty-five dollars for it. There was a basic am/fm radio for five and I bought her that instead. I teased her that with all the humming she does, we don't really need one. She gave me a "teenage" look but I saw a smile underneath the scowl.

After we dropped all our treasures at the house, we took the laundry on the bus and managed to get enough machines to do them all at once. For a Saturday, we were lucky but it was another six dollars with Tracey's extra loads. I didn't say anything for fear of embarrassing her but her clothes are in rough shape, especially her underwear which are all a dirty gray instead of white or black. I'll see if I can do something else to get them cleaner. I don't think she's had anything new since I bought her some jeans and T-shirts for back to school. I'll have to see how the money goes this month after all the moving expenses. I wish I could get some help from Pete, but then that's what this is all about.

* * * * *

Sunday night, Dec. 5

Joe,

Wow! You should have seen the ocean today, Joe. It was amazing—even better than I imagined. I wore your cleaned coat when we went to Jericho Beach and now that I know how to get there on the bus I can go myself.

First, she went to church—she wanted me to go too. When she got back I had everything tidy and all the new stuff in the right places. I think she was pleased about that. She treated me to a coffee and a bagel sandwich down on West 4th Ave. then we walked through the quiet park, over the duck pond bridge, past the kites flying over the field, and onto the wide-open beach.

It was so beautiful! The sun shone and the sky was a rich blue with only a few wispy clouds. We faced snow-covered mountains across English Bay's north shore and white caps flashed out on the water with brightly coloured sailboats that raced from the marina. The tide flowed out and the water left the sand wet, glistening smooth, and washed clean. Small shells of different shapes, round stones and pebbles of beautiful colours, broken glass smoothed by the

waves, bits of paper—I imagined someone’s secret message in a bottle!—and seaweed in long rubbery strips were washed up on the sand. Little crabs scurried when I lifted driftwood. The seagulls were screeching and chasing each other in the air currents above the beach. The wind blew my hair all around and I felt like running—I raced out to the point and back again feeling free. She watched from the bench and waved when I looked back. I wished that Buster was with me—he would have loved this too.

After a while we walked west together, past the point onto Spanish Banks, and I started talking. I know she wanted to say something but she didn’t interrupt much and just let me talk.

“So, when I borrowed Mel’s clothes, I spilled something on them. I tried to wash out the stains but I didn’t do the sweater right. It’s cashmere. It’s supposed to be dry cleaned, right? But I couldn’t afford that so I did the best I could at home. It’s ruined. Mel was really mad—about that and some other things—so she didn’t speak to. Except to tell me off.”

“What about Kelly? Or Meg and Hannah? Aren’t they still your friends?”

“Not these days. Melissa told them her side of the story and they won’t talk to me. It’s so harsh not to have friends at school. I hate it. I don’t even want to go most days.”

“Your father says that you were skipping classes and not getting your assignments done. Is this the reason? Your friends?”

“I’ve only missed a couple of classes and I’ll get the work done. Man, everyone gets so *wound up!*”

“Okay, okay. So...how did the jeans and boots come out? Are they all right?”

“Yeah, fine. I bleached the jeans a few times to get the stains out but now the seams are kind of frayed. That’s from the bleach, right? But the boots are pretty good with only a few water marks on them. It’s the sweater—the most expensive thing—that got really wrecked. And it was our *special* thing. That’s why I had to get Mel a new one—so she’d be okay about *us*. If I had the

money, I would have bought her a new one but I just took it. I know it was dumb—I wasn't thinking straight. I wasn't even that surprised that I got caught."

"But you did. What if you didn't get caught?"

That question caught me off guard and I didn't have an answer. I kicked a plastic water bottle along the beach in front of us. What if?

It felt good to get some of that stuff out. When Dad heard what I'd done, he didn't listen at all. There's nothing else I can do about the shoplifting now. But by talking about why I did it and how sorry I feel, I've decided I need to write a letter to Melissa and try to explain how I feel about our broken friendship.

We were both smiling by the end of the afternoon and I kind of wish she didn't have to go to work tonight.

Tracey

Sunday, Dec. 5

Dear Melissa,

You might not want to read a letter from me considering all that's happened but I'm in Vancouver right now and I really want to fix things between us. So I beg you to keep reading.

I can't tell you enough how stupid and sorry I feel about what happened at the party. I'm never drinking again—at least until I'm legal. It must have affected my judgment too because I was not hitting on Chad! Honest. I knew you were going for him but when he tried to hook up with me I didn't know what else to do.

And I'm sorry about the clothes. I feel the worst about the sweater getting ruined—it was this special thing we shared and I loved it. Every time I wore it, I felt lucky. It wasn't so lucky for me last time, though.

When you shunned me and sent that email, I felt desperate. I found another sweater but it was almost two hundred dollars! I couldn't afford that! So I took it. For you, Mel. Of course I got caught—in front of everybody. That was embarrassing but it was really harsh at the RCMP station. Dad finally picked me up and was so freaked about it and all the hassles at school that he sent me down here. I rode the bus for five hours without my tunes! Now I'm staying here just until I finish my assignments and get caught up.

Mel, we've been best friends since grade two and I don't want to lose that. I'll probably be back in a week or two so I can go to the Christmas dance on the 16th. You're going, right? I need to hear from you—that we're okay. I don't have email so can you write me a note or call sometime?

I hope you can forgive me, Mel. I'm truly, truly sorry.

Your lonely, long-time best friend,

Trace

Victoria's Day Planner: Tuesday, December 7

6:00 a.m. – 2:30 p.m. shift @ T.H.

6:00 p.m. – 11:00 p.m. shift @ Oysters

Notes:

Write Christmas cards

Check art class supply list

Set budget

It's been one week since Tracey came to stay with me. I thought I'd got my baby back with me only to lose her again on that terrible day when she ran away. Now, I am not holding my breath but I think things are improving between us. She still won't call me Mom but we had a breakthrough at the beach when she talked about her friends and school and a little about the shoplifting, so I am hopeful. She's even humming like she used to.

I just wish I wasn't working so much and wasn't always so broke. When will these bills ever get paid?

* * * * *

Tuesday, Dec. 7

Joe,

I went back to the beach on my own—I really love it there. It started to rain so I didn't stay too long but it was still wild and beautiful. I walked along the beach as the tide went out and looking at all the wet pebbles and shells, I got a great idea. Since I have no money, I'm going to try to make Christmas presents from the things I collected on the beach. I brought a whole bag of stuff home with me and hid it under the bed. She's not home till late tonight anyway.

Wednesday night, Dec. 8

Joe,

I couldn't figure out what smelled so bad in my room until I pulled out the beach stuff under my bed. Phew! There must have been some tiny alive things that died in the plastic bag. I just washed everything in the sink and left it to dry while she's out. Hopefully that will take care of it. No one wants a gift that stinks.

After working for a couple hours on my math and socials stuff, I went to the library for something to do. She told me what bus to take and it wasn't too bad—even with the rain. I found two books that look good. *Before Wings* by Beth Goobie is about a girl who goes to camp to work for her aunt after suffering a near fatal brain aneurism. I've never been to camp but I know Kelly loves it and goes every summer—I think she's training to be a counselor. But I'll read the other book I picked up first. *Alice, I Think* by Susan Juby looks funny and I could use a laugh these days.

Tracey, *I think*.

Thursday, Dec. 9

Joe,

I got my laugh, all right. Last night before she went to work, she asked for all my underwear!

"Tracey, slip into your PJs and round up all your bras and panties. I am going to give them a good scrub and see if I can't brighten them up. They look so ratty."

"They *are* old. I haven't had anything new in *years*. They need to be thrown out though—scrubbing won't fix the broken strap or stretched elastic waist bands. Can we go

shopping for some new things? *Please*. I only have two bras that fit. My panties are pretty well shot too.”

I was on a campaign. I wonder if she’ll let me get some thongs. Probably not. I’d love some new clothes too but I’m sure that’s not going to happen. I didn’t realize how much I borrowed Mel’s stuff to wear. I’ve got nothing.

But, it’s her parental duty to provide for me, right? It’s just stuff I need.

“Tracey, it hasn’t been *that* long. We bought you new things in the summer when you started to get busty, remember? With the extra moving expenses and Christmas coming, I really don’t have the money right now so let’s give this a try first, okay sweetie?”

It was late enough and I wasn’t going anywhere so I did what she asked. Whatever. She looked like a woman on a mission as she scrubbed each piece with Borax and then left them to soak in the bathroom sink.

“Now, give them a couple hours in this solution and then rinse them out thoroughly. Hang them up and they should be all dry by the morning. I have to leave for work now.”

To save on laundry expenses, she was always rinsing out her granny-panties and pantyhose after work and hanging them in the bathroom over the shower rod—I knew what she meant.

As I rinsed my things out I thought the bras looked kind of funny. I tried to shape them right but they were all lumpy and distorted. I left them dangling in the shower and this morning the panties are a little brighter but the bras are ruined. The Borax must have disintegrated the foam lining into odd clumps—not a sexy look.

So, it looks like I get new underwear after all!

* * * * *

Victoria's Day Planner: Thursday, December 9

6:00 a.m. – 12:30 p.m. shift @ T.H.

6:00 p.m. – 11:00 p.m. shift @ Oysters

Notes:

Take Tracey lingerie shopping, if time

Write Christmas cards—stop procrastinating!

I spoke with Brady on the phone yesterday. Oh, I miss him so much! Just to hear his voice was wonderful! He wasn't very talkative but he asked me for skates for Christmas. How am I going to make his wish come true? New hockey skates must be about two hundred dollars. Maybe I'll talk to Pete about it and see if we can share the cost. Or better yet, I'll see if I can find a good second-hand pair for under a hundred. I might be able to manage that much.

*May you enjoy all the Beauty,
Warmth, and Tradition
of this
Christmas Season.*

*Thinking of you and wishing you
Happiness
for the New Year.*

Victoria's Day Planner: Friday, December 10

Day off @ T.H.

6:00 p.m. – 12:00 p.m. shift @ Oysters

Notes:

Shop for Brady's skates, Tracey's underwear, groceries, etc.

Write Christmas cards—*do it!*

I've been trying to avoid writing the cards and dealing with Christmas but with the coloured lights and music everywhere, it's hard not to be reminded. Memories of happy times in our house with the twinkling tree surrounded with presents, the delicious aroma of turkey roasting, and the rambunctious cousins over for a visit keep flooding back. When I think of those magical Christmases when the kids were little, I realize that the last few years were forced and we were just putting on a show. Things have been rough between Pete and I for quite a while. We tried really hard to hide it from the kids and the rest of the family. He would never go to counseling with me and pretended nothing was that bad. When all the money problems started it just made it harder and harder. This year will be a whole new challenge, though. I have no idea how we are going to celebrate this once favourite holiday. Family, and friends in Vernon know what's happened so why am I so reluctant to put it in writing?

Whew! Am I ever getting philosophical in this journal. Good thing Sally doesn't actually read it.

* * * * *

Friday night, Dec. 10

Joe,

Ta da! I mailed off another two assignments this morning and it feels great to be halfway finished. I'll be heading back pretty soon. Vernon, here I come! I haven't heard from Melissa yet but then she might just be getting the letter I sent and with the busy season, snail mail is slow. We wrote cards for Grandma, the aunts and uncles, cousins and family friends. I saw her hesitate when she signed them but even though we hardly ever see them, by now they all know that the damage is done—our family is broken.

The little radio she bought isn't anything like my stereo at home but I did find a cool radio station, New Country: JRfm, and they play all the top hits as well as some less known country songs. With no one around, I can sing out loud and know the words to most of the songs they play—especially my favourite artists. They also have phone-in contests to win stuff. I haven't won anything yet but I'm trying for the new Rascal Flats CD.

Oh, and I finally talked to Dad—and to Brady who answered the phone first. The kid's his usual sulky self but eventually I made him laugh. Dad and I actually had a pretty good talk too. He misses me and not just for all the jobs I did around the house. Ha! *Now* he notices how much I did.

He also thinks he might have an offer on the house. They want to close the deal by the fifteenth of January which doesn't give us much time to move our *lives* out of there. It makes me kind of sick to think of leaving it. But then, it hasn't really been much of a home since she left. I promised Dad that I'd help pack and it'll be okay—I hope it is.

I wonder what everyone's doing this weekend. Usually there's something going on—even just hanging out. I'm not *supposed* to phone long distance unless it's to home—the phone bill is another thing she freaks about! If I had the Internet I could stay in the loop but the way it is here, I feel trapped. Then again, I don't know if anyone wants to talk to me anyway.

* * * * *

Victoria's Day Planner: Saturday, December 11

6:00 a.m. – 2:30 p.m. shift @ T.H.

5:00 p.m. – 12:00 p.m. shift @ Oysters

Notes:

Call bank manager to reschedule time

A good day today! At Tim Hortons, the manager asked if I was interested in becoming a shift supervisor. It pays eighty cents an hour more so of course I'm interested! I can only do the morning shift though, and she wasn't too pleased. She doesn't know I have to work two jobs.

The restaurant was crazy last night. It was packed with office Christmas parties and friends getting together. I remember dressing up when Pete took me out somewhere nice. It's been many years since that happened! Some of the women looked so beautiful in their beautiful clothes and spa-groomed bodies. I felt so frumpy and tired but I kept smiling and made some big tips. A percentage goes in the jar to split with the chefs, bussers, and hostesses so it feels good to know that I'm charming them on the front line so those in the back can have a share.

I better get ready for tonight. I've got to do something with my hair. No time or money to cover the grey properly. I'll use mascara to touch up my roots.

* * * * *

Grocery List – *use coupons

Milk

1 dozen eggs

1 loaf whole wheat bread*

1 tub of yogurt (plain)

Green tea* (box on sale)

Rolled oats

Two tins of tuna* (on sale)

Baked beans* (on sale)

Baking soda

Vinegar

2 oranges

2 bananas

Carrots (about 4)

Cabbage (the largest head)

4 large potatoes

2 small onions

Toilet paper* (6 rolls, on sale)

Maxi pads (and tampons if on sale)

Extras:

Jello 2 or 3 flavors

Cookies* (if enough \$)

Saturday, Dec. 11

Joe,

Whenever she works at Tim Hortons she brings home the leftover newspaper. I love doing the Sudoku puzzles and I'm getting pretty good at them even though math has never been my best subject. After doing today's puzzle—and not checking the solution—I looked over the help wanted ads for small jobs or one-time opportunities to make some money for Christmas. I want to get something for Dad and Brady, Grandma and Melissa. Her too, I guess. I was going to make presents from the beachcombing I did at the beach but I can't think of anything decent to do. I've got quite a bit of free time because my assignments don't take very long—and I'm almost done! I could walk dogs, babysit, or anything like that but most jobs call for experience and resumes. I'll try my luck on the postings at the library and grocery store. I'm getting pretty good at getting around on the bus. I haven't got lost yet—well, not again anyway.

She looks really tired and kind of sad. On her way to work, she gave me a handful of coupons, a long grocery list, and two wrinkled twenties, then asked me to be careful to make them stretch. Mission impossible, I figured. It was tough but I did it—no money for extras, though. I also checked the message board for a job—nothing. It sure was cold standing there waiting for the bus. It's a different cold than in the Okanagan—damp cold that goes right through you—but it still feels like snow.

Riding the bus, I was thinking of how to make some extra cash when I saw a homeless guy picking stuff out of a garbage bin and piling it on his over-loaded shopping cart. From the novel and articles I've been reading in the paper, I know they call that "binning." Were you ever a binner, Joe? I wouldn't want to grub around inside a dirty dumpster. But it gave me an idea—I could collect what I find along the road and there're lots of empties in the park near the beach.

After I put away the four bags of groceries, I put on your overcoat and went to work. I managed to collect two garbage bags *full* of bottles and cans while walking along the main roads and park. I got a funny look from the guy at the corner store when I cashed them in but he gave me four bucks—not bad for a couple hours walking!

On my way back, I checked out some yard sales to find more things for the basement suite or for Christmas presents. It was near the end of the day and close to giving up time but then I saw an old oval mirror with a scratched wooden frame. It's really ugly but I know just what to do with it. He wanted five dollars but I managed to make a deal and got it for four! Back in my bedroom I've been gluing bits of shells, pebbles, sea glass and driftwood around the edge of the frame. I need a ton more interesting pieces but I think it's going to look amazing. It's just the kind of thing she'd like and I've noticed with us sharing one bathroom, she doesn't take much time on her looks. She needs a mirror in her room.

Tracey

* * * * *

Victoria's Day Planner: Sunday, December 12

Day off from T.H.

6:00 p.m. – 12:00 p.m. shift @ Oysters

Notes:

Goal # 11 Spend more quality time with Tracey

I am tired. After a long shift at Tim Hortons yesterday and another wild night at Oysters all I want to do is sleep in this morning. However, Tracey deserves some attention and I promised her a trip up Grouse Mountain with two free passes from Allan. There's no snow in the city but fresh snow up the hill with lots of activities like skating, sledding, caroling, and skiing, of course. We will probably just wander around and see the sights because I can't afford to pay for much. It should be fun and lift our spirits for the afternoon, though. If Tracey will hurry and get ready! I am waiting for her to do her hair which is looking better as it grows out from that strange cut she had.

Last night I was running all night. We were short-staffed with two people sick so everyone was really stretched to their limit. With the recent reviews in the paper, the restaurant has been fully booked every night for two weeks and those walk-in hopefuls jam the entrance. Good for Allan—he is very excited that his business is taking off. And tips have been good for us—especially at this time of year when people are more generous. Good thing they had a sense of humour last night too!

I had just taken the tedious orders from a diet-specific couple and rushed back to pick up the entrees for the office Christmas party at the long table in front. With burning arms from balancing two large seafood platters, I glanced up and down the table to confirm who were taking on these challenges. The predominantly male members of my table all stopped talking and

turned to look at me with raised eyebrows and smirky grins. At the same time I felt a refreshing breeze at my waist. I looked down and saw that my apron ties were tangled up with the ties on my wrap-around skirt; my lower covering had fallen open to reveal the front of my oldest panties and patched pantyhose! Lovely. With my hands full I couldn't do anything until I had safely placed the platters in front of the two eager diners; modesty and pride dissolved. There was no one to replace me at the table so I decided to laugh about it and carry on. They loved it and tipped me sixty dollars so it was worth it, I guess. Maybe I'd make more money stripping! Hee hee!

The best part was that when I told Tracey about it after work, we had a good laugh. She told me about having the flu and getting sick in her sweater. The story sounds familiar and I'm pretty sure she left out some of the details but I appreciate the fact that she shared her "most embarrassing moment" with me. Today should be a good day together.

* * * * *

Monday Afternoon, Dec. 13

Joe,

I didn't want to go up Grouse Mountain yesterday. I had just started my period and felt lousy. But most of all I didn't want to be in all the fresh powder if I couldn't snowboard. We couldn't afford ski passes last year and it's obvious it's not happening this year either. One more thing lost.

The snow wasn't like the Okanagan Mountains that I'm used to—it's still pretty wet and sticky this early in the season. It probably wouldn't have been that great to ride on. I told myself that anyway. Instead, we rented skates that didn't cost too much. Her feet hurt so she didn't skate for long but I tried some crossovers and spins and I wasn't too bad. I even played a little pick-up

hockey with some guys who were short a player. Brady would have loved it. He's crazy about skating. Maybe we'll bring him up here when he comes at Christmas time. Joe, did you ever play sports in the winter when you were young? Do you like the snow and ice now?

This morning we went to the drugstore because I needed some stuff—I was not wearing her MAXI pads another day! I also talked her into getting some decent shampoo and then we “splurged” and bought some hair dye too. She dyed my hair to get rid of the orange streaks and it looks good with the colour more normal for me and my bangs growing in to a better length. I did her hair too. She told me what to do and I'd watched Melissa put the streaks in mine. I'm surprised how much grey she has and the roots were showing and making her look pretty ancient. Her hair really shines and looks way better now though she could still use a good cut. She wouldn't let me try. She's gone to start her training for shift supervisor at Tim Hortons and the beauty treatment did her some good.

She likes it better at Oysters but says it's crazy busy there right now. Actually, she thinks there might be a short term job for me helping in the back. It would be great to have something to do and earn some money because I'm just about finished my school work, I have nothing to do in this place and I have NO money. It would just be for the Christmas rush this week—I'm going home next weekend.

late Monday night

I got the job! She just came home from the restaurant and said she talked to Allan—I think he's the boss—and he said if I was *her* daughter he'd give me a try without even meeting me. I start tomorrow and they'll train me on the job—basically, I'll work in the kitchen because I'm the dishwasher but maybe I can clear tables out front once in a while. I can't serve because you have to be at least nineteen to serve alcohol. I'll make minimum wage but I also get a share of the tips! Yahoo! I could take in a good wad of money. Now I might be able to buy that collector's baseball card I saw in Sports Traders for \$75 that Dad's wanted to go with his

collection of rookie cards and it might cheer him up. Oh, I wonder what I have that's decent to wear to my new job—I don't know what I should wear! Mel would know and probably lend me something cool. I wish I could phone her right now! I really miss her—and not just for her clothes!

Dear Tracey,

Thank you for your latest English assignment. I was pleased to see that you finally read Theories of Relativity and were able to get so much out of the novel on your own. You really seemed to appreciate the struggles and fears of the characters. It certainly is an eye-opener to the life of a street person, isn't it? I am very impressed with your writing abilities and the improvement you are demonstrating. Your writing is very expressive! The effort you've made to catch up with your English course work is commendable. I look forward to reading your final assignment. I hope that you are keeping up with your journal writing too.

On a personal note, I hope you are doing well and enjoying your visit in Vancouver. I want you to know that you are missed by me, the staff, and several of your classmates who are asking for you. Take good care of yourself, Tracey, and we hope to see you soon.

Sincerely,

Ms. Singh

Victoria's Day Planner: Tuesday, December 14

6:00 a.m. – 10:30 a.m. supervisor shift @ T.H.

11:00 meet Kitsilano high school counselor re. Tracey

5:00 p.m. – 11:00 p.m. shift @ Oysters with Tracey!

Notes:

Phone Brady's teacher

Set up meeting with lawyer re. house sale paper work

Shop for clothes for Tracey

Busy day! It's late but I still can't sleep. This morning was my second day as shift supervisor at Tim Hortons. It was a scramble. One girl didn't show up and I had to send another home because she was stoned. We were really short staffed and all had to work extra to cover. I barely made it to the high school on time.

I'm pleased with what we worked out. I didn't want to involve Tracey unless I was sure it could happen. I arranged for her to either start there after the Christmas break or wait until the semester is over in February. Regardless, she'll have to write her first term provincial exams in January and can go for the extra tutorial classes for those subjects if she needs to. Tracey's been working very hard with her assignments but I understand these exams are difficult. I'm glad the school is willing to support her. Living here with me, she'll do much better too.

With my tip money, I took Tracey shopping for some new work clothes. Well, not *new* exactly. I didn't have enough money to buy her what she really wanted. After her initial look of shock, I managed to convince her how fun it can be to discover older labels and unique vintage pieces at the consignment store. Once you get over that musty smell, the Second Time 'Round Shop is pretty good. I bought some clothes for work there this past fall and saved a bundle. Tracey was able to find two adorable white blouses and some black pants that will do fine for work. She also found a cute skirt that's a bit too short but somehow she managed to convince me

that it would be perfect for the school Christmas dance in Vernon. Does she still think she's going back?

* * * * *

Wednesday morning, Dec. 15

Joe,

Well, I survived my first shift at the Oyster Bar. I never saw so many dirty dishes in my life! And I had to wash them. Okay, I didn't have to actually *wash* them but I did load them all into this huge commercial dishwashing machine, unload them and put them all away. It only takes five minutes to sanitize them with the high-powered spray but the loading and unloading took *ages*. I only broke three. I swept and mopped the floor, wiped the counters off *three* times, and cleaned the staff can. I don't think that should be part of my job description.

Simon, the chef, is the kitchen boss and his two assistants are called "sous chefs." Under them are the four line cooks who put together the food dishes on the chefs' orders. Then there's me—I do a little of everything. Most of the kitchen staff is old or boring but one of the guys is so hot. He's actually taller than me and has dark brown hair cut short and dark eyes that blink when he smiles. And he smiles all the time! His name's Spencer and he's about seventeen. He's a line cook and I saw him arrange plates of food that looked really good. Spencer saw me watching and raised an eyebrow, "Hey, Chick. What's new? Oh, *you* are! Welcome aboard the Oyster Bar-*ja*! You're tall enough to be the mast."

Another joke about my height. Groan.

The other people who work at Oysters are the bartenders, the hostesses, and the servers. They seem okay but it was so busy last night that they just rushed into the kitchen with problems

or snapped out special requests. Except for her, they had no time to visit with me. But she was *ridiculous* and kept checking that I was okay and following directions like I was in kindergarten or something.

I couldn't believe it either—she uses another name here! She's *Ria*, short for *Victoria*. In Vernon she was always Vicki but now that I think about it, she only goes by Victoria or Ria now. It's kind of like she's a different person in Vancouver.

I finally had a break at about eight but it was worth it when I got to try the seafood lasagna. It was delicious! And it sure beats the boring suppers we usually have. It's important for the staff to try *all* the entrees—main course dinners—so that they can recommend them when the customers ask which ones are best. I'm not serving yet but I'll probably get the chance if they're really busy so I'll try something different every night!

The chefs are supposed to train me on more cooking stuff but they were too busy to do much other than order me around. They treated me as if I was their personal slave giving me all their crap cleanup jobs. I'll have to speak to Allan about that.

Allan's pretty cool—for an older guy. He was friendly when we were introduced and he chatted with me a couple times. Even though he was busy, he made time for me, which is really professional. His dark curly hair has grey at the sides and is kind of long at the back, about shoulder length. He has a goatee or whatever you call that beard on his face, though—yuck. He dresses pretty sharp and looks like he works out. He might be gay—I'm not sure. He's definitely rich, though, because Spencer said he *owns* the restaurant.

The Oyster Bar is in this trendy market area on Granville Island that looks out over the water in English Bay. I bet it has a terrific view on summer evenings. It's even impressive on these dark nights with Christmas lights adding to the sparkle of city lights. Inside, the walls have rough wooden boards with holes in them—Allan said they're from sea worms?—and brightly painted wooden fish hang from the greeny-blue ceiling. It's supposed to feel like being under the

sea and I guess it kind of does but it's a bit corny too. The tables are lit with candles and just a few soft lamps surround the room. Mostly it's dark and cozy feeling although the laughter and party noise can be heard over the rattling dishwasher in the back. I wish I could work out front where all the action is but this is okay for now, I guess.

I figure I made about forty dollars last night and that doesn't even include tips! Spencer told me that the kitchen staff gets a percentage of the servers' tips. We split the amount in the tip jar at the end of each week. I saw the jar of cash get bigger and bigger all evening—it was pretty impressive! I'm working again tonight and tomorrow so with all this money I'm making, I might decide not to go back to Vernon for the school dance this weekend. It might be a good Christmas after all!

* * * * *

Victoria's Day Planner: Wednesday, December 15

6:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m. shift @ T.H.

3:00 p.m. Lawyer's office for house sale

5:00 p.m. – 12:00 p.m. shift @ Oysters

Notes:

I'm so upset I can't sleep. I discovered something really ugly. Pete has tricked and cheated me once again. I've had enough. I want out for good.

I went to the lawyer's office to sign the papers accepting the offer for the house. Pete had already signed the papers and the realtor faxed them down here for me to sign in the presence of a lawyer. Once the subjects are removed from the agreement, the buyers will take possession of the house on the 15th of January. We got a good offer for the house (almost what we were asking) but we won't see any of the money to pay off our debts. I found out there are TWO

mortgages on the house! Now we have two huge loans to pay back! Without my consent, Pete took the second mortgage out (probably for more gambling money) and forged my signature. Because he plays ball with the loans manager, no questions were asked about why I didn't sign in person. *How low can you get?* What little trust I had in our marriage is completely gone now.

I was still shaking with the shock when I asked the lawyer what would be involved with filing for divorce. He recommended a family lawyer who I should contact. I wonder how much that will cost. I never thought I'd want a divorce but now... Pete's gambling problem is out of control. I have to do more to protect myself and my kids.

* * * * *

Wednesday night

Joe,

Spencer and I had a blast! He teased me at first—for *humming*—I don't even know I'm doing it! But he recognized the *Big and Rich* song. He's into country too! We had our dinner break together and each had the special—Thai prawns in a stir fry. I've never had anything like it before but it's spicy and delicious. He taught me how to use chopsticks but I need more practice. When he asked me how old I am and if I have someone back home, I told one truth and one lie—no boyfriend, seventeen years old. He's surprised "Ria" has a daughter my age because he thinks she looks too young. *Whatever*. I don't like how he went on and on about how friendly, pretty and cool she is. She puts on quite a show for everyone but her family.

Later, when we were working, Spencer and I had this joke thing we did. It's pretty childish but it's always so serious in the kitchen we figured everyone could use a laugh. Whenever the servers brought in unfinished meals on the dirty plates, I'd scrape the leftovers into the big, green garbage bin and stir it up with the mop handle pretending it was soup. I was a witch stirring her cauldron and in a creepy voice, Spencer would announce that I was mixing in

eye of newt, chicken's brain, and other gross stuff for a magic spell. The leftover oysters were the best because they looked the most disgusting. When Simon yelled at us to quit screwing around we had to stop, but it made us laugh every time I caught his eye.

Now that I think about it, Joe, I feel kind of bad about what we were doing. All that wasted food. In a restaurant, so much is thrown out because someone ordered too much or changed their mind and sent it back. And then there're people like you who don't have enough to eat and never get to order what you want. You eat what you're given and are so thankful for whatever you can get. I'm sorry, Joe. I wish I could give you whatever you'd like from this place. I wonder where you are, Joe. Are you safe and warm? Are you hungry tonight?

Tracey

"Hi. You've reached the Waters: Pete, Vicki, Tracey, Brady and Buster. We can't come to the phone right now but leave a message and we'll call you right back. 'Bye for now."

At the tone, please record your message. When you have finished recording, please press one for more options.

"Hi Brady! It's Mom. I miss you, darling boy. I haven't seen you in ages. I'm sorry to just leave you this message on voicemail but I have to go to work and I wanted to thank you for sending me the Christmas card you made at school. It's beautiful! I have it on the fridge and it makes me smile every time I see that roly-poly snowman.

"What are you doing after school these days? I know tomorrow is your last day before the holidays start so I hope you have a great time at the party. Oh, how did the Christmas concert go? I'm so sorry I couldn't be there or help you with your costume. I phoned your teacher and she said she'd help you with it so I hope it worked out okay.

"Well, Tracey and I are both doing well and working hard. She started working at the restaurant with me for a little while and so we are seeing a lot more of each other which is great. We can hardly wait

until we see you at Christmas time. I'm not sure exactly what day yet but I'll speak with your father about the details. I love you, sweetheart. Goodbye. Now the rest of this message is for your father.

"Pete, call me. I left you a message yesterday too. We have a lot to discuss and I want to arrange Brady's visit down here for Christmas. Don't put me off any longer. I'm going to work now but I'll be home after 1:30 tomorrow."

Thursday, December 16, 4:32 p.m.

Thursday night, Dec. 16

Joe,

I just called Dad and we had a long chat.

"Brady and I are hanging out together quite a bit after school. We've been going to the junior league hockey games and he likes to go to the video arcade downtown."

It doesn't sound like Dad's working all that much but it's nice for Brady.

"Did Melissa or anyone call for me?"

"No. I don't think so. I haven't checked messages for a couple days though."

"Dad! You need to check them *every* day. What if there is something important?"

"Yeah, okay I'll call you back if there's anything. Do they have your number there?"

"I don't know but you can give it to them, okay?"

"Sure. Hey, kiddo, how's the new job? Good on you! I bet you get good tips too."

I told him all about it. After about fifteen minutes, he interrupted and said,

"That's great, Tracey. Ah, this is long distance and on your mother's phone bill. She doesn't want a lot of charges on here. I'll call back and we can chat more another time. Right now I need to talk to your mother."

He wanted to talk to her about the house sale but she wasn't back yet. He told me it went through after all and will be sold once the "subjects" are met, whatever that means. Dad got the

price he wanted but couldn't get them to change the possession date of January 15—that's only one month away! He's going to need help to move but I have to let it sink in first. I just can't get my head around leaving the only home I've ever known. We moved there when Brady was a baby—over eight years ago—and I don't really remember the apartment we lived in before that. That's a lot of stuff and memories to pack up and do something with.

And here we are in Vancouver—living in this dump. The electrical is pretty dicey because the power keeps going out when we plug too much in at the same time. The toilet handle is still broken. I told her I thought the suite was leaking too and she nearly had a fit when she saw the water marks on the ceiling in my room and the new ones in the living room. The one in my room has been spreading and now looks like a huge wolf with teeth. Something must be dripping from the upstairs suite. Considering the stains that were there earlier, I don't think it's a new problem and she's mad at the landlord for not telling us or fixing all this stuff before we moved in. I guess you can get sick from the mould that grows in damp places. It does smell musty in here.

Anyway...I've been listening to the radio all day and phoning in every time they give the signal for the contest. I'd still like to win a new CD but this prize is way better. The Dixie Chicks are coming to town in January and the station is giving away concert tickets! I love their music and wish I could write songs like that. I've tried.

Rains pour down around the clock
Waves crash hard against the rock

Friday afternoon, Dec. 17

Joe,

It's still raining hard and it's so dark and dreary outside—and inside this dungeon. That's five days straight and it's really getting on my nerves. And on my hair—it's all frizzy and curly on the ends from the humidity. Another bad hair day! It doesn't rain this much in Vernon—in fact, we'd probably be enjoying snow in time for Christmas.

Working three nights in a row is hard so it was good to sleep in all morning. I don't know how she goes off to her other job so early. Last night I had to peel potatoes and chop vegetables first *then* the servers started bringing the dirty dishes in! Spencer was off tonight so I didn't even have someone to talk too—the others are a bore. The last table left just after twelve and then I had to clean everything so we couldn't leave until closer to one. She waited for me and spent most of the time talking to Allan. He was probably asking her about me and discussing how well I'm doing. I know I work hard enough—he's lucky to have me. I could hear the two of them laughing and having a good time together but she hardly said two words to me on the bus ride home. She's doing the shift supervisor thing at T.H.'s again this morning and then we're supposed to clean the suite this afternoon before working at the restaurant. All we do is work!

I sent off the last school assignment yesterday and it feels great to have that job behind me. I'm not sure if I did everything right but at least I finished it all and they can't call me a slacker! Now I can keep up when I go back in January to finish the term. She helped me with a couple really hard chapters in Math and my Social Studies mapping but I'm surprised how much easier the assignments are without trying to work *in class*. I miss my friends, though, and planned to go back home for the Christmas Dance. It was last night, actually.

There are two reasons why I didn't go:

- 1) I still haven't heard from Melissa—or anyone else for that matter—and I'm ticked that no one's missing me at school.

2) I'm making a ton of money at the restaurant and Allan said he *really* needs me working there. The Christmas party season is almost as busy as summer time and it makes a big difference to have me working there.

So, I guess it's okay that I didn't go home in time for the dance. No one wanted me there and it was probably another teacher-patrolled bore.

* * * * *

Victoria's Day Planner: Friday, December 17

5:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m. shift @ T.H.

5:00 p.m. – 12:00 p.m. shift @ Oysters

Notes:

It's funny but I don't feel any sadness about selling the house! That surprises me. But then, all the heart and soul I put into making ends meet and trying to keep the family together was wasted when Pete put us in this debt-pit. The house stopped being my home when I made the terrible decision to leave back in September. Oh God, that was awful! I struggled to break ties with my home and garden as well as neighbourhood friends, like Lori and Karen. And, of course, the separation from the kids! Tracey's here and I hope to get Brady to live with me too. Maybe when he comes at Christmas time I'll just keep him here with me. Pete doesn't deserve to have them!

I left Vernon with memories but not much else. I tried my best but during the first weeks in Vancouver, my depression really hit. Oh, I was in rough shape. When I contacted social services, Sally helped me through the mess I was in by showing me ways to be strong and independent enough to support myself first, and then my children. Now the house sale closes that stage in my life and helps me move closer to this goal.

Writing about what happened and how I am feeling about things is really helping me to sort out my emotions too. It's very liberating.

Victoria's Day Planner: Saturday, December 18

6:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. shift @ T.H.

3:00 p.m. meet with landlord

5:00 p.m. – 12:00 p.m. shift @ Oysters

Notes:

Poor Allan.

At the restaurant last night, the manager resigned. I don't know all the details but it's obvious there's been tension between he and Allan for some time. Allan is such a hands-on owner and I really appreciate his leadership but not everyone likes working under those conditions. Other than Simon, most of the staff is younger than me and there's always some turnover so Allan wasn't too surprised when he left for another position. He didn't offer any notice though, and with the busy season in full swing Allan won't have the extra help he needs after this weekend.

Later

I had a very frustrating meeting with my landlords. They are a middle-aged couple who are clearly buying and renting multiple properties just to make a quick profit. I suspect they haven't done repairs or renovations on this old house in years and now it shows. Even with the evidence spreading all over our ceiling they don't seem too concerned about the water damage. They won't even look at the toilet and of course, the electrical worked just fine while they were here. I threatened to move out if they don't get the water and plumbing problems fixed as well as the electrical looked at, but they say because I signed the lease, I am under contract for the whole year! We argued about "good faith" and "health concerns" and "reasonable conditions" but it

wasn't until I threatened legal action (how would I pay for it?) that they agreed to have someone check it out. I don't know if I trust them so I better start looking for another place, just in case.

* * * * *

Saturday afternoon, Dec. 18

Joe,

After sleeping in for a while, I went out. It's the first day without heavy rain in a long time and I was bored. First I rode the bus over to the library to check online for messages. No one from home was on msn—they're probably up the mountain skiing or hanging out somewhere now that school's out. I checked my emails—still nothing from Mel but there's a chatty one from Kelly telling me stuff about the school dance. *Whatever*. I picked out a couple new books. On the way out, I stepped around a guy, who reminded me of Dylan in *Theories of Relativity*, sitting on the sidewalk holding a paper cup—hoping for handouts. I wonder how much money he gets panhandling. I'm glad *I* don't have to go low enough to resort to *begging*.

I get my tip pay tonight!

Saturday night

I got my tips. Big flipping deal. It's the first cash I've seen since I started slaving away at that nut house. Five nights working there and my share in tips is only forty-two dollars. I *saw* how much the servers put into the kitchen staff's tip jar each night—I'm getting ripped off! Apparently my tip is determined by what Simon thinks of my work performance. What a load of crap! I deserve more than that for a week's worth of work. Then I find out that we don't get our paycheque until the end of the month, and that's *after* Christmas. I probably won't even be here! I just missed the payday on the fifteenth because I only started the day before. This is insane! I

had plans for that money for Christmas presents for Dad and Brady. Now what am I going to do?

Not having money sucks!

* * * * *

Victoria's Day Planner: Sunday, December 19

6:00 a.m. – 12: p.m. shift @ T.H.

5:00 p.m. – 12:00 a.m. shift @ Oysters

Notes:

Pick up some groceries

Phone Pete re:

-Brady coming for Christmas

-sell/split furniture

-get my belongings, kids' things

Tracey is going through a rough time. First of all she thought she'd go back to Vernon for the Christmas school dance. She decided not to (I'm not sure the real reason) and I'm relieved because I don't think she has any idea how expensive a bus trip is, especially just for fun.

Besides, I'm afraid she won't come back. I talked to Allan and we were able to convince her that she's really needed at the restaurant. Actually, it seems to us that there's more fooling around than working most nights. This job is a little adventure to her and I don't think she has any idea just how good and patient Allan is by keeping her on. He is such a great guy and I really appreciate all he's doing for Tracey *and* me.

Christmas is the next problem she's struggling with. We both are. When I finally pressed Pete to make a decision about what we are going to do, he breezily stated that he and Brady are going to his mother's in Edmonton on the 23rd! He doesn't show any interest in seeing Tracey

and doesn't expect us to come nor does he care *what* we do. I'm desperate to see Brady and am determined to spend some time with him around Christmas at least. I don't think Pete has told him about the plans and I suspect he won't until the last minute. I keep phoning but can't reach Brady to see if we can get him here before then. Tracey talks about Brady often and I know she misses her little brother. She doesn't talk to me about her father but she phones him regularly. We are both trying to prepare for a very different Christmas.

Later

Pete took Brady and left for Edmonton!

I'm so angry I could spit! I called the house all day to talk to Brady but still couldn't get anyone at home. I had a funny feeling so I called Lori. Pete brought Buster over this morning and asked her to take him for the holidays. They left right away!

I don't know when I'll get to see him, how long they're away, or if I can get his present there in time. I wouldn't be surprised if Pete doesn't have *any* money to buy the kids something but he certainly didn't want to split a gift with me. That's one reason he went to Edmonton. He'll beg money from his poor mother again and end up smelling sweet at the last minute. Pete is really messed up. The sooner he stops running from his problems, faces reality and starts the counseling program, the better for him and for the kids. It's too late for me.

By now I shouldn't be surprised but I just can't believe he would stoop this low. Sneaking off and denying me my own son for the holidays! I wanted Brady down here with us! I was *counting* on it. It's been almost four months since I saw my boy. *My baby*. I need to see him! To smell him! To hold him in my arms and never let him go!

This is breaking my heart. I can't bear to think about it.

*

*

*

*

*

*

Sunday afternoon, Dec. 19

Joe,

She's really freaked that Dad and Brady left early for Grandma Rose's. I've never seen her so mad—and now I hear her crying, even with her door closed. I'm disappointed too. I knew that we weren't going to have Christmas all together but I *did* expect to see my dad and brother at *some* point over the holidays. Maybe I'll go to Edmonton on the bus. It would be a long trip but I'm really missing Dad and Brady and I'm getting sick of working for next to nothing. I don't really mind living with her for a while but it's not home and I miss my friends.

Even though I'm not supposed to, I tried calling Melissa because I suspect that she didn't get my letter. The house sitter answered and said, "Bonnie and Melissa went to Cancun for the holidays." That's why she didn't call! I still don't know if she has forgiven me and it's gnawing at my gut.

A package arrived in the mail yesterday from Edmonton and I think it's a present from Grandma. All I can tell is that it's two pieces or two presents or something. I guess I'll have to wait and see. I wonder when Dad will send his. When I talked to him on the phone a week ago, I asked him for an MP3 player. It's kind of pricey but I could load up all my tunes and it's easy to carry around. Besides, I don't think she has money to buy me much.

I'm feeling pretty desperate about giving presents now. I haven't done much work on the mirror since I started at the restaurant but it's looking pretty good so far and I don't need to buy anything else to complete it. I don't know what to do about the other presents, though. She says she's putting Brady's on the Greyhound bus tomorrow so I have to include mine then or it'll be too late. But now I can't afford much of anything. I *wanted* to buy Dad the collector baseball card and buy Brady the comic books he likes in the same sports trading shop. And then there's Grandma too. I usually get her something that smells nice but I need ten bucks at least. With the

forty in tips, that still puts me behind by about sixty. Since I'm not getting paid till the end of the month I'm hooped. Even if I only bought the one comic and got Grandma's present for under ten, I'm still nowhere near enough to get Dad the card he's always wanted. I know she won't give me any money. For some reason she doesn't have any. Where does all her money go?

Tracey

* * * * *

Victoria's Day Planner: Monday, December 20

Day off @ T.H.

5:00 p.m. – 1:00 a.m. shift @ Oysters – Lock-up duty!

Notes:

Call Sally to "report in"

Inquire about Christmas dinner

Pay remainder of Brady's gift

Shop for gift for Tracey: ideas?

It's so nice to finally have a day off! I wanted to sleep in but can't go back to sleep after waking up. I have lots to do anyway. I called Sally back and arranged for her to come over this afternoon. I want her to meet Tracey and see how well we're doing. I felt pretty good about the visit (although Tracey clammed up with all Sally's questions). Sally said she'll take me off her case load because she can see I am reaching my goals and taking on my own responsibilities as well as caring for one of my two kids. (I didn't mention the problems with getting Brady here.) But she pointed out that I should have a separate bedroom for *each* of the children because they are different genders and a wide range in ages. I don't know how I can afford a three bedroom place. Two bedrooms are pricey enough in the city.

I can make it work. I see how good it will be to have both kids back now that Tracey is living with me. She's settling into her new life in Vancouver and has turned herself around under my care. I am not as worried about her now and we're getting along well, although I wish she would start calling me Mom again. She still holds a grudge about me leaving but she doesn't need to know the truth yet. I don't want to turn her against her father. Maybe he'll tell her himself (if he has enough backbone!) or else she'll figure it out herself.

I am also proud of her for completing all her school assignments. She'll write her exams down here and then she can start the new semester in February so she doesn't have to go back to Vernon at all. Even the little job at the restaurant has done her some good and she is learning to be more responsible, although she'd do better if she lost some of her self-righteous attitude.

I think about Brady often and worry about how he's managing with Pete. As soon as this stressful Christmas is past, I'll insist that Pete put him on the bus and he can have a belated Christmas with us. Let them think it is just for a visit but I am sure I can convince Brady to stay here.

I bought Brady his hockey skates and hope they fit. He must be growing and has changed shoe size. I haven't bought Tracey's present yet but I have an idea. I checked the prices of a few and am shocked at the price, though. How will I do it? I'll keep shopping and try to bargain like I did for Brady's skates. It's enough of a struggle to find the money for the things you need without trying get the things you want.

I had a reality check on my way home, though. I passed a homeless woman I'd seen before, begging on the corner. I stopped and talked to her and when I asked her name, she said, "Patty." It's hard to guess her age. She looks so life-worn but I don't think she's much older than me. I convinced her to let me buy her a coffee but I ended up buying her lunch. When I see how Patty is living, my little worries seem insignificant.

* * * * *

Monday afternoon, Dec. 20

Joe,

I just met Sally, the social worker. She's quite the crazy lady! Before she came, we had to "spruce" up the place and I had to change into something "more appropriate" than my PJ bottoms and sweatshirt. I made tea while she set the table and arranged some fancy boxed cookies "just so" on our nicest unchipped plate. All this fuss for fifteen minutes of non-stop questions and yabbering! Sally started in on me and when I wouldn't take the bait, she targeted her. I was curious to see what Sally'd say when she read the "secret" Day Planner but she only asked if it was still helpful, all the time nodding like a bobble-head. Then she jumped up, clapped her hands three times, and said everything was fabulous! For some reason, Sally reminded me of Mary Poppins. She wouldn't call again unless we needed her, and practically vaporized without touching the special cookies or sipping her tea.

Before meeting Sally, I didn't know much about what social workers did but I guess they're pretty busy with all the clients—or cases—they have. From what Sally said, I gather she has a wide variety of people in crisis that she works with—from kids to seniors. She helps them with social assistance programs, health care access, abuse prevention, housing placement, and/or counseling issues. You can tell she's passionate about what she does even though she's crazy busy. It must be cool to help people who really need it. I thought about asking her if she knew you, Joe. I'd like to be able to find you again. It also got me thinking about why *she* needed to call a social worker at all. She must have really been a mess when she got down here.

When my parents first fell in love, they had big hopes and dreams—like every young couple, I guess. Dad was quite the muscle stud in high school and played baseball for the Juniors. He was kind of a "bad boy" by the sounds of it and quit school to work at the mill. He

was making more money than any of his friends so he could afford the loan on the biggest and best truck in town with all the custom features. I remember the picture of him in his T-shirt, muscles flexed, leaning cocky and proud against it. He planned to go into business and open his own custom auto shop when he had enough money.

When they met at some country dance, it was “love at first sight.” She was pretty and not a stretch like me. At eighteen, she was in first year art classes at the college with plans to transfer to University of British Columbia in Vancouver to become an art teacher. Then I came along sooner than expected and they got married. There must have been a really bad scene because I don’t think she ever spoke to her parents again.

Dad sold his truck and bought a car and a baby car seat. She finished the term but stayed home once I was born. They rented a cute little apartment near the lake and she took care of me and Dad, and then Brady too, later on. They bought the house soon after Brady was born. Dad took the sales job at the lumber yard with a slight increase in wages but with all the expenses of a family, money was a bit tight.

She offered to get a job to help make ends meet but Dad wanted her to stay home and raise us kids, make dinner, and clean and stuff. Now that I think about it that’s pretty chauvinistic. I wonder if he ever asked her what she wanted to do.

Her leaving must have really hurt his pride but I guess it was pretty hard on her too. Why couldn’t Dad have given her a choice? That reminds me of the Dixie Chicks song “There’s Your Trouble.” Yeah, Dad didn’t get it. He was almost asking for trouble.

Monday night, after work

Hey Joe!

I have a solution to my money problem—I borrowed some!

At the restaurant I was really late finishing up my drudge work. Allan was away at a family thing all night. Simon was grouchy and left with his assistant after listing off my chores. And the line crew was gone, along with most of the servers. She sat at the bar and chatted with the last two while waiting for me. I was putting away the final load of dishes when I noticed the over-flowing tip jar still on the side table—an impressive amount of coins and bills—more than I'd seen lately. Most nights, Simon, Allan or the manager on duty locks it away. Obviously it was forgotten this night. My heart started racing and my mind buzzed with excitement—here's the answer! I didn't bother with coins but stuffed a handful of bills into my apron pocket, fluffing up the remaining ones to look full again. I ignored that warning in my head—I'll pay it all back with the paycheque next week and because it hasn't been counted yet, no one will ever know the difference. It's the perfect solution.

I wrapped my apron into a ball and stuffed it into my jacket pocket. I put the jar in the office beside the kitchen where it belongs. I shut the door and went back to slopping the floor. That's when she popped her head in the doorway to see if I was done. She studied the kitchen through narrowed eyes but then nodded before she turned off the light. With a shiny new key held proudly for me to see, we went through the front door of the restaurant and checked that it was locked tight behind us. I didn't realize that she'd been asked to lock up tonight but since the manager quit and Allan's away, she's the oldest on staff and the logical choice, I guess.

She flagged a cab because we'd missed the last bus. She grumbled about the extra expense while she rubbed her stinky feet on the way home. How disgusting! I had other things on my mind, though. My stomach's so jumpy I was sure she'd notice.

I counted the money in my room. It's not as much as I thought but \$95 will do just fine. There's a funny little voice telling me it's stealing but it's *not* stealing, Joe, because it's partly my money too. I'm just *borrowing* it for a couple of weeks. I wouldn't even have to do this if

we got paid at the end of each shift or at *least* at the end of each week! How does Allan expect us to get by if we have to wait two weeks for a paycheque?

How do *you* get money, Joe? Do you get a government cheque or something every week or every month? Do you ever have to borrow? Or beg?

Tuesday afternoon, Dec. 21

Joe,

I didn't sleep well in the night so she was gone by the time I finally woke up. I scribbled a quick note and went to buy the Christmas presents. I wanted them wrapped and ready to go in the box she's sending this afternoon—before she asks any questions.

I took the money from under my bed and stuffed all the bills into my bag. It made quite a pile. My heart was racing as I rode the bus. I went into Sports Traders first to get the Rookie card. I'm glad it was still there but when I asked to see it, the hag behind the counter gave me attitude.

"You want to see *this* card? Well, honey, that's *seventy-five* dollars. It's a special edition rookie card, you know."

"Yeah, I know. Can I see it, *please*?"

She reluctantly opened the locked case and reached in for it with her eyes on mine. She handed it to me with her long fingernails on the edge of it and motioned for me to do the same, like I didn't realize how *valuable* it was. As if anyone could damage it with that thick plastic case it was sealed in!

She repeated the price as if it was way too much for me to afford: "That's seventy-five *plus* tax."

I pulled out a fist full of fives and tens and smoothed them down as coolly as I could. I counted out seventy-five dollars—and enough for tax. Her over-plucked eyebrows shot way up but her attitude changed.

“It looks like you’ve been saving up for months with all those bills. You must be a serious collector. Or are you buying this for some lucky person who is?”

I cringed and checked her face for irony but her innocent comment made my face feel hot no matter how hard I tried not to blush.

Then I remembered Brady’s comics and quickly picked out two new ones he didn’t have, and went back to the counter to pay for them too. After the woman’s comment about saving up my money, my heart wasn’t into shopping for Christmas presents anymore. I still had to get Grandma’s gift so I went to the drug store and found a set of scented soaps with a bath sponge. I had plenty of cash left over but couldn’t think of anything else.

With the Christmas paper she bought on sale, I wrapped up the baseball card—still in its “safe” plastic case, the comics, and the bath set. I sure hope they like them and that all this *trouble* is worth it! I’ll send these off and try to forget about it all until I can pay things back at the end of the month.

With my upset stomach, I’m not hungry but I bet she’ll be back any time now and will want some lunch. I’ll make it for her.

Creamed Tuna on Toast

In a saucepan, mix 1 can of Campbell’s Cream of Mushroom soup, ½ cup of milk, and 1 tin of drained and flaked tuna. Add frozen peas and/or chopped green onions. Heat through, stirring occasionally. Spoon onto triangle-cut toast.

Victoria's Day Planner: Tuesday, December 21

Day off from T.H.

5:00 p.m. – 11:00 p.m. shift @ Oysters

Notes:

Shop: check out music stores

buy gift for Allan?

Pick up skates for Brady – final payment on layaway (\$25)

Wrap and send Christmas gifts on Greyhound bus

I was getting ready to do some shopping while Tracey slept in, when I remembered something about last night. I had been so excited about the responsibility to lock up that I forgot to put away the tip jar.

When I phoned Allan he said, "It was sitting on my office desk when I arrived this morning." He sounded serious.

"Oh, good! I guess Simon did it. Well, just so long as it's safe because it must have been extra full from what we made in tips last night. It was a very busy night, Allan!"

"Ria, could you come in to talk about something?"

"Sure. I have the day off and plan to do some errands but I am happy to come around noon, if you'd like."

We set the "date" to meet. Maybe he'll take me out to lunch. I *think* he wants to ask me out. We're becoming good friends but haven't been out together except for that time I bought him a coffee and then he took me out for a friendly drink after work once. He's so busy with the restaurant and I have no time to socialize with working two jobs and Tracey living with me. Besides, I am in no shape to start any kind of serious relationship with anyone. Even though I'm separated, it hasn't been that long. I was married for sixteen years and never dated much before either. I am not in the market for anything other than getting to know him better as a friend. And

I can use all the friends I can get! Allan's such a great guy too. I don't want to jeopardize our current status but if something does happen today to change the situation, I don't want Tracey to know. She couldn't handle that yet.

Later

Now everything is in a terrible mess and *I'm* to blame! I did my morning errands then met Allan around lunch time. I was hungry but quickly lost my appetite when I saw the look on his face. Allan called me into his office and shut the door. He asked me to sit while he remained standing behind his desk. It made me feel like a child!

"I trusted you to lock up at the end of the evening but we have a problem, Ria."

I felt like a storm was about to break loose.

"Simon counted the kitchen tips this morning and is convinced that a substantial amount is missing. He came to me very upset. First he accused the servers of not putting in a fair percentage. Then he suggested that maybe someone took half of the bills and placed the jar in my office to make it look like nothing was wrong. Because the tip jar wasn't put away, I'm afraid that makes everyone who worked Monday night suspect of tampering. Simon thinks this isn't the first time the tip jar has been 'creamed' and accused some of the kitchen staff."

I immediately thought of Tracey. Surely he wasn't going to name her.

"I'm sorry to say, Ria, but Simon is suspicious of Spencer, one of the young line cooks, *and* Tracey. He said they're always fooling around."

"No! It would never be Tracey! My daughter can always be trusted and would *never* do anything like that."

Then I thought about her shoplifting which is so out of character from the daughter I knew before. My face flushed and I couldn't look Allan in the eye. Could Tracey have taken the tip money?

"I really don't think it's Spencer either. He's a good kid too," Allan added.

"But clearly something is wrong and of course, the majority of the blame rests with *me* because I was in charge. What a failure on my first night on lock up duty! Allan, I'm sorry for letting you down."

"Don't worry, Ria, you didn't. You just forgot one thing. Otherwise, the evening went well and I appreciate you taking on the responsibility. But I am concerned about morale on staff. I've got to get to the bottom of this. Let me know if you think of anything else. Now, I have to meet with the others. Thanks for coming in."

I left Allan's office angry and at the same time embarrassed. I had thought he was inviting me out to lunch. *What was I thinking?*

At home Tracey said, "I don't know anything! I never saw how much was in the jar or who put it in the office. I was too busy *working* in there all night long." I told Allan I trusted her and I guess I do.

Tracey was busy while I was out. She'd taken the bus and bought her Christmas presents with her tip pay from Saturday. She seemed so pleased with herself having wrapped them all and put them in the box with mine. I'll take the parcel to the bus depot this afternoon. I don't know what she bought but I'm proud of her using her own money and choosing them on her own, especially since this year I couldn't spare any money to give her. She made us lunch then I wrapped the book for Rose and Brady's skates. It won't take the place of giving them to Brady in person but at least I know he'll get them in time for Christmas day and will know I'm sending them with all my love.

*

*

*

*

*

*

late Tuesday night, Dec. 21

Joe,

This job sucks! The tension at work tonight was brutal. And for some reason she seems to be taking all the blame for the tip jar. I don't even know how they figured out any money was missing! Katie, one of the servers, even *cried* because she thinks someone took a twenty from her purse the other day. As if. Our things are all locked up in the back. Everyone looks at everyone else with shifty eyes now. Even Spencer is grumpy so I tried to cheer him up.

"Hey, Spence! What're you going to have for dinner break tonight? Want to try the salmon?"

"No, I'm not hungry. Simon wants me to prep the salad then I'm going home."

What's up with that? He's always hungry and never goes home early.

Then Allan called me into his office—we each had a turn.

He asked me right out, "Tracey, what do you know about the tip jar?"

"Nothing. I think I saw it earlier in the evening but after the rest of the kitchen staff left I was really busy cleaning the dishes, the counters, the grill, the appliances and the floors—all by myself."

"So, you didn't take some of it or see anyone else touch it?"

"No! No one. And how do you know anything's missing anyway?"

Allan raised his eyebrows at that comment. "Well, Tracey, Simon usually counts it every night but last night was irregular and it wasn't locked up. When it was counted this morning, it was much less than usual, especially after a busy party night."

"So why are you blaming me?"

"Hold on, Tracey. I'm not blaming anyone yet and it isn't a lot of money we're talking about. I'm just trying to find out what might have happened and facilitate some renewed trust on

staff. I want to know what you know because you were the last person in the kitchen who might have seen the tip jar. So, you're *sure* you know nothing?"

Allan's a jerk.

He ignored the fact that I said, "No!" and went on and on about how the police may get involved because someone on staff has stolen from the others and that a code of trust has been broken—blah, blah, blah. What about being paid a miserly minimum wage for all this hard work? What about having to wait *two weeks* to get paid? He can stuff this job! I felt like quitting right then. But I remembered that if I keep working, I'll get a major paycheque on the 31st. I'm not staying here much longer anyway. I'm moving back home soon. I just couldn't leave her all alone at Christmas time—especially with Brady gone to Edmonton.

She's a wreck.

Wednesday morning, Dec. 22

Joe,

I'm really tired because I had another nightmare last night—the second time in a row. I haven't had any in a couple of weeks so I forgot about those sleepless nights I used to have at home. I don't know where exactly but it was somewhere dark and scary and I was running away from a large angry wolf. Every time I turned around there were snapping teeth and bright red eyes that seemed to look inside my soul. I ran and ran but it felt like something was dragging me down and I couldn't run. I was up to my knees in icy water but it felt like heavy snow. I saw your old coat lying on the street and I dove underneath it just before the wolf caught me. When I woke up, the covers were over my head but my bare legs were hanging over the bed and freezing cold. Even with my eyes wide open I freaked when I turned over and saw the wolf head on my ceiling in the shadows. I snapped on the light and lay there waiting for my pounding heart to return to normal—but I couldn't look up again.

Wednesday afternoon

I finished the mirror while she was out. It really looks awesome now that the old frame is completely covered with little shells, sea glass and coloured pebbles. It took two bottles of glue—including the mess that soaked into the carpet. I thought about spraying the whole frame in gold or silver to make it look new and polished but that would cost another four dollars and I kind of like the natural colours. Besides, with metallic spray it would look artificial and too much like the dumb macaroni crafts I used to make in Brownies.

I also cleaned the *whole* suite. I made my bed and put all the clothes in the hamper. I found my work apron rolled up under the bed and my stomach twisted tight again. I'm finished with my school books so I stacked them up in the corner so we don't trip over them anymore. The dishes are done but the stove and counters are spotted with dried spaghetti sauce and need more than a wipe. I ran out of spray cleaner in the bathroom but at least the sink and tub got done. I'm *not* doing the toilet. I swept the floors but since we don't have a vacuum, the carpet looks pretty bad and smells mouldy. At least the stains on the ceiling aren't getting much bigger—I'm able to look at mine in the daylight and the wolf *is* looking more sinister than he did last week. I straightened the lumpy cushions on the couch and pulled open the dingy curtains that still smell of someone's stale cigarettes. It doesn't take too long to make this little place look tidy, though. I wish we had some decorations to put up. Just something to get us in the mood. It doesn't feel like Christmas this year and we always had the house done up before. I wonder if we'll even get a tree for just the two of us.

When she came home this afternoon, she said she had a bad headache and went to lie down. She didn't even notice all the work I'd done. After a while, I reminded her that we need to do some laundry and she just sighed and looked like she was going to cry.

Wednesday night

The job is only getting worse. Allan made me clean the staff can again. How disgusting!
Can't the guys aim straight?

"Tracey, I asked you to clean the staff washroom."

"I *did*."

"It doesn't look like the toilet was done. You need to clean it *especially* well."

"What a jerk," I said under my breath.

"What did you say? I don't need any attitude, Tracey. Go back and finish the job properly."

"Yes, sir."

I hate this job. I thought doing dishes was bad enough but cleaning toilets is not what I signed up for. Oh, and now we have tight security! I overheard three of the servers complaining.

"Did you hear what we have to do with the kitchen staff's tips? Now their tip jar is kept in Allan's office and we have to put the percentage in each time or hand it over to Allan or Simon personally."

"After each table? You've got to be kidding! The office is at the far end of the kitchen. That's going to waste a ton of time going back and forth."

"Are you sure? Whose great idea was that?"

"I heard it was Simon's. He's so anal about getting every cent of the tips he thinks he's entitled to. I wonder how he splits it with his crew."

"Well, I'll be happy to do it if it catches that thief. After someone stole my twenty last week, I don't trust anyone around here. I heard that kid, Spencer, might have done it. Or Ria's kid, Stacy. What else's Allan *doing* about them?"

"Ah, come on Katie. It's not that bad. Some of the younger staff is a bit off the wall but most of the staff is okay. And Allan's doing all he can. Cut him some slack."

Yes, good old Allan certainly is doing everything he can *short of calling in the police*. And it sounds like it's Simon who's making the biggest fuss—no surprise there, actually. But it bothers me that *Spencer* is suspected of stealing. No wonder he's been quiet and uptight lately—I'll try talking to him. And this new twist with the tip jar is going to make it extra hard for me to return the money. I'll have to figure something out without raising any *more* suspicions. Even though the ditzes think my name is "Stacy," I'm starting to feel really bad about all this.

Trace

* * * * *

Victoria's Day Planner: Wednesday, December 22

6:00 a.m. – 12:00 a.m. shift supervisor @ Tim Hortons

5:00 p.m. – 11:00 p.m. shift @ Oysters

Notes:

Check downtown music stores after T.H.

Tracey's Christmas present is becoming a real problem. With the little time I have sandwiched between shifts and without Tracey tagging along, I've been trying to shop. A brand new one is out of my price range but I'm hoping to find a good second hand one that I can afford. I just wish I had more money to get her a really beautiful one and everything she needs to go with it as a special present just from me.

I'm not looking forward to work at Oyster's tonight. It was terrible yesterday. Allan still hasn't found out what happened to the money and he's edgy and short with everyone. He certainly didn't have much time for me when I asked to speak to him.

"Allan, I am prepared to take full responsibility for my negligence with locking up. How much money do you think has gone missing?"

“Simon and I figure that about a hundred dollars was taken that night.”

“Well, I would like to pay it back but I’ll need to do it in monthly deductions from my pay.”

He looked at me strangely then said, “No, Ria, I appreciate your offer but *I’ll* cover it. No one else will be out of pocket at Christmas time. Now, if that’s all you wanted, I have to get back to work. I have some calls to make.”

I was surprised at his abrupt manner. Clearly we are no longer on friendly terms so I kept right out of his way for the rest of the evening. I can’t help but feel disappointed though. I thought we were becoming friends.

Victoria’s Day Planner: Thursday, December 23

6:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m. Tim Hortons

5:00 p.m. – 12:00 p.m. shift @ Oysters

Notes:

Shop music stores on Main St.

Check with landlords – wiring, toilet, ceiling stains

My shift at T.H. was great today. After the morning rush the manager called me off the front.

“Victoria, I’d like to give you your performance review and hope you don’t mind the short notice.”

I was happy to get off my feet for a while as we sat in her tiny office.

“You’re a fast learner and a hard worker and you haven’t missed a shift. Now that you’re a shift supervisor you’re showing good leadership too. The other staff like working with you and have told me so. The only thing I’m concerned about is your reluctance to work any evening shifts.”

"Ah, thank you for the compliments. I enjoy my job too. The reason I can't work evenings is because I work full-time at a restaurant."

"What? You're working *two* full-time positions? I don't know how you do it."

"My daughter's recently come to live with me and my son will soon be as well."

She smiled. "I'm a single parent too. It certainly can be a challenge, can't it?"

We had a lovely bonding moment that ended when I asked for health benefits. I have to be working full-time for six months before I am eligible. I just hope neither the kids nor I have any expensive dental or extra medical issues this winter. Otherwise I'll have to delay divorce proceedings just so we can stay on Pete's extended benefit plan a while longer.

It may be okay at T.H.'s these days but I am not enjoying the job at Oyster's much. Allan is trying to handle everything there without a manager so he's obviously stressed and over-worked. Apparently he's just started advertising for a new one. And we are no further ahead in finding out who took the tip money. Then, as if I don't have enough trouble, a table of four that I was serving left without paying their bill. It was over four hundred dollars with all the alcohol they drank. I'm sure they planned it all along, but at the time, I never suspected that they would be dishonest. Once again I offered to cover it, not knowing what the restaurant's policy is. Allan smiled and teased me about being such a martyr. He knows I can't afford any extra expenses. I had to choke back tears of gratitude mixed with humiliation.

Tracey is still out, somewhere, and it's almost time to go in to work. She finally cleaned the suite yesterday after asking her to do it for almost a week. She can do a good job at anything when she sets her mind to it.

I wish we had some decorations to put up for Christmas. In past years, our house was always decorated from front door to back, with things the kids and I made and collected over the years. All of those boxes are probably still packed away in the basement now. Pete wouldn't even think to take them out. I hope Brady enjoys some Christmas spirit at Rose's house.

I am panicking about Tracey's gift. I haven't bought her anything yet but found a refurbished one at the music store on Main. I negotiated with the owner but he only took off ten percent. I have to find about fifty dollars more. I got a good deal on Brady's used skates but Christmas presents and even just daily expenses for Tracey are expensive, especially on my own. I hope I can manage everything when I have both of them.

* * * * *

late at night, Thursday, Dec. 23

Dear Joe,

You won't believe what happened! I don't even know where to begin. Do I start writing about the most important things? Or what happened in order? I guess I'll just start at the beginning. Ms. Singh didn't tell me how to handle stuff like this. Revealing the truth is supposed to be a good thing—is that *always* true, Joe?

For something to do this afternoon, I went to the library to get another book and checked emails again. Nothing but spam. I treated myself to a hot chocolate with lots of whipped cream at a trendy new I and sat at the window to read my new book. I saw that the store across the street is having a big sale—all the Christmas stuff is fifty percent off! I still had over twenty bucks so I bought a ton of things to put up around the basement suite—my little surprise for her. It was a surprise, all right!

I just missed a bus and then it started raining again. By the time I got back it was late and I was soaked. She was all hyper about where I'd gone, not letting her know, and catching cold. But when she saw my shopping bags, she stopped talking and just stared. As I took the water damaged decorations out of the wet bags, she watched me. As I described how we could fix them and put them around the room, she watched me.

In a squeaky little voice she asked, "Where did you get the money to buy this?"

I hid my face in the bag I was emptying and said, "Oh, I had some money leftover from last week's tip pay." When I looked up, she caught my eye.

"But you told me that you'd spent all your money on presents and didn't have anything left to put in the Christmas hamper fund at the church."

What could I say? My pulse jumped and my face felt warm. The knot in my stomach—that I'd had for three days—clenched tighter too. I tried to explain. "Umm....oh yeah! Great news. I found a twenty in a fold in my wallet. I forgot it was there."

When I said that, she just dropped her head in her hands and stared at the floor. She didn't buy it. But the lie sounded pretty pathetic to me too.

Then she sighed. "Tracey, tell me the truth. *Please*. Did you take the tip money?"

My mind raced with options to spin my story further. But then, your face came into my mind, Joe, and I felt ashamed. It isn't just the guilt that's driving me crazy—I can't escape the damage that my borrowing has caused. The stress at work is affecting everyone, especially Spencer and he shouldn't have to take the blame for what *I* did. None of this was intended but I can't hide the responsibility of my actions any longer. She looked up with tired eyes and I saw in her face that she saw the answer in mine. I let it all go. Like the tide rushing in, I confessed what I'd done.

"Oh, Mom, I'm sorry. *I'm so sorry*." As I spoke about the *borrowing*, the truth hit me like an icy wave, and my stomach sank—what I did was *stealing*. Plain and simple.

With tears leaking through her fingers, she whispered, "God, what did I do wrong?"

I didn't get what she meant—why would she blame herself? She had nothing to do with it. *I* was the one who took the money—come to think of it, taking the sweater and the snacks falls into this same sorry category.

"You didn't do anything wrong. I took the money without asking. I only meant to borrow it but I should have let someone know or ask permission first. I didn't think anyone would know but I planned to pay it back as soon as I got paid."

I don't think she was even listening because she swore, pounded the arm of the sofa, and said, "Tracey, it's time you learned the truth."

I sensed something big was coming so I sat down before my shaking knees collapsed. That's when she saw the clock behind me. She jumped up, grabbed the phone, and scrubbed her eyes with her other fist. As she dialed the number she said, "We'll be late going to work tonight but this is *very* important. I hope Allan will understand."

She cleared her throat. "Allan? This is Ria. I'm sorry but we're having a little family crisis that I have to deal with right now so Tracey and I will be late."

When she got off the phone, she told me that Allan said to take the evening off—me too. I knew how much it meant for her to miss a night's wages and tips so I freaked about what she was going to tell me. It felt like a storm was about to bust loose.

*

"At first our marriage was fine. We were both young and in love and it wasn't long before you came along. We didn't have any money or support from my parents but we had each other and we were determined to make it work.

"We were always careful with expenses. In the Okanagan, I had access to great fruit and vegetables so I did a lot of canning. I also baked, sewed clothes and made everything I could. I only bought on sale or second-hand stuff. Your father became handy fixing things and we patched and repaired and made do. When he was offered the lumber sales job, we were able to get a mortgage on the house.

"But as you both got older, expenses increased. The house needed some money spent on it and you kids didn't want to wear my homemade clothes anymore. You kids wanted to ski and

then board, but we couldn't keep that up. Pete applied for several jobs that came up, ones that could earn him more money, but was always passed up for someone younger, newer, and more educated. He got depressed about work, started drinking and lost his sales position. He had to take the "on call" job working out in the yard—basically where he started. Money became a real issue and we had some big arguments trying to figure out what to do.

"To escape the stress at home, he started hanging out with his baseball buddies and joined them in many late night drinking parties. Their team started to win more often and travel to tournaments farther away. All that cost more money and time than the family could afford.

"His drinking was a problem and then another took over that affected the family even more. One day he brought home a big screen TV and was very excited and proud about winning the money for it. I was in shock. We had a huge fight but he couldn't return it and the TV with its box and wires lay around the living room for three days before he finally hooked it up. I didn't mention his reckless spending again but a new stove arrived at the end of the week to replace the broken one.

"Within a month, he won big three other times for a total of over twenty-four thousand dollars! He bought himself a brand new truck, an Xbox for Brady, a stereo for you, and let me pick out a used car for our second vehicle. He managed to convince me it was a one time thing for winning their tournament. Stupid me. It turned out the winnings didn't cover everything so he quietly took out a loan, but enjoyed bragging and was confident his lucky streak would continue. During this time, he had a ton of friends and he went from ball games to poker games at the casino, with work squeezed in when he felt like it. He was happy with himself and life in general which was the opposite of when he lost his sales job. Some of the money came home to us so I managed to buy groceries, most of the time.

"When he first started losing, he confidently borrowed money from family and friends but resorted to less friendly means as we got further into debt. I didn't know all his tricks but

suspect the 'lost' antique brooch from my aunt was pawned. The credit cards were always maxxed out and I had the frequent embarrassment of non-sufficient funds that rejected my Interac card at the grocery checkout. Every time I confronted him he denied it, and then blamed everyone else. Sometimes he was remorseful and promised to seek counseling but he never went. We stopped speaking to each other except in front of you kids. The bills stacked up and the creditors started calling. The damage was everywhere."

As I listened through her barely held emotion, many of the pieces started fitting into place. I'd only seen and heard things from my point of view and had chosen to side with him. Now I was seeing her side and I realized I hadn't understood what was really going on.

"The end of the summer was an especially rough stretch. I'm sorry to tell you this, Tracey, but I think you should know. I caught him trying to pawn the treasured gold watch that was his father's *and* his own wedding ring that he claimed was lost. For no better reason than playing at cards again! He was *sure* he'd win enough to buy them back but lost everything. I arranged for him to go to a counselor who specializes in gambling but he lied about going there too. Then the bank wasn't the only one calling or sending urgent notices. Because my name is also on the legal title of the house and credit cards, it's on the mortgage, the loans and all the bills as well! There is no money and no hope for an improved situation on his part. I tried to get a job in Vernon to help pay off some of the debt but his pride wouldn't allow it.

"I just couldn't make the marriage work with all the lies and lost trust. I was desperate and decided that my only option now was to leave and set up a new life for myself and, eventually, you kids would follow. Once I got myself together in Vancouver, with Sally's help, I started working. I've started paying off my half of the debt through an arrangement with the bank."

That's why she's so broke while working so hard at two jobs! I have to admire how she's been able to do that. If only *he* had been willing to deal with his gambling addiction or at

the very least let her get a job to help out back in Vernon. Then our family might still be together.

"Tracey, I need to tell you all this is because you're old enough to know the truth and I don't want you to have the same kind of trouble. The shoplifting and taking the tip money frightens me because I thought you knew better."

"*But I do!* I've learned my lesson, Mom. *Honest.*"

It's true. Now I know that I need to *listen* to that little voice that nags in my head and squeezes my gut—my *conscience*. I would never do anything to hurt anyone on purpose and now that I see all the damage stealing can cause, I'll *never* touch anything that isn't mine without permission. Borrowing is only borrowing when you *ask* for something first and *return* it. Now, just like him, it will take a long time to rebuild my reputation with the people I know and love.

"I believe you and I love you, Sweetheart. Now I hope that you can forgive *me* for not telling you the truth before. And especially for leaving you and Brady without a better explanation. I didn't realize how devastating that was for you, Tracey. I decided what I needed to do but you had no idea what was going on. I'm sorry you had to hear the truth about your father too."

"I'm glad to know the other side of things, Mom. I always blamed you because leaving changed everything. Now I see it was what *he* did that ruined our family."

"Pete's not a bad person, Tracey. He just needs help and I wasn't able to give it to him. I don't know what it will take for him to decide to get the counseling he needs. He has to want it badly enough for himself."

We ended the talk with lots of tears, hugs and apologies. I guess you could say we each forgave the other. With the shock of her leaving us, I've been angry with Mom for so long. But now I understand how she felt and I'm not mad anymore. I'm not sure how I feel about *him*, though.

And there was still unfinished business to deal with.

"I'm sorry for taking the tip money and causing you and everyone else at work so much trouble. I want to go in and talk to Allan. Do you think I should go in now?" I wanted to get the confession over with.

"No, honey. It's too late to go in tonight. Why don't I phone him and see when a good time would be for tomorrow?"

"Okay, but *I'll* speak to him myself, Mom."

We're meeting tomorrow at four o'clock—Allan wants to speak to each of us. I just hope she doesn't lose her job over this—after all, Allan hired me on Mom's reputation. I'll beg and grovel for her sake and see if I can't convince him I really am sorry and I didn't intend to keep the money. I'll understand if he wants to fire me, though. I just want all of this over with—but I feel a whole lot better after telling Mom the truth.

As we were hugging each other, laughing and wiping our eyes, I suddenly felt something else, "Hey, Mom, I'm starving!"

"Me too! Let's see what we've got. What do you feel like?" Mom threw open the cupboard doors.

"It's pretty late. Maybe we should just have cereal or something easy."

"I've got the shivers. How about I whip us up some hot pancakes?"

"If you want something hot, why don't we warm up a can of baked beans too?"

"Okay, but I only have one tin. Hmmm, how about we make creamed tuna too?"

"Oohh, yeah, on toast? That'd be good with melted cheese on top."

"And what about our vegetables? We have to eat healthy, Tracey. There's carrots. Do you want them raw or cooked?"

"Definitely raw! I'll scrape them while you open the tins."

"I still feel like pancakes. Don't you?"

"Sure, if we have jam and ice cream to go on top. That's my favourite way."

"Yeah, we have a little ice cream left and raspberry jam. This can be our dessert."

"What should we have to drink?"

"Oh, I know! *La piece d'resistance*. Hot cocoa with a peppermint candycane and a marshmallow on top."

"Mom, you sure know how to throw a party!"

After we cleaned up our bizarre buffet, we decided to make the most of our evening off work and rented a corny old black and white Christmas movie called, *It's a Wonderful Life*. I bet you know that one, Joe. Our choice had real irony because the movie has the message about being happy with what you have and not worrying about money so much. I don't know when it happened but Mom was so tired, she fell asleep before the movie was over so I covered her up with the blanket.

"Hi, it's Tracey and Victoria. We can't take your call right now so please leave your name and a brief message and one of us will get back to you as soon as we can. 'Bye for now. Oh, and Merry Christmas."

At the tone, please record your message. When you have finished recording, hang up or press one for more options.

"Hi, Mom? Trace? It's me, Brady. I'm at Grandma's right now and she said I could call long distance and say 'Hi.' We picked up the box from the bus station. You know, the big one you sent us? Thanks! Grandma said I should unwrap the brown paper covering and open the box. Was that okay? I took out all the presents and put them under her tree but we can't open them until Christmas morning, right? I think I know what you bought for me, Mom, and I can't wait to try them out. There's lots of snow here in Edmonton and the river's frozen over. I don't know what you gave me, Trace, but thanks. Sorry, but I didn't

get you anything. I hope you won't be mad. Dad's out shopping right now to get you something. Grandma says it probably won't get there in time for Christmas, though. I think she's mad at Dad. It's too bad you couldn't come and spend Christmas with us but Dad says you're busy working. Will you even work tomorrow, on Christmas Day? That doesn't sound so fun. Dad says if I want to come see you after we get back, I could maybe come down on the bus like you did, Trace. I wouldn't be afraid to do it by myself. Honest. Um, I better go. Grandma's baking sugar cookies and needs me to cut out the shapes for her because she doesn't do it as good as me. She says Merry Christmas too! See ya."

Friday, December 24, 10:12 a.m.

Victoria's Day Planner: Friday, December 24, Christmas Eve

6:00 a.m. – 10:30 a.m. Tim Hortons

4:00 p.m. meet Allan

5:00 p.m. – 12:00 p.m. shift @ Oysters

Notes:

Pick up Tracey's gift

I was so surprised to wake up on the couch this morning. I must have fallen asleep during the movie and now I have a crook in my neck. Tracey was sweet and tucked me in, though. I'm exhausted after our emotional talk but feel like a huge burden has been lifted off my shoulders.

The best part of all this is that Tracey started calling me *Mom* again—my heart could burst! We had an honest mother-daughter talk after she confessed to taking the tip money. I kind of suspected this and it terrified me. But even though I feel emotionally drained from all the honesty, I am also relieved to tell her about Pete's gambling. I tried to protect the kids from their father's destructive problem and was even willing to take all the responsibility, but now I realize that keeping it all a secret only punished me and didn't prepare them for my leaving. It broke my heart when Tracey said how abandoned she felt. Why was I protecting him?

I am so disappointed that I missed Brady's call. Oh God, I miss my boy! I'm almost ready to support the three of us and once Christmas expenses are over it should be more predictable to budget for. Since Pete will be without a house after January 15th and is barely holding a job, it will be easier for me to gain custody of both children. I'll have to talk to Sally and see if she has any further advice before I speak to the lawyer.

Tracey must have slept through the call because her door is closed and I think she's still asleep. After our big discussion, I bet she was writing in her journal late last night. I wonder if it helps her as much as this diary helps me. It started off as an organizational tool but I am finding myself reaching for it more and more as an emotional release. I can sort out the muddle in my brain better when I write down my thoughts and feelings. I haven't felt so depressed lately either. But that could have something to do with Tracey living with me now. Even with all the trouble we've had, it's good to have her here.

I love her so much.

* * * * *

Friday morning, Dec. 24
—Christmas Eve!

Joe,

I just missed Brady's call when I was down the street returning the movie and picking up some milk, peanut butter, and some other things. It's too bad because I want to talk to him and see how he really is. And talk to Grandma too. I miss them both. Yeah, even my dorky brother. I called back but there was no answer.

I wondered when the Christmas presents were coming here—now I realize there will only be the one from Grandma. What a *jerk* he is for leaving it until Christmas Eve. A lot of thought my father's put into the family lately! And all the trouble I got in to give him that

expensive baseball card. Now I bet he'll just pawn it for the money. I sure got the picture backwards! I'm glad Mom told me the *truth* about everything.

Mom worked at Timmies this morning but I found her lying on her bed and in tears when I came home from the store. She was *really* sorry to miss the call and they were still out when she tried to call him back. She's missing Brady and finding all this separation stuff really hard. I made us a pot of tea—I think we're both wiped from all the heart-talk.

She's out doing something "important" and when she gets back we're meeting with Allan—but not until four. The wait is killing me! I've written a letter and I'll apologize in person then deal with whatever he has to say. Mom wants to speak with him too so I guess we'll each have our turn. She has a shift tonight at five—if Allan doesn't fire her—but I doubt that he'll want me to stay. The restaurant is closed on Christmas day so everyone can spend the day with family. But we haven't got any plans yet—I don't think either of us can bear to think about it.

What are you doing for Christmas, Joe? Do you have someone to celebrate with?

Friday afternoon

After Mom told me about his gambling, I had some questions so I went to the library after lunch and checked some sites on the Internet. There was a ton of information on gambling and I read everything I could.

Apparently, there are three phases a compulsive gambler goes back and forth with. First is the winning phase when the gambler has big wins that give him "unreasonable optimism." That was him. He just kept winning and didn't see how his luck could stop. The second phase is, of course, the losing phase. I don't remember much about this time except that he was home less and less and seemed irritable and restless when he was there. He'd come home for dinner but hardly say two words, and then head out right after with lame excuses. The desperation phase kicked in when he became desperate to win back what he was losing.

My father is a classic example—from what the websites say. I knew he was having trouble with some things in his life but now I understand better what happened and don't just blame my mom anymore. I guess I didn't pay attention to what was going on around me at home but now I can remember little things and the pieces fit. The compulsive gambling has been going on for almost four years, Mom said, and they did a good job of hiding it from us. I guess parents just try to protect their kids. That's why it was such a shock when she left—no one could see how serious this problem was until it was too late to do anything else but start over. *He* was the one who caused the damage.

Joe, I remember you told me that when you were a younger man, you gambled and lost everything. I didn't realize it at the time but your gambling took away not only your money but your job, your house, and your family too. Your grown boys don't speak to you any more and you're homeless. *And lost*. That's what you meant, isn't it?

Joe, I'm worried. Is he like you were? Will the same bad stuff happen to him that happened to you? Didn't anyone help you, Joe? Couldn't you help yourself?

Who's going to help my dad?

* * * * *

Victoria's Day Planner

Later on Christmas Eve

After my first stop, I picked up Tracey's gift and paid for it in full. It's beautiful and I am sure she'll love it! I have money for all the extras to go with it. I am so excited but hope she will really like it too. She never asked for one (actually, she never asked for anything for Christmas!) but I am positive it's something that will inspire her creatively. She's always humming those crazy country songs she loves.

Luckily, Tracey was taking a shower when I came home so I hid it all under my bed. She's still in there getting ready and once I get my turn, we'll head down to the restaurant for the

meetings with Allan. My stomach is heavy and I suspect Tracey's is too. Despite the trouble she's caused this fall, I now understand her perspective of the breakup of my marriage. She's been through a rough time too.

I am also excited about my plan for tomorrow. Hopefully Allan will agree.

Dear Allan and Oyster Bar Staff,

I want to apologize to all of you. I was the one who took some of the tip money on Monday night. I only meant to borrow it to buy some Christmas presents for my family. I didn't think it would be missed and planned to pay it all back on payday. The money was missed, though. It was a huge mistake to take it.

The second mistake I made was not admitting right away that I took it. Especially when Allan started asking everyone questions. I know it put you all under a lot of stress and made you look at each other with suspicion. That wasn't a nice way to feel about the people you work with. Believe me, I know.

I've only worked at Oysters for about two weeks but everyone was pretty nice to me. I probably won't be coming in anymore now that the truth is out, but I just want to say I'm really sorry and it's been good working with you. Please don't blame my mom, Ria, for any of this. She didn't know anything until last night and she really likes working there.

Please forgive me for taking the tip money. I admit that it was stealing even though I only meant to borrow it. I will give it all back.

Sincerely,

Tracey Ann Waters

(Chef's assistant, kitchen staff)

Later, Friday Afternoon

Joe,

We came to the restaurant just before four but Allan's meeting with someone else and isn't able to see us yet. Mom's chatting with some servers who aren't busy because it's pretty empty right now. I'm at a table near Allan's office, sitting by myself with my journal—waiting. Spencer's been putting together an order by the kitchen pass-through and is trying to get my attention by hanging a spoon on his nose. I'm ignoring him because I don't want to face him, or anyone else, until I talk to my boss.

*

Allan was pretty decent, actually. At first he sat behind his desk and let me talk. I probably said "sorry" about a hundred times and was babbling on and on too much but he didn't interrupt. He just listened and when I was finished explaining exactly what happened with the tip money, he said, "How much did you take, Tracey?"

Because I was the only one who knew the actual amount taken out of the tip jar I could have easily lied and said it was only thirty or forty dollars. But I didn't. I'm all about the truth now.

"It was \$95, exactly. I'm *really* sorry, Allan."

Allan wrote this number down. "Okay, Tracey. Now what do you plan to do to make it right?"

"I would like it taken from my paycheque, please. Oh, and I have an apology letter I wrote for you and the staff." I handed him the note I'd written that morning. "But could you not put it up for the staff until I'm gone?"

Allan smiled. "Sure. I can do that. Thank you for writing this. It will give everyone a chance to hear what you have to say. Apologies are important. And your paycheque will be adjusted at the end of the month."

"Thanks, Allan. And for trusting my mom enough to offer me the job in the first place. After this mistake, I don't expect to keep my job, but *please*, Allan, don't blame my mom for any of this. It had nothing to do with her and it was just my screw up."

He actually laughed at that point. "Well, thank you for your honesty and taking responsibility for your actions, Tracey." Then he got serious again. "But because of this incident and since the Christmas rush is pretty much over, we won't need you back at the restaurant. Thank you for coming in to talk to me, Tracey. I'm sure we'll see each other around. Now, I need to speak with your mother." He shook my hand and ushered me out the door saying, "Everything is forgiven and forgotten."

Allan's a good guy. He's fair and all about second chances—especially on Christmas Eve.

This sounds like a country song.

I left Allan's office without the heavy load on my shoulders. But Mom went in and took my place. Right now I'm waiting for her and writing while she's with Allan. I want to make sure everything is okay for her. They've been in there a long time and I don't know what else they could be talking about.

*

While I was writing Spencer popped his head around the corner with chopsticks up his nose! I couldn't help laughing and it felt good. My stomach wasn't all tied up in knots like it's been the past three days. But I knew I still had something to do. When he saw that I wasn't ignoring him anymore, he sat down beside me.

"So, Chick. What's with the serious meetings?"

I told Spencer a shortened version of what I had done. It turns out that a month ago he'd had a run in with Simon about a prank with hiding the tip jar—it didn't go over well. So with the

tip trouble this time, Simon automatically thought Spencer was behind it. Boy, he can hold a grudge.

“Spencer, I’m really sorry I caused you all that added stress. Honestly, I didn’t mean to cause anyone else trouble. Forgive me?”

“Okay, no worries. I’m cool with Allan and will be with Simon now. I’m just sorry you won’t be here to hang around with. You made it fun, Trace.”

“Yeah, I’ll miss working with you too, Spence.”

“So, are you hungry?” He got up and placed a small plate of different kinds of sushi in front of me and gave me a fresh set of chopsticks that I got to snap apart. I’ve never tried sushi before but everyone eats it so I figure, how bad can it be?

Have you ever eaten sushi, Joe? I know that sushi is raw fish and this is the Oyster Bar—known for great fresh fishes dishes, ha!—but I didn’t think I could actually *eat* it. There’s no doubt that I couldn’t eat raw *oysters*—they look sooooo disgusting. Spencer poured soya sauce into a tiny blue dish and then with fresh chopsticks—not the ones he’d put up his nose—picked up some green paste called wasabi—I’ve scraped this stuff off enough plates to know what it’s called—and mixed it in with the sauce. He showed me how to pick up a little piece with his choppers, dip it into the spicy sauce and pop it into his mouth. It looked easy enough. After many misses, I finally managed to spear a large pink piece and dip it into the sauce.

The problem happened on the way to my mouth. I didn’t realize sushi came apart so easily—some of it ended up in my mouth where it was supposed to and the rest made a trip down my chin, over my chest, and lodged in the space between my T-shirt and bra—yup, right in my cleavage! As the soya sauce soaked through everything and created an interesting feature to highlight my boobs, my mouth was freaking out. The slippery, slimy piece of fish and seaweed was sliding from one side to the other and not likely to ever go down my throat. I didn’t know what to deal with first as Spencer sat, staring at my bust, with a funny look on his face. I grabbed

a napkin and let the knife and fork, wrapped inside, clatter to the floor. I spit out the disgusting fish stuff first, picked out the cleavage piece, and then dabbed at my shirt the best I could. By this point, Spencer had finally come to his senses and jumped to my rescue. Using the other napkin, he began apologizing over and over again while dabbing and rubbing at the spilled mess *on my boobs!*

That's when Allan opened his office door to let my mom out. Her mouth fell open and his eyebrows shot to the ceiling. That's when I saw that she'd been crying.

Oh no, she's lost her job!

"Hi, it's Tracey and Victoria. We can't take your call right now so please leave your name and a brief message and one of us will get back to you as soon as we can. 'Bye for now. Oh, and Merry Christmas."

At the tone, please record your message. When you have finished recording, hang up or press one for more options.

"Merry Christmas, girls! I hope you're having a great morning.

"I've made all the phone calls, packed the van and everything is ready so call me when you get back and I'll meet you there...or, on second thought, I'll swing by to pick you up because the bus schedule is pretty minimal today. I'm looking forward to doing this with you two gorgeous ladies. See you soon!"

Saturday, December 25, 10:03 a.m.

Christmas Day—night

Merry Christmas, Joe, wherever you are.

In some ways, this was my best Christmas ever. It certainly was special and very, very different.

Yesterday, I went home after meeting with Allan but Mom stayed on to work her shift at Oysters. We were both very relieved that she wasn't fired! She was crying in Allan's office because of something *nice* that he said to her. *And* the great plan they came up with for today. When I got back to the suite last night, I wrapped her present, put the stupid decorations up around the living room, and made a fruit salad for us to eat in the morning. I made peanut butter cookies too. Then, I was so tired after all the stress of the past few days that I went to bed pretty early and didn't even hear her come in.

I woke up to the smell of coffee, the sound of Christmas songs on the radio, and then saw the little Christmas tree on the side table. Where did she get *that* from? I also saw a huge present wrapped up and a grin on her happy face. But I got hers from under my bed and insisted she open it first.

She kept saying, "How did you *make* this?" while crying and running her fingers over the bits of shells and pebbles that decorated the frame. That's when I noticed she didn't have her wedding ring on her finger anymore. I wonder where it is.

"Now Tracey, open yours!"

I tore open the wrapping paper. "Oh my God!"

It's the most beautiful guitar I've ever seen!!! It's got a cool strap, picks, and a couple of songbooks, all in a funky old case.

"*I love it!* Mom, how did you manage to pay for this?"

When Mom saw how excited I was, she started to cry again and I have to admit, my eyes were kind of watery too.

I played around with it while she got our coffee and the fruit salad. I practiced strumming and using the finger charts in the songbooks, I figured out two chords: G7 and C. Then she reminded me about the other presents from Grandma Rose—one for each of us. Grandma usually makes something that's too young for me but I was happy with the soft purple sweater. I don't think she knit this one—it's fine and smooth. It fits perfectly and looks great with my hair. I'll wear it with my new skirt but I have to borrow heels from Mom. She got a red sweater, to match her dark hair, and even though it's a different style, it looks just as good on her. We both wore them when we went to church for the Christmas morning service.

I haven't been to church in ages. I didn't want to go because we were having a nice time together but it was all right and made the morning feel like Christmas. The downtown cathedral is impressive especially with the trees, candles, and beautiful nativity scene. The music is pretty formal but there's a great guitarist who leads the group and sounds awesome. I watched him for pointers. The sermon the priest gave was pretty good as well—to build peace in the world you must start with your own heart. Peace is the greatest gift you can give or receive. I agree now that I've confessed and started to straighten out this whole mess—I feel a *lot* more peaceful.

But I'm glad I got the guitar too!

When we returned, we phoned Brady, Dad and Grandma again and got through this time. It's weird not to be together for Christmas day but it sounds like they're okay. Dad said he really likes his baseball card and apologized for sending my present late. It doesn't matter. I thanked Grandma for hers, though, and I think she knows how much I like the sweater. Brady didn't sound very happy to me. He got the skates but something must be wrong with them, maybe the size. Or maybe this Christmas is just too different for him.

When she hung up I could tell Mom wanted to cry—she's doing a lot of that lately!—but she took a deep breath and said she had a surprise plan. It turns out I was the one who gave her the idea. Since that day I was lost, I talk about Joe and homeless people often and she thought

that maybe we could do something for them at Christmas time. A while ago, she called the Franciscan Sisters of Atonement and volunteered our services for the annual Christmas dinner they host for the poor. I'm so surprised that she thought of something like this, I didn't know what to say at first. Then I realized what this might lead to—I've wanted to find you, Joe, and here's the perfect chance!

Then she wrecked it. Yesterday, she told Allan her plan and asked him if he would be willing to donate some food items from the restaurant for the sisters' kitchen. He got so excited about the idea, he started to take over all the arrangements with plans to load up boxes and crates of extra supplies from the storeroom and freezers. He even came to the suite to pick us up! I felt uncomfortable about seeing him again so soon. Allan's okay but this morning he was the last person I wanted to spend Christmas day with.

The van was full of stuff. I could tell Mom was impressed but she also acted sort of weird with Allan. He was kind of cool with me at first but warmed up after a while. We drove around to the back of the familiar building and a guy was waiting for us with the side door open so we could unload right into the store room. I had chills thinking about the last time I was here—hungry, cold, and very scared. Today was completely different since I wasn't lost and I was on the other side of the serving table.

A couple of jolly volunteers were preparing the food in the warm kitchen. The woman in charge was very friendly and gave us each a hug—which was kind of weird. I noticed the differences between this tired-looking place and the restaurant's new stainless steel, state of the art equipment. But the smells of good food cooking were the same—the turkeys roasting in the big ovens were making my mouth water. Quite the different smell from the last time I cooked—*burnt*—a turkey!

Once we cleaned up she assigned us jobs.

Tracey—mashed potatoes

Victoria—vegetables

Allan—storeroom, set up tables

I saw the huge recipe for the potato mix and it didn't seem too hard—boil water, add butter and potato flakes. I laughed when the woman said to mix it in one of the huge plastic pails against the wall but I guess you need to make a lot to feed all those people. When the water boiled Allan helped me pour it into the pail. I added the rest and stirred it all with the largest wooden spoon I'd ever seen. But something wasn't right.

"Sister, can you check my potatoes? They don't smell right." When the sister in charge took a sniff, she made a face and looked at the side of the pail. I had taken the *cleaning* pail instead of the food prep. pail and this one smelled of Pinesol!

"Don't you think they'll be fine with some good gravy on top? It would mask the smell and we won't have to waste all the potatoes."

But she said, "Nonsense! Our dinner guests deserve nothing but the best!"

I feel embarrassed but she's right. When you think about it, I wouldn't have liked those potatoes and I sure didn't want Joe or anyone else to have to eat them. I found the proper pail—labeled "potatoes" *duh!*—and started a fresh batch. While I was waiting for the water to boil *again*, Allan asked me what happened. He feels terrible that *he* didn't notice the label himself! But I managed to make him smile and then helped him organize the packages and open some of the boxes he'd donated. There's some good stuff!

We started serving dinner at three o'clock and it was the biggest Christmas dinner I'd ever seen! The dining hall had been decorated with two trees in the front corners, streamers across the ceiling, and poinsettias on the brightly coloured tablecloths with gold-wrapped chocolates at each place setting. It really looked like a party and so different from the last time I'd been there. There were even huge boxes of hundreds of small, wrapped presents. Sister said

they were hats, gloves, socks, scarves, and T-shirts wrapped up and labeled for men, women or children.

When they opened the doors for the first seating of two hundred, I noticed that the hungry people looked around at the decorations before they took a seat at the long tables. The dining room filled quickly and others in line had to wait for the next seating. The food was all ready and us servers either stood behind the long counter and spooned the food onto plates or took the full ones and served the guests. I felt more comfortable behind the counter and spooned gravy onto *my* potatoes that Allan was scooping, until I thought my arm would break. Allan laughed when I asked him to make what Brady calls “crater mountains” to hold the gravy. My mom was one of the servers and I noticed her chatting with many of the guests. She had a huge smile on her face.

Once everyone was eating, I scanned the tables looking for you, Joe, but there was no sign of you in that first group. Maybe you were still in line. Or coming later.

On the way out the door, each guest was given their choice of gift—I guess whatever they needed most. Even from where I was, I could hear the many thank yous, God bless yous, and Merry Christmases. Most people were gone in less than half an hour and once the chairs were straightened, the tables re-set and the serving dishes refilled, the doors were opened for the next seating of two hundred guests.

This time I asked Mom to switch with me—I wanted to serve to be sure to see you right away, Joe. Each plate was heaped with lots of turkey and all the trimmings. I picked up two plates at a time and placed one in front of each person then went back for more. Another guy brought around a tray of coffee, tea and juice. Most people ate everything on their plate but I saw some trading with each other and some wrapping up small portions in a napkin—like I saw you do—to save for later. I’d say about eighty percent of the people who came in were men on their

own but there were a few families. Some looked gloomy or even sick, but most people smiled and seemed happy to be spending their Christmas here.

I liked serving the plates and got better and better at it. Mom showed me how to carry two plates on each arm so I could deliver four at a time. It's tricky getting them to balance but I got the hang of it pretty quick. The expected number of guests for today was eleven hundred and we had enough food for more if necessary. At the end of the day, the count was eleven hundred and sixty so that was almost six full seatings! The last guests left at 6:15 and then we volunteers could have our dinner. There were no more cranberries or stuffing left but there was enough of everything else to fill our plates. Everything tasted delicious—because we'd worked hard and were so hungry ourselves. Allan didn't eat much because he still had to go to his sister's house for dinner after he dropped us off. Mom offered to take a cab so he could leave right from there but he wanted to drive us back. We didn't talk much on the way home but I think we each felt happy despite the hard work. They teased me for humming when I didn't even know it. I have these songs stuck in my head.

Mom said she got more thank yous today than she ever has serving in the restaurant. You'd think that when she finally got a day off, serving food would be the last thing she'd want to do but I haven't seen her look happier. I think my face has done more smiling than usual too.

My only disappointment is I didn't see you, Joe. Six times I checked the crowd. Six times I studied the new faces that came in. Finally I asked Sister Theresa if she knew you. She listened carefully to my description but didn't know who you could be and even asked the other nun if she knew you. I gave her the cookies I'd baked for you. Now I don't know what to think.

Where *are* you, Joe?

*

*

*

*

*

Victoria's Day Planner: Sunday, December 26

6:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m. supervisor shift @ T.H.

5:00 p.m. – 12:00 p.m. shift @ Oysters

Notes:

This afternoon I'm tired but happy. Yesterday was a great success. I'm so proud of Tracey. I've never seen her work so hard. And Allan was wonderful! He was so generous with the food supplies that the sisters have many weeks worth of meals. He worked hard there too, hauling, organizing, serving and cleaning. For someone in management, he sure knows how to be a worker!

While Allan and I had a break, he really opened up. Before he started Oysters, he worked his way up at various restaurants so he would know how to do everything to run his own one day. He worked long hours. Too long for his ex-wife. Their marriage only lasted three years and he regrets some of his choices. He was working hard and saving up for his dream but it became a reality when his dad passed away and left him a sizable inheritance. He answered my unasked question when he said he hasn't had a serious relationship since his divorce. He looked into my eyes when he said he's been waiting for the right woman. I hope he didn't see me blush.

I tried to reach Brady (he sounded upset yesterday) but Rose said they left Edmonton this morning. We had a good talk about the whole situation and I wonder now why I didn't confide in her sooner (my long distance phone bill is going to be one reason). She has a strong mind and a good heart. If anyone can get through to Pete, it's her. And I'm glad she understands my point of view but Rose doesn't take sides. She also hinted at what might be wrong with Brady.

The precious mirror Tracey made for me is beautiful. It's hanging in my room where I can see the mosaic frame from my bed and look in the mirror as I get ready in the morning. It is very creative and unique and reminds me of some of the simpler versions that we made in crafts

when I was her Brownie leader. The amount of work and thoughtfulness put into this handmade gift really touches my heart.

Even though I didn't want to resort to that, it was well worth selling my ring to see Tracey so pleased with the guitar. She's got a knack for it and can strum and chord pretty well even without any lessons. It's funny but I don't even think she realizes how much she hums and sings especially now that she's happy again. She looks so different too. She's healthier and even more beautiful, especially when she smiles. She played for hours with the guitar after she wrote in her journal last night. I wonder if she'll keep it up now. What's she writing in there anyway? My guess is that it helps her as much as this diary helps me.

Victoria's Day Planner: Monday, December 27

6:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m. supervisor shift @ T.H.

5:00 p.m. – 11:00 p.m. shift @ Oysters

Notes:

Allan asked me out tonight, officially! He called me into his office and stammered out an invite being painfully careful not to pressure me. I'm pretty sure he was worried about sexual harassment issues with employer/employee dating. I declined, at first. I don't think I am ready to have a relationship with someone yet. He assured me we could continue to be friends without any pressures. He'd like to treat me after receiving the gloves I gave him for a Christmas gift. I am not working tomorrow night (he checked the schedule beforehand), so he'd like to take me out to a light dinner and then to the theatre to see the play everyone's been raving about. I haven't been out for a fun evening in ages but haven't *dated* in twenty years! I'm separated from Pete but it still feels awkward. I certainly didn't go looking for romance when I moved down here. I wonder what Tracey will think of this—if I even tell her! I think she likes Allan, but as a boss, not as her *mother's boyfriend*.

* * * * *

Monday morning, Dec. 27

Joe,

Dad just called and Brady's coming here for a visit! I'm excited about seeing him since it's been almost a month since I left them in Vernon. He doesn't have to ride the bus alone either which is good—he's only eight. Dad has some friends who were skiing at Silver Star but are heading back to Vancouver tomorrow and they agreed to give Brady a ride. I already figured we can make a bed for him in my room using the sofa cushions and I'll take him to places on the bus. It'll be good to have someone to do something with. Mom will flip out because she's at work right now and doesn't know he's coming tomorrow. She'll probably try to book off work to do stuff with us.

Wait till he sees my guitar! I've been practicing and can play "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" which is lame but is a good one to start chording with. There are a few other simple tunes to play from the beginner book and I'm practicing them. Mom says that maybe I can have lessons if I show enough interest on my own first. Ahhhh, I'm interested!

Spencer sent me a note with Mom last night. It was corny but pretty sweet of him. He said he read the letter I wrote to the staff and most people are okay about it. He's glad I told him myself though. He misses working with me and asked if I'd like to meet up with him sometime! He also asked if I'd heard the new "Big and Rich" tune. He's the only one I know down here who likes country music. In fact, he's the only friend I know here at all.

Monday night

I WON!!! I can't believe it! I've got two tickets to see the Dixie Chicks! I must have phoned the radio station a hundred times over the past three weeks but it finally paid off and now I'm going to the sold out concert! And I don't have to buy them—if I could even get the tickets—they're hugely expensive but I guess I could use my pay cheque but now I don't have

to! Yeehaw! They recorded me screaming, "I won! I won!" and played it on the radio about four times already. They're two fifth row tickets to the concert on January 29th. How cool is that?! Oh my God! I can't stand it—that's four weeks away. I'll go crazy waiting that long!

TRACER

Tuesday morning, Dec. 28

Joe,

I picked up my concert tickets and stashed them in my backpack for safe keeping—two fifth row seats! Yahoo! I wonder who I'll go with me. Mom doesn't really like country—she probably won't be able to take another night off anyway.

It's a long bus ride out to the radio station and the weirdest thing happened on the way back. The bus was crowded so I had to sit beside this guy who looked like a university student—scuffed shoes, a bulging backpack, and a heavy book on his lap. He also looked half-alive. It wasn't five minutes before his head started to drop off to the side and his book slipped out of his hands. When I reached to catch it his head flopped onto my shoulder! At first I thought he was *dead* but his snoring proved otherwise. I tried sliding away but with his head firmly planted on my shoulder, he only followed me. I looked around for help and my eyes caught an older woman's. She gave me a big smile and a wink—she'd seen what happened. I suddenly saw the scene through her eyes and realized how funny it must look. The poor guy had probably been studying all night or something—he looked like the serious student type. I decided it wasn't really hurting me to let him take his nap. After twenty minutes, I nudged him over against the window so I could get off. He never woke up—I wonder if he missed his stop.

The library was on my way so I stopped to check out the other two hilarious *Alice* books by Susan Juby. I wish I could write that funny. I also checked out the Internet and found some great sites that have mini-guitar lessons. They'll help a lot until I can get lessons of my own. I

might bring my guitar next time so I can practice—oh, maybe that will be a problem in the library.

“Hello, it’s Tracey and Victoria. Sorry, we aren’t here to take your call right now so please leave your name and a message and we’ll get back to you as soon as we can. Goodbye and Happy New Year!”

At the tone, please record your message. When you have finished recording, hang up or press one for more options.

“Hi Vicki and Tracey. It’s me, Pete . . . um, Dad. I just dropped off Brady at the Martins’ and they said they’d be down there around four. I guess you’ve made plans to meet already? I hope he has everything for the week and we can talk later about he and Tracey coming back in time for school. I think it’s starting on the 4th.

“Tracey, there are messages from some of your friends here on the answering machine. I’ll save them. Did you get your present yet? It should be there by now. I’m sorry it’s late—you know your Dad. And, I’d like to talk to you about what your mom said when I see you, okay?”

“Vicki, I got your message about the furniture and stuff. What do you want? I haven’t found a place yet so I don’t know how big it’ll be or how much stuff I’m going to need for the kids and me. It’ll be pretty expensive to send anything down there too so it might be better for you to just buy what you need down there.

“Well...’bye for now.”

Tuesday, December 28, 10:38 a.m.

Tuesday afternoon

Dad called and left a really strange message—I was glad to listen to it without Mom around. It's erased—she'll hear an edited version. Mom must have told him about our big discussion. But what he said about us going back up for school surprised me. Brady's coming down for a visit but I hadn't really thought about going back up with him next weekend. School starts on Tuesday the fourth and I've been out of it for so long I kind of forgot about going back. I'm getting used to being here too and with the house sold, I feel really mixed up about where home is. I'll have to think about where I want to live before I talk to Mom *or* Dad.

Torn between two places
Both so far from home

I wonder where we'll live in Vernon and if Brady and I will have to change schools. I've thought about going to school here—it would be kind of exciting. I think she's even expecting it but we haven't talked about it yet. Maybe Brady will stay here too—but then we'd have to share a bedroom all the time and I don't think I could do that for long. Also, I didn't think I'd miss working at the restaurant so much. I don't miss Simon but Spencer and I had fun goofing around together. I wonder what school he goes to—oh, he thinks I'm seventeen and in grade twelve like him.

I haven't seen my friends at home for ages. It's good to hear there are some messages for me—I wonder who called. Maybe Brady knows. When he gets here I can take him places and stuff for the rest of the holidays but then I think I'm ready to go back to school. I just don't know where.

*

*

*

*

*

Victoria's Day Planner: Tuesday, December 28

6:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. @ T.H.

4:30 meet Brady at the Skytrain Station

Notes:

Phone Allan

Change/shorten shifts for this week if possible

Phone landlords, again!

My baby boy is here! I am so happy to see him and couldn't stop holding him as we rode the skytrain together. He let me for a while but then he squirmed away and said he's too old to sit on my knee. Tracey teases him as usual but I can tell she's excited to see him too. He has a new haircut from Rose's favourite salon in Edmonton and it looks different but good. I guess he's just looking more grown up. He's too pale for my liking and is quiet but he looks like he's been eating okay. His clothes are clean and I see that Rose has let the hem down on his pant legs.

When we got to the basement suite, he looked around but didn't seem to register anything. Tracey showed him what little we have and helped him unpack while I started his choice for supper: spaghetti and meat sauce with lots of cheese. The cookies Tracey made were perfect for dessert.

I finally figured out what was wrong with Brady's Christmas present. When he asked for skates, I *assumed* he meant hockey skates. Really, he was hoping for *figure* skates! Brady didn't want to tell me I'd made a mistake and is afraid he'll be teased. He's not much of a team player which was clear when he played soft-ball. He loves to skate though and will probably be a good figure skater but somehow I'm caught up in the gender stereotype. Shame on me! I still have the receipt and so I promised him that one day this week we'll go exchange them for the ones he wants. I just hope they don't cost any more than the hockey skates did.

We watched a movie after listening to Tracey play her guitar (she's really doing well) and now Brady is sleeping and Tracey is curled up, writing, just like me. It was great not to have to work tonight so I could be home with my two kids but having to cancel my date with Allan was disappointing. He was very understanding (again!) and offered me as much time off as I wanted. It's not as easy at Tim Hortons as shift manager and they need me to open most mornings. I'll just do what I can. Thankfully Tracey is around to babysit too.

It's been raining really hard the past few days and the ceiling is leaking again. This time you can really smell the mould and I'm very concerned about having it repaired before we get ill. This could be a big problem for Brady with his asthma. The broken handle on the toilet still doesn't flush properly. The electrical wiring is old and has me worried about the fire hazard. The landlords won't return my messages. I'll have to keep looking for a new place. There's just no time. Moving is expensive and such a hassle.

* * * * *

Wednesday, Dec. 29

Dear Joe,

Did you ever get a present, like for Christmas or your birthday, and it was so wrong it felt like a joke? Or that the person who bought it didn't know you at all? That's how I felt when I opened the present from *him*. The note said that he tried to find something "country" from the Calgary Stampede but there was nothing in Edmonton during the winter. So when he was at the hockey game, he bought the next best thing . . . an Edmonton Oilers' T-shirt and ball cap! *That's hockey*. I don't even *watch* hockey. Why would he think I'd want them? Brady can tell I'm disappointed but he's happy I gave them both to him. They'll go with his Oilers' sweatshirt. Perfect.

I really love the guitar, though. I play it every day and am even trying to figure out the chords to some of my favourite songs. Allan said that he can play a little but hasn't in a while. He even used to play in a rock band—that figures! He gave Mom some old books to give me and they're ancient but don't look too hard to figure out. He says we should "jam" together sometime. Yeah, that would be soooooooooo fun. Not.

* * * * *

Victoria's Day Planner: Thursday, December 30

6:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m. @ T.H.

Notes:

Sort and pay bills

Mail cheque to bank with note

Hold rent cheque until tomorrow's meeting

Call about suites in paper

Allan and I agreed to postpone our date until next week, once the kids are settled in their new schools. He also agreed to help me with the landlord problem and is coming here for the meeting tomorrow morning. It will be good to have a man on my side.

Yesterday I had to work in the morning so Tracey took Brady to the library on the bus then we went to exchange his skates in the afternoon. He was eager to try them out so we went to public skating and Tracey rented skates to join him on the ice. Brady is so comfortable on ice and makes it look easy. I'll have to find a way to put him in lessons.

Tracey took him downtown to find her homeless friend, Joe. I couldn't believe she took a little boy down to that area of town let alone go herself. It's pretty rough. Maybe she felt braver with the company. She's disappointed about not finding Joe and said she even checked the

shelter's registration for the past two months. I think these homeless people are often nomadic so he could be in another city by now. She should just give up finding him.

I can't get out of working my T.H. morning shifts but it seems to be okay this week with me home in the early afternoons for the rest of the day. I feel like I'm on holidays, almost. If the weather clears, I want to take them to Stanley Park this weekend. I don't have much money to spend on treats and admissions but since Tracey and I have transit passes, we also plan to ride the Skytrain over the Fraser River to Surrey and take the sea bus across the harbour to Lonsdale Quay on the North Shore. We'll window shop all the fancy stores on Robson Street and go skating at least one more time. He's most happy on the ice and is becoming more relaxed about being here with us. That makes me happy. He asked for my homemade macaroni and cheese tonight. He said that Kraft dinner wasn't the same thing at all. What a sweetheart!

Vicki's Macaroni and Cheese

Boil $1\frac{1}{2}$ - 2 cups of macaroni noodles in salted water until tender.

Drain and pour half the noodles into a greased casserole dish. Add a generous layer of grated cheddar cheese.

Pour in the rest of the macaroni.

Put another good layer of grated cheese on top.

Sprinkle with bread crumbs (or crumpled potato chips—Brady's idea!)

Slowly pour in milk just until you can begin to see it at the edges.

Put 3 chunks of butter on top.

Place uncovered in 350°F oven for 45 mins. - 1 hour.

Friday, Dec. 31—Payday!

—and the last day of a crappy year.

Hey Joe!

I got my paycheque today! Allan actually dropped it off himself when he came over to meet with Mom and the idiot landlord. Even with \$95 taken off it's not bad.

I've never had more than two hundred bucks to my name so being able to put that much in the bank will be cool—until I decide what to do with it. She gets paid for both—by automatic deposit—so there'll be a treat for New Year's.

Brady and I went to Covenant House to ask about you. Another lady was at the desk and said this shelter is only for youth, aged 15 to 23. You wouldn't be staying there. She was curious about us looking for "our grandpa" and suggested some other shelters to try. As we were leaving, I saw the same guy I followed into Covenant House a month ago. I hardly recognized him though—he was kind of dressed up and has his hair trimmed. I said "hi" but he doesn't remember me. I guess I look different too.

* * * * *

Victoria's Day Planner: Friday, December 31

6:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. @ T.H.

1:00 p.m. meet landlord

8:00 p.m. "First Night" New Year's Party downtown with kids

Notes:

Pay bills when paycheque comes through account

The meeting with the landlord went better with Allan there. Being a single mother doesn't hold much negotiating power. Allan suspects that an upstairs pipe is leaking and knows

which questions to ask and how to pressure them into being responsible because he knows my rights too. The repairs will be started next week. I still *had* to give them the January rent cheque, though.

I invited Allan in to meet Brady.

"Hey there, young man," Allan said with his hand out. "You must be Brady. I've heard some great things about you from your Mom and your sister. It's good to finally meet you."

"Who are *you*?" Brady said, ignoring the offered handshake.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm Allan. Your mother and I work together. And Tracey worked there too." Allan looked expectant. He assumed that Brady had heard all about him.

But Brady chose to be rude and embarrass me by walking out of the room without another word.

Tracey, on the other hand, was very excited to get her first official pay cheque.

"Thank you, Allan. This is great. Oh, and sorry again for all that other stuff with the tip money."

Allan said, "That's all over with, Tracey, and after seeing how hard you worked at the mission dinner, I'm willing to hire you back when another opening comes up."

"Really? Thanks, that'd be cool!"

When Allan was in the suite he was very polite but I could see him glancing at the stained ceiling, the peeling wall paper, the soiled carpet and the dingy furniture. Seeing it through his eyes, I saw it for what it is: a cheap and temporary rental. Our house in Vernon was never rich or grand, but it was clean and tastefully decorated. It was as homey and comfortable as I could make it. I haven't had time to do any homemaking here and it shows. In fact, it hardly looks like a home at all.

It's New Year's Eve and Allan will be very busy at the restaurant with two fully booked seatings at 7:00 and 9:30. He didn't want to ask me but when I offered to come in to work later, he was very relieved. I promised the kids pizza and some movies and they seem okay about that.

It's so rainy tonight the downtown family event we planned on going to wouldn't be much fun anyway.

* * * * *

New Year's Day Disaster

Oh Joe,

It's ruined! When the men finally left this morning, the disaster really hit us. The suite is pretty well destroyed and all of our stuff is either soaking wet or damaged beyond repair. It's brutal!

This is what happened. When Mom decided to work at the restaurant, Brady and I were choked about not going downtown to the New Year's event but it was really pouring out. She treated us to pizza and the PG movies weren't too bad this time. The machine quit working so I hooked it up to another extension cord. A couple minutes later, we heard a loud pop and the power went out—again. We don't have a flashlight, but I know where the matches and candles are. Brady was scared at first but after we finished the pizza by candle light, I practiced my guitar and we messed around doing a kind of karaoke game. We tried to stay up till midnight but with no power and nothing else to do, we got bored and just went to bed.

Brady went to the bathroom—when I reminded him. It was dark but I still should have checked that he flushed properly. While we were sleeping, the toilet kept running. Maybe it got clogged or something but it overflowed and flooded the whole suite! Mom got home extra late because of the New Year's parties so when she came in the door, water sloshed over her shoes. Brady's bed on the floor was drenched and he was just waking up—cold and wet. She got us both out, banged on the door upstairs to wake them up, and the lady called someone to help stop the water before it caused any more damage. Too late. And it really is my fault—Brady doesn't know how to jiggle the handle right.

We stood outside and waited in our pyjamas. I don't recommend it.

After the restoration crew turned off the water to our suite, sucked up the flood with pumps, ripped up the sopping carpets and under pad, and placed huge fans all over the place, we were allowed back in to check on our things. I was shocked how awful everything looked and how much damage the water had caused. The water mark on the wall showed the height of the flood—almost to the height of the coffee table! It's shocking how much water can come from a broken toilet left running. Once Mom isn't so busy trying to get everything sorted out, I need to tell her what I did. Or didn't do.

I'm most worried about my guitar. I knew I'd left it leaning against the couch before I went to bed. When I saw the water mark on the case halfway up, I started to cry—I couldn't help it. The case looks really bad and when I opened it up, water actually poured out. Everything inside the lower half is soaked. The body of the guitar was filled with water. It's ruined.

One more thing loved and lost.

*

Early this morning, Mom phoned Allan and he brought the van to help us save what we could and move somewhere. He must be getting sick of our emergencies. I know Mom wanted to cry but I saw her jaw set and other than the flush on her cheeks, she looked okay.

She quoted some famous saying, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." I'm proud of her—she's strong.

Right now Brady and I are in a hotel room and she's back at the suite with Allen "talking" to the landlords. I've got all the stuff that we could salvage spread out on the beds and floor and I've been trying to dry them out with a blow dryer—especially my guitar. Most of our clothes got wet because they were still in the suitcases on the floor and will have to be washed. But the clothes on the hangers are fine—too bad I didn't hang more of mine up. Some of our things are completely ruined and we had to throw a lot of stuff out. The worst damage is—

my guitar

all our shoes

everything in the lower cupboards in the kitchen and bathroom

my school books that were stacked on the floor—including two library books

all Mom's important papers that she kept in a shoe box in her closet

Brady's new skates—he's trying to dry them out with the blow dryer now

I don't care about the ruined furniture. But, everything we own is either spread around the room drying or stacked into two cardboard boxes at the end of the double beds. It's not much. Mom says everything else can be replaced. Eventually.

This room is okay for tonight but where are we going to *live*, Joe?

* * * * *

Victoria's Day Planner: Sunday, January 2

6:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m. @ T.H.

6:00 p.m. – 11:00 p.m. @ Oysters (if I want to work the shift)

Notes:

Thank Kate for covering my shift yesterday

Phone landlord AGAIN

Phone Pete

Phone Sally

Take another load of clothes to laundromat

Look for a new place!!!

I feel like a basket case. I need to sort it out in my mind.

Just when my life was getting on track, this happens. It's so unfair. Thankfully not too many of *our* belongings are ruined so not getting the expensive tenancy insurance policy wasn't a huge mistake. However, the suite is completely uninhabitable now (actually it was pretty bad even before the flood!). With the necessary renovations to the suite, it will be at least a month before we can move back in there. I need to find another place ASAP if I want to keep the kids with me! Allan got a corporate rate for the hotel room but it still costs more than rent and there is little space for the three of us. The landlord has my money for January rent but won't refund it until the insurance adjusters complete the inspection, *whenever that is!* I wish I knew what my legal options are. Even if I do get it back it might not be for weeks and I'll probably never see the \$500 damage deposit.

Last night Tracey took a deep breath and said, "Mom, *I'm* responsible for the flood. I didn't check after Brady used the broken handle and that's why the toilet flooded the suite."

Poor girl! She's been beside herself with guilt. I never imagined she would take responsibility for this and deal with it in such a mature manner. It was the one happy moment in the past two days when I could tell her, "Oh, sweetheart! No, the flood *wasn't* your fault. The leaking pipe from upstairs finally burst and water flowed down the walls into our suite. Neither our toilet nor anything else we did caused it. I am very sorry that you're worried but I am proud of you for accepting responsibility for your brother. I am also sorry about your guitar. I'll find a way to get you another one, someday. It's hard to accept that this happened. We were starting to make it work, weren't we?"

This week I want to have the kids set up in their new schools...but Lord, I don't even have a *home* to keep them in! My hope for starting a new life for the kids is completely sidetracked! I can't stop the tears from coming now.

RENTALS

Furnish. Apt./Suites

Vancouver Area

2Br bsmt, Hidabed, twin, kitchen set, desk. nr park & transit, n/s, n/p. Avail. Feb 15. lease 1 yr min.

OCEAN VIEW lge. bach. ste. murphy bed, designer furn. Avail. Feb. 1 lease neg. \$1800

Lower Mainland Area

Spac. ste's, some fully furn. storage, heat/hot water incl. Vanc. (40 mins), bus to skytrain. Low rent!

New lrg. bright suites, excel. loc. near transit, schools, Walmart, hwy 1, skytrain 35mins to Van.

Sunday night, Jan. 2

Joe,

I'm trying to fix my guitar. I phoned a music shop to see what to do about the damage. They suggest I loosen the strings slightly, lay it flat on a towel and just leave it in a warm room. It may take a week or more before it's completely dry and can be tuned again. The case was already pretty beat up but now the water marks make it look ancient. I'll have to be patient and hope the water isn't too much for my guitar.

It's been a busy day sorting the mess and taking wet clothes to the laundromat while Mom works. She gave me forty dollars to buy some second hand clothes and shoes

that have to be replaced. It took a while but I got quite a few neat things. Brady's anxious so he follows me everywhere. He's okay now—after I bought him a new comic book. He wants a graphic novel but I can't afford one and I think he's too young for most of them anyway. At least he likes to read. Last night he was upset about his wrecked skates and convinced me to phone Dad collect—he was actually home—to see if he knew what to do. He was shocked to hear about the flood—I thought Mom would have told him already. He fired off questions but I changed the subject back to the skates. He said if they're still wet Brady should wear them as much as he can—with the guards on—so the leather will dry to the shape of his foot. He can blow dry the outside and change socks to soak up the inside—until they dry completely. They might need to be rubbed with some kind of oil later. It sounds bizarre but looks like it might work even though Mom and I had to force Brady to take them off before he went to bed. Crazy kid.

This flood has really made a mess of our lives. I'm relieved it isn't my fault after all but Mom's furious that the landlord's leaky pipe should have been fixed long ago.

I've got to stop writing now and turn out the light because Brady needs to go to sleep. He's hyper and keeps throwing the pillows at me. Mom should be back from work soon—she decided to go to Oysters after all. She's worried about having enough money with all these problems. When will she ever get a break?

Water damage everywhere
Never more will this girl care
What I expected to be fair
How strong can I be?

How strong can I be?
Alone, I'm only grasping, free.
It takes more than one, I see
To weather all eternity.

Some things change and start again.
The way is wet and courage thin.
We carry on, where we begin
How strong can we be?

Tracey

Monday night, Jan. 3

Joe,

Allan picked us up in the van and took us all out for breakfast this morning. I asked, "Do you always drive this ugly, commercial van?"

He laughed and said, "My two-seater car would be a little tight for the four of us."

We drove around Stanley Park then walked along the seawall. It wasn't beach weather but it wasn't rainy either and it felt good to get out in the fresh air and see the sun sparkle on the ocean.

Mom kept saying things like, "Tracey, why don't you run on ahead with Brady?"

"No, I'll let him do his own thing. I'll just walk with you two."

It was a nice little diversion but I'm really getting worried about where we're going to live. Mom's been all over town with Allan trying to find an apartment but the vacancy rate is low and there just isn't that much out there that we can afford that's big enough and isn't way out of the city. We're also in a time crunch—what's reasonably priced isn't available until *next* month.

Brady's really mixed up and having nightmares. He wants to go home but I don't think he realizes that home won't be there for much longer. Mom called Dad to talk about the flood and to see if he's having any luck finding a place in Vernon but I wonder if he's even tried.

Grandma told me I could call her collect anytime I wanted. When I phoned with a Waters update she listened quietly and said, "Tracey, you and Brady can *always* come and live with me—for as long as you want. My big old house is so empty I just rattle around in it all day long."

Her offer's nice but just *too* extreme—I can't imagine living far away from *both* of my parents. But I suppose it's some comfort to know there's an option that wouldn't leave us *completely* homeless!

Where do I belong?
How can I be free?
I try so hard to find my place
And struggle to believe

Tuesday afternoon, Jan. 4

Hey Joe,

School starts back today so I went to check out the high school near our old suite. I don't even know if this is the one I'll go to for sure but until we're settled somewhere, I just wanted to see what high school is like in Vancouver.

There are so many people at the school—with a multicultural mix of staff and students. The halls are so crowded but no one even looks at me. It's so different from my other school—everyone knows everyone else and even if they're making fun of you, at least they *know* you and you get noticed. You can spot the popular group and the ones on the edge. When you're a newbie, they check you over and you either pass or fail—or continue being invisible. That's me—just another body. I guess it would have been worse if they found something wrong with me—like my freakish height—but I was just ignored. That's okay—there weren't a lot of awkward questions I can't answer.

This place is huge—about three times the size of my old school. Everything's bigger and better but it's easy to get lost with the different wings and floors. I did. There are two gyms, a big cafeteria *and* a lounge, three computer labs, and the most incredible school library I've ever seen. The band room is so cool and there's even an auditorium for performances and stuff. I'm hyped about the music courses and wonder which one to take for my elective—if I can stay. It's a great school—but I still haven't decided for sure. I want to talk to Mom about it first.

I look outside to change
 A world that is so new
 Daily struggles to survive
 Am I alone to make it through?

T

* * * * *

Victoria's Day Planner: Tuesday, January 4

Day off work!

Notes:

Get Tracey up for school @ 7:00

Check schedule at T.H.

Return Sally's call

Phone Pete to confirm

Pete is driving down to get the kids. With ten hours driving the return trip, I hope the roads are clear of snow through the summit. Even though he doesn't have a place lined up for later, he has a whole house until the 15th! I can't offer the kids *anything* right now and can't afford this dingy hotel room for many more nights either. It's not what I

planned but it's what might have to happen, for now anyway. I can figure out something temporary for myself (even a shelter if I have to). Maybe Sally can help. When everything gets settled, the kids will be able to live with me again.

Brady's happy to go back to Vernon and although I hate to see him go so soon, I can see why. His visit has been stressful and not much fun with me working so much. He won't be finished school until June so the summer will be a better time to move and start school here in September. At his age it seems that as long as he has something to eat, video games, comics, and a turn at public skating once in a while, he's happy. Simple needs that I should be able to meet.

It's different for Tracey. She is starting her new school today. She'll be upset about the change in plans. In the last month or so we've been through a lot together and have grown close. I will miss her desperately.

Tracey's due back soon and I'll have just a few minutes to tell her before Pete arrives. I don't want to upset her but she has to go back, for now. My dream to create a new home and have my kids live with me is washed out, literally. In an hour, they'll both be gone!

My heart is breaking all over again.

* * * * *

Tuesday night, Jan. 4

Joe,

I can't believe they'd do this! Without even asking *my* opinion. Treating me like a kid. What about what *I* want to do? I want to go to the new school and take all the music courses offered. I want to hang out with Spencer and get the new job at the restaurant. And I want to find *you* Joe! Now I'll probably never see you again. Life is right back where it started—like nothing has changed between Mom and me. They shipped us out! I'm back in Vernon—whether I like it or not!

The drive didn't take long because I didn't want to talk to *him* and slept most of the way—cramped up on the back seat with only my backpack for a pillow. He and Brady always chatter on and on about sport teams or video games or Buster's new trick or whatever—they get along great. But Brady doesn't know about Dad's problem—he still thinks Mom left for no reason.

When I got back to the hotel—all excited to talk about my new school—she held me tight and said Brady and I have to go back to Vernon to live with Dad! At least for now, *supposedly*. I'm still in shock. I promised to go up for a few days to help him move out of the house but I don't want to be stuck *living* with him unless it's *my choice*.

There was no time. At around four o'clock, we met him in the hotel lobby with our pathetic plastic bags of clothes and things. He was carrying a cardboard box marked "Vicki" and handed it to her. They both look so disconnected—like strangers. Seeing the two of them in the same room, it's clear their marriage is over.

It made me feel embarrassed. Or angry—I'm not sure which. I knew I didn't want to talk with him face to face—*my* face was burning. The phone calls have kept us distant and I'm more comfortable with that since learning the truth.

Mom took Brady into the restaurant for a milkshake and Dad invited me to sit at another booth with him. Over two coffees we talked. Mostly I listened as he wrestled with what he had to say. His ears were bright red—like whenever he gets emotional—and he kept fiddling with the change in his pocket.

"Tracey, I'm real sorry about all the trouble you've had here. Your mother and I will try to replace your things as soon as we can. She also told me that you know about our, my...problems...from before. I wanted to tell you myself when you came up but I'm glad you know. If you've got anything you want to ask or say to me, I wish you would."

I poured more sugar in my coffee and stirred it round and round. I let him struggle.

"Ah . . . I've signed up for some counseling sessions and they started this week. It's group therapy for those of us trying to . . . break the habit. I'm kind of nervous . . . you know, about *sharing*, but I'm going to do it and get help . . . for my gambling. I'm going to get onto some more regular shifts at work too. Okay?"

Whatever. I'm not letting him off the hook that easily. We'll see.

*

The house doesn't feel like home. The kitchen is pretty clean but the only food in the fridge is mouldy or sour. Dad's tired from the long drive but he's out getting a few groceries so we can at least have milk with our cereal. My room looks like someone else's. It's crammed with stuff I forgot I had—from when I was a kid. Buster was glad to

see me though. I didn't realize how much I missed him! I scooped some kibble into his bowl and he jumped up and licked my face with his slobbery tongue.

It made me laugh—the first time in days.

Last month, I couldn't wait to get back home to Vernon. But the last couple of days, I've set my heart differently. But with the flood, Mom and I lost our home and I lost that choice. Now I'm forced to live with Dad but he doesn't have a home to offer for much longer either. He's checking out a new place tomorrow. If I go with him, maybe I'll get a choice about *this*!

Tracey

Wednesday after school, Jan. 5

Joe,

Dad called to wake us up this morning and I couldn't figure out which bed this was at first. He drove Brady and me to our schools but I didn't even have time to get myself together. And of course, it's a bad, *bad* hair day—my first day back! Even though I'm not planning to stay, I want to look decent at school. I'm not used to getting up for school even after yesterday. One day in one high school—the next in another. I feel like I'm all over the place.

I forgot to check my messages when we got here last night because I was going through my favourite CDs. It was after twelve when I finally remembered. There's a really old one from Kelly giving me party details, hoping I'd come. Obviously she didn't know when I'd be back in town. Still nothing from Mel. It was too late to phone and we don't have Internet service here anymore—with unpaid bills they finally cut us off.

At school I didn't know what to expect with my friends. Mel wasn't at school and I'm still nervous about making up with her. It was okay with the others though I feel like I've missed something. Everyone was hanging around—asking where I've been but smirking like they know some secret. Ms. Singh was right in her letter—they did miss me, or were at least curious about why I was gone. I didn't want to answer all their nosy questions so went right home after school—I promised Dad I'd be there for Brady anyway. Call me the Nanny. I've got other "chores" too. Once again, a slave.

Later

Dad called while I was making supper and said the house he looked at is in rough shape and won't be good for us kids. I'm ticked because he went to check it out without me! Doesn't he trust me to know what would be good for us? We need a place to live! He's heading off to his counseling session now. He doesn't want to talk about his gambling. I think he's embarrassed about everything. I would be too.

List of jobs:

<u>Tracey</u>	<u>Brady</u>	<u>Dad</u>
all laundry	feed & walk Buster	vacuum & wash floors
some cooking	clean living room	get groceries
clean kitchen	take out recycling	some cooking
clean bathrooms		take out garbage
		fix things

Thursday after school, Jan. 6

Joe,

It was a pretty good day at school. After English class, Ms. Singh showed me my grade so far and I have a high B with all the assignments I did in Vancouver! She especially liked my paper comparing two Canadian novels—I got an A! In all the enthusiasm, I admitted that I write in the journal she gave me everyday and am even working out some lyrics.

She smiled kind of smugly and said, “You must be hooked on the writing habit!”

I’m not *hooked*.

Mr. Johnson said I’m now passing Math with a high C and I’m at a C+ in Socials. Life Skills is okay and so is Physical Ed. with two more C+’s. They’re not the best marks but they beat where I was at when I left!

Thursday night

Mom *finally* called. The only way I can reach her is to leave a message at the hotel or restaurant. I wish she had a cell phone. Even though she didn’t have much time to talk, it was good to hear her voice and that she’s okay. Well, sort of. She’s still living in the cheap hotel but doesn’t know if she can for much longer. None of the money’s come through from the landlord—she’s considering going to small claims court. As for a new place, there’s nothing she can afford closer than a 45 minute commute by bus.

I appreciate her honesty with me—even though I’m still mad about her sending me back! I told her things are great and we’re doing fine. I don’t want her to know about the mess the house was in. It’s getting better now that I wrote out a job list and everyone helps. I hate doing them but the bathrooms are cleaned and smelling way better. The

laundry piled up in the basement is almost done. Brady brushed and fed Buster already and I made him tidy up the living room. Dad got a big grocery order and there's decent food in the kitchen now—I can smell the pasta and veggies he's making for dinner.

Everyone's trying.

The packing is another story. Every night Dad brings home a few more boxes for our stuff. Already I've filled three and at this rate I'll need another twenty! I know some of it should be thrown away but it's my stuff and it's hard to decide what isn't important. Dad's doing way better at throwing out his junk. The garage is full of garbage bags that he's either giving away or putting on the curb. He hasn't touched any of Mom's stuff though.

Friday after school, Jan. 7

Joe,

Something's going on with my friends—if you can call them that. They keep asking me questions about where I was and what I was doing so I finally asked them to give it a rest. They don't want to accept my answers—like they're looking for something else. Even people I hardly know are giving me looks. What's up? Could it be my vintage clothes? They said they liked them. Kelly is really nervous around me and so are Meg and Hannah. Mel is still on holidays in Mexico so I can't ask her either. I don't know where I stand. There's no plans for the weekend—that they've told me about. I guess I've been away too long.

Hopefully I can try out the guitar soon—I think it's dry enough. The pressed cardboard case is practically toast but the water marks on the guitar have dried kind of

neat. They're mostly on the back and look like star bursts. It's kind of unique. I tightened the strings and they sound a little off when I chord but the water damage isn't that bad after all. Thank God!

Saturday morning, Jan. 8

Joe,

We only have one week left and there's still a ton of packing to do. If we get three hours done we can do what we want this afternoon so I'll get back to it as soon as I finish this writing break.

Dad helped Brady get organized and I did okay until I found my doll house collection in the back of my closet. Mom and Dad built it for me when I was six—just before Brady was born. It's the Victorian style in pink, with lots of frilly white trim—like a fancy wedding cake. All the little furniture pieces are inside along with the perfect little family that lives there—a Dad, a Mom, a girl and a boy. For no reason at all, I started to cry.

The phone rang and thinking it might be Mom, I ran to get it. But it was Grandma. She could tell I'd been crying but we had a good chat and shared our news and complaints.

"The temperature's really bothering my 'Arthur-Itis' this year. It's hard to keep the big old house warm enough in cold-as-hell Edmonton!"

"Grandma, it's snowy and cold here too."

"Ha! My -30 °C beats your measly -5 °C hands down!"

She's a riot and her call cheered me up.

Then she asked to speak to Dad but he'd taken a load of stuff to the charity drop off. I told her that we may never get all our stuff packed and out of here. And when we do, we might not have a place to take it to.

Grandma was real quiet and then she said, "I'm sorry, Tracey. I know how strong you are but it's a lot to deal with. Don't give up hope, Sweetpea. God loves you and so do I. It'll all work out somehow. You'll be okay. You *all* will." Her words echoed in my head as I remembered that you said this to me back in November, Joe. I trusted you then and I trust Grandma now. Somehow everything *will* work out okay.

Saturday night

Brady and Dad went to the ice rink and dropped me at the coffee shop where my friends usually hang outside the mall. A few kids from school were there already. When they saw me they were even pushier and razzed me about the old coat and vintage pants I was wearing. I don't care—I'll wear whatever I want. Besides—they'd never understand why this old coat is so important to me.

Dad gave me a five for my "allowance" yesterday so I was just paying for the hot chocolate with extra whipped cream when Mel showed up. Everyone oohed and aahed about her tan and new turquoise jewelry. I watched from the counter until she spotted me. She looked over my "new" clothes slowly but didn't say anything. I handed her my hot chocolate as a peace offering but she said, "I'm on a diet and don't drink *that* stuff—it's full of sugar and fat! Not good for the *bikini*." The guys in the group whooped at the image of "barbie doll" Melissa Landstrom at the beach.

I felt stupid but was determined to get through this.

"Mel, can we talk? Just us?"

“Whatever. Let me get some green tea first. And what’s with the...*clothes*?”

Some in the group snickered. She left me standing alone while she chatted in line with the others, placed her order, and the barista made it—over ten minutes! For tea?

Everyone left me alone but they were an anxious audience waiting to see what would happen between us. *Tension*. I drank the chocolate and worked on some lyrics—in my head. When she was ready, I led the way into the mall and we sat by ourselves on a low bench near the entrance.

“First, Mel, *I’m sorry!* I never wanted us to fight. The sweater, and Chad and everything—I didn’t mean to hurt you or ruin anything. Did you read my letter? Can you forgive me?”

“I suppose. But you better not break the guy-code again. Girl friends don’t *do* that to each other.”

“Like I said—I didn’t do it, *he* made the moves on *me*.”

“Come *on*, Tracey. Why would *he* go for *you*—unless you were drunk?”

“Umm, well...”

“Forget about it. It’s been ages and it’s over now. I didn’t know you were going away—you left all of a sudden. Lots of people were wondering—especially after you were arrested for shoplifting. They asked me but I didn’t know for sure. Are you back for good now?”

“I’m not sure. Probably.”

“So, what was it like living in Vancouver? Tell me all about it.”

“Ah, well, it rains quite a bit, especially because it’s winter.”

She made a face. "I mean what *happened*? What's going on with your *mom*? Does she have a boyfriend? She *has* started dating, right?"

What? Why would she ask about that?

"No! She's just working a lot and trying to make a new place for herself and... Brady and I'll go down and stay some times."

I was careful how much I told her—I wasn't ready to share everything. Reflecting the questions back to her, Mel started in about her holiday in Mexico and away she went. Lots of people looked her way while she talked and laughed. With the tan, she's really quite a knock out—even though she thinks she's fat and ugly. I let her talk hoping she'd feel better about us. That's when Chad walked by on his way to Kevin's store.

"Well, if it isn't my long-legged, red-necked girl! Where've you been hiding?"

Mel was interrupted mid sentence and she hates that. Avoiding the glare I could feel beside me, I looked up into a handsome, smiling face. "Hi, Chad."

Mel piped in too, "Hi there, Chad."

"Hey. So, *Tracey*, right? I haven't seen you at any parties lately. There's one down in Kelowna this weekend. Want a ride?"

"I'm kind of off those parties for a while. But thanks for asking." As if I'd go all the way there with him.

"You'll have to give me some more two-step lessons sometime. You board too, don't you? Maybe we can meet up and take some runs together. Here's my number, Tracey—call me *anytime*. 'Bye, girls."

He left with a wink. Was he serious? I looked down at the printed card in my hand and Mel snatched it away.

"What's the matter with you? He's *gorgeous*! If you're not going to go to the party, *I will*. We'd have a better time together anyway!"

She jumped up and headed in his direction. I don't get her. She's out of control.

Vernon News:

Houses to Rent

Clean 2 Br. Rancher, located on dead end rd. Near downtown centre. Avail. Feb. 1

4bdm. Older-style in rural set. includes f/s, w/d. some work needed, separate workshop, pets okay. Immed. Poss. Rent neg.

3 BDRM exc. Cond, w/d, fully finished basemnt, lrg. fenced yd., fp, ns, nr schools. Mar 1 occup.

Sunday night, Jan. 9

Joe,

This afternoon, Dad had three houses to check out and I wouldn't let him go without me this time. One place is close to downtown but it's only a two bedroom and really run down. Forget it. Another is way out of town but it's even bigger than this house. We couldn't walk to school but there's a bus. It's more than Dad wants to spend and could use some paint and a good cleaning but it has definite possibilities. The third one is almost new and in a good neighbourhood but it isn't available until next month. We'd have to stay in a hotel or something for two weeks. No matter which one we

choose, I won't have to change schools and none of them are near the casino, which is a definite plus. We went for a coffee and Dad listened to everything I had to say. Finally.

Together we decided to rent the second one so that we could move right in. The big yard will be good for Buster, and there's farm land behind for Brady to explore but I'm not thrilled with the idea of living in the sticks. Still, I'm surprised at the rent—the whole house is about the same as what Mom paid for the suite in the city.

Then Dad cleared his throat. "I need to talk to you about something else now, Tracey."

Finally Dad spoke honestly about his gambling and gave his brief version of how it broke up their marriage. Even though he made some excuses, he took responsibility for it failing. I don't know what Grandma said to him up in Edmonton but he seems to be turning things around since Christmas. He's facing his problem and doing something about it.

"It's my fault about what happened. I'm going to counseling but I'm going to need your help too. I just hope you understand and can forgive me, Tracey."

I looked up. His eyes spilled over and begged me to understand.

"Yeah, Dad, I understand. I think I can forgive you."

It might be a while before I can forget, though. What he did affected each of us in the family. I was so mad at him when we finally got together but now I really just feel resigned. They're each trying to remake their lives. I wonder if Brady and I are able to do the same.

I'm happy he's decided to get some help for his gambling addiction. I've been reading more about it on-line at school and it sounds like compulsive gambling—what he

has—is almost like a disease. They talk about treatment and relapses, and therapy just like its cancer or something. Of course it isn't life threatening but it is pretty serious so I'm glad he realizes that he needs help. Mom said he's been in denial about his problem for so long. He has to be willing to accept it before he could start getting over it. Maybe he is now.

I tried my guitar again and it sounds awful. I don't know how to tune it properly so maybe I'll see if the music teacher can help me. He's new this year and I don't know him but I hear he's a decent teacher. I wish there was a guitar course this term so I could really learn to play.

"Hey. This is the Watering Hole. Ha ha ha. You know what to do."

At the tone, please record your message. When you have finished recording, hang up or press one for more options.

"Hi kids...Pete. It's Ria... I mean Vicki. I mean, Mom.

"Interesting message. Anyway, I just called to tell you I am thinking of you kids. You're probably at school right now. I can't call later because I have a meeting at three with Sally. I hope she's going to be able to help me with this landlord problem and find a new place through the Tenant Assistant Program.

"Did you find something, Pete? I guess you'll be moving this weekend so of course you've got a place, *right?* Well, I'll try to call tomorrow when I get a chance. Good luck with the packing. I wish I could help with that. I hope everyone is well otherwise. I love you kids. 'Bye."

Monday, January 10, 2:14 p.m.

Monday after school, Jan. 10

Joe,

There's fallout from Saturday, of course. Mel is madder than ever and I don't know what to do about it. Chad rejected her friendly attempt. Hannah heard he was pretty blunt and had to tell Mel flat out he didn't want to go out with her. After hearing his interest in me—even though I'm not interested in a guy like him—Mel's jealous. Or at least that's how she's acting. Once again she's ignoring me. Now that we're both back in Vernon, I just want to spend time with her and get back to the way we were—best friends. I miss her and the good times we had.

Nothing's the same anymore.

Tuesday after school, Jan. 11

Joe,

I can't believe she did that! Or that the others *fell* for it.

I finally found out what the weird attitudes at school have been about. When I left “suddenly” at the end of November, everyone was talking about what might have happened. Since we were best friends, they assumed Melissa knew where I went and why. There were lots of guesses and it sounds like she let rumours get crazy—I don't know for sure if she started them. It turns out everyone thought I'd gone to “juvie” after being arrested for shoplifting! There was even the hint of me getting caught dealing drugs! Don't they know me? No wonder I was so popular when I came back—everyone was keen to talk to the juvenile delinquent! Now they act like I'm this whole different person—with the new look of these old clothes too. In the city, your look can be artsy

and unique—people wear whatever they want. Everyone here tries for the uniform designer look—from jeans to T's. I don't think they can figure me out. Maybe I *have* changed.

At least my courses are going better these days. I can concentrate in class and some of the organization tricks that Mom showed me are really helping. After what happened with Mel, I don't hang out with anyone but with provincial exams coming up, everyone has a lot of studying. I'm also not sure if I'm staying here anyway.

LIVING HERE WITH DAD—

PROS

- school and classes going well
- know lots of people in town
- the new house has potential
- Dad could use my help and we get along
- Brady likes it here
- Buster lives here

CONS

- friends at school are limited right now (Mel's still mad)
- there are a ton of chores at home as well as moving
- staying around for Brady after school
- missing Mom
- can't look for Joe

Wednesday after school, Jan. 12

Joe,

I went to talk to Mr. Travers in the music room. He's really nice and wants me to bring in my guitar so he can check it for damage and help repair what's needed. He'll not only tune it but show me how to.

I'm really into the current affairs project I've started in Social Studies. We're allowed to pick from a list of social issues and thinking of you, Joe, I decided to research homelessness. There's not much current stuff in books but good info on the Internet. I looked up Covenant House and was impressed with that organization. Even though I find it interesting, it's taking a lot of time because we don't have cable. Dad promises he'll order it once we're in the new house. I can research at school during study break or at the public library but have to take Brady so he's not left alone. The paper isn't due until next Tuesday but with the move this weekend, I won't have much time. My goal is to finish it by Friday—never have I handed an assignment in *early*.

Dad's really excited about the house we're renting because it has a heated workshop out back. He's hoping to fix the car to sell and then buy a second-hand truck. He also arranged a deal with the owner of the house if he does some of the repairs and maintenance. He's spent the last couple nights after work painting and fixing things and he's more excited than I've seen in ages. Some of his new friends from the counseling group are giving him a hand too. Between the house repairs, work, and counseling sessions, Dad isn't around much though. That leaves Brady and me to do the rest of the packing. My room is almost done but Brady's is still a mess. I better give him a hand.

Thursday after school, Jan. 13

Joe,

The phone was ringing when I came in the door and I was glad not to miss Mom.

“Trace, I’ve got great news—Allan offered *me* the manager’s position at the restaurant!”

“Wow, that’s great! When did he decide that?”

“Just last night. He said he should have done it sooner instead of wasting his time interviewing others. He doesn’t know why it never occurred to him. Tonight is my first shift and I’m nervous about how the staff will be.”

I said, “Mom, they love you! They’ll be great about it.”

I could tell she was pleased. And not just about the raise in pay.

“So how’s the packing and moving plans? Did your father finally get a house to rent?”

“Oh, yeah, we did it together. He’s pretty excited about it but I’m sick of packing. Mom, what should we do with all your stuff like your summer clothes and sewing supplies?”

She was quiet for moment and then said, “Just throw them in a box and take them to the new place until I can get them later. I don’t have time to sew anymore but maybe Rose would like some of the material for her quilting.”

“Okay. Any luck finding a new apartment?”

“Oh, yes! That too! I got most of my rent money back and Sally helped me find an affordable building near work so I signed a lease for a small two bedroom and den

apartment. I can move in at the end of the month. I'm lucky to have good friends like Allan and Sally to get me through all this."

"Are you still in the old hotel?"

"No, I'm staying with...a friend. So, how's school going?"

She must be staying with Sally.

I told her about my good grades but not about the trouble with friends.

"You deserve those grades, Tracey. You worked hard and I'm proud of you for making positive choices and taking charge of your life."

"Thanks, Mom. I'm trying."

"Oh, Spencer was asking about you."

"Oh, *yeah*? Say 'hi' to him for me. Mom, does Allan have that job opening yet?"

I wonder when I'll see Spencer again. I miss working there too. I've still got my paycheque in the bank but it would sure be nice to have a steady income for my own stuff. And not have to live on Dad's five dollar allowance every Friday.

"There's nothing right now but as the summer season starts there may be." Now that she's the manager, I'll have a great chance to get a job.

"I'm still trying to decide about coming down for the next semester."

"Of course you can come here! That's why I'm renting the apartment with the two bedrooms. One for you and the little den could be a room for Brady when he comes."

By February, I'll have two *new* places to choose from, Joe. How come I still feel homeless?

Torn between two places
Both so far from home
How can I decide?

Friday Afternoon, Jan. 14

Joe,

I think you'd be proud of me. I handed in my socials paper early and I think it's the best assignment I've ever done! I wish I could've interviewed you for it, Joe. I talked to Mr. Steele about my topic and was surprised when he told me there are homeless people right here in Vernon—there's a church that operates a small shelter and serves daily meals. I'm going to check it out. I'd like to do something like that again. Maybe I could talk someone into going with me.

Kelly's having another party this weekend and I'd like to go. No booze or crazy stuff this time. I don't know if I'll be able to pull it off though since we're moving into the new house tomorrow but if I work hard Dad might be okay with it.

Dad said with the subjects removed from the sale agreement, we have to be out of the house by noon so if we can move some stuff tonight it would help. With everything packed up and taken down, it doesn't feel like our house anymore. It echoes with so many leftover memories that I just want to get out. Brady and I are waiting for Dad to get back from the mill with the company truck he's borrowing. We'll take a load or two of boxes and small things. I just packed up the rest of the kitchen dishes so Dad said tonight we can grab a burger for dinner. Yeah, I don't have to cook!

I brought my guitar to school today but Mr. Travers was pretty busy. While I was waiting, I played a bit—haven't had much time all week. I can tell it's out of tune but I've figured out quite a few chords—I need to get smoother with the strumming, though. I've still got songs—or parts of one—floating around in my head. They're nothing

recorded—it's more like a heartbeat rhythm and I can't quite catch all the fragments.

There are so many songs to write but it's like water in my hands—they leak through the fingers. I love playing my guitar—it's so beautiful and these water marks just give it more character.

I would have died if it got completely damaged in the flood.

Water damage everywhere
Never more will this girl care
What I expected to be fair
How strong can I be?

How strong can I be?
Alone, I'm only grasping, free.
It takes more than one, I see
To weather all eternity.

When Mr. Travers finally came back to the music room, he listened to me chord and was very nice about it. He looked over the guitar carefully and suggested a little minor repair. We glued a crack in the body and placed it in a vice for the weekend. I hate to be without my guitar but I'll be busy this weekend anyway.

Sunday morning, Jan. 16

Joe,

We're in the house, sort of. Yesterday was freezing cold with one major hassle after another. Dad woke us up early to get started but his baseball buddies didn't show up. We loaded up the company pickup. I lifted what I could but some of the boxes and most of the furniture were too heavy for me and Dad alone. We took two more truck

loads to the new house but slipped off the icy road on the third trip. The pickup was full of stuff and we were halfway into a snow bank and tipped way over to one side. Dad had trouble digging out the tires and even with my help he finally had to call a tow truck. That cost him almost a hundred dollars! He was in a foul mood after that and picked a fight with his friend Ernie who finally showed up at eleven. Mrs. Harrison from next door gave me some muffins as a kind of moving away present and I was really glad for her thoughtfulness. It's all we had to eat for the whole day.

With all the delays, we didn't get out of the house by noon. The new owners' enormous moving truck showed up just before they did at quarter after. They were livid that we weren't out and the house wasn't cleaned yet. I didn't know we were expected to clean it! Since they were paying their movers by the hour, they actually got them to help get us out of there faster. In the end, everything was just thrown into our two pickups. I even heard the big hall mirror crack. We left feeling like we'd been given the boot and it wasn't a very nice way to leave the house we've lived in for eight years.

In all the chaos, Buster ran away. It was Brady's main responsibility to watch out for him at the new house but we needed him to do other stuff too so Buster was forgotten. Because he didn't know the new neighbourhood he had wandered almost back to town by the time we found him on the old side road. Luckily he was just cold and snowy and wasn't picked up by the pound—that would have been another fine.

By six o'clock we had all the boxes and furniture unloaded and moved into the new rooms. Dumped really. The guys were in a hurry to watch some hockey game so they carried stuff in but didn't help with the set up. When they left for the pub, I could tell Dad really wanted to go with them to watch the pay-per-view game but I just didn't

have the energy to figure out what to do with this mess on my own. We were starving too so he went to pick up a pizza—we don't have the phone hooked up yet to phone for delivery—but he didn't come back for over an hour.

Dad couldn't find the tools to put the bed frames together so last night we slept on mattresses in our new rooms. I couldn't remember where I'd packed the sheets so we just slept in blankets. It was okay and kind of felt like camping—even the cold part. The heat wasn't working quite right.

Dad had most of the downstairs repainted before we moved in but hadn't done the bedrooms yet. He picked the one in the front with the view of the road. I let Brady pick the room he wanted and of course, he chose the one with the space-man wallpaper even though it's too babyish for him. The other two were similar with sloped ceilings under the roof-line and with views to the back yard and distant hills. One was bigger and obviously the master bedroom but it had old-fashioned floral wallpaper, pink carpet and frilly curtains. Yuck. The other had a window seat but was an ugly green colour. That's the one I thought I could live with—if I live here. Dad said he might have time to paint it and if he does, I pick yellow. I don't know where to even begin with setting up the room so this morning I left it to start on the kitchen. We are going to need to eat before I can take the time to organize my books, clothes, and CDs.

Sunday night

I was up here studying in my room when I realized that I forgot all about Kelly's party last night! Darn. But even if Dad had let me go, I was probably too tired to party.

Moving is a lot of work.

Monday afternoon, Jan. 17

Joe,

Getting to school today was so embarrassing I nearly died. Dad had an early shift and left by seven so Brady and I waited for the school bus at 7:30 because we weren't sure when it would come. It was freezing cold and so at ten to eight we were glad to see the bus coming. The driver stopped to see what we were waiting for but didn't want to let us on. Apparently you are supposed to *register* for the bus service way out here! Dad hadn't looked into it so I don't know what will happen tomorrow. She took pity on us and let us on but all the bus-kids looked at us like we were morons.

It sounds like I missed a good party. At school, everybody talked about Kelly's new karaoke machine and the crazy stunts people were doing. Whatever. I would have liked to try a country tune, though. Canadian Idol practice? Okay, maybe not.

But no one knows the reason I didn't come—it's not because Mel hates my guts. I'm not ready to answer questions about why we had to sell our house and move way out here. I don't want them thinking we're poor or anything especially with me in these second hand clothes. More rumour material.

It's still a disaster at the house. Dad helped me make dinner last night but the stove doesn't cook the same way as our old one and I burnt the potatoes. What a stink! The house is cold unless we keep the fire going in the fireplace and it's a lot of work to bring the firewood in and there isn't much left out back. It's a big old house but it needs a lot more TLC.

I checked on the guitar and it looks great. Mr. T. showed me how to tune it and what to do for basic maintenance. There were a few other kids hanging around the room

and they watched too. He gave me some strumming tips—he's a great teacher. I can take it to him anytime I need help and leave it in lock up there if I need to. I just wish he was teaching a music class I could take next semester.

Tuesday after school, Jan. 18

Joe,

The stupid phone *still* isn't connected!

When I called the service line from Kelly's cell phone at school the operator said, "Sorry, there's no record of a connection request."

"*What?* Then this call *is* a request."

But she said, "It has to be authorized by the owner."

Dad! I called him at work and I really lit into him. Hopefully he's done it now and the phone will be working soon. I can live without cable or Internet for a while but I don't feel safe way out here without a phone line.

The other major problem is the heat. It's been especially cold this week at about -10 or -12 °C and snowing every day. The house is drafty, especially without curtains on the windows or the stripping around the back door that came off when we moved in. Dad said he can fix that easily but it's not soon enough. The furnace rattles and bangs when you turn up the thermostat but it's either noisy and hot or freezing and deadly quiet. I'm not sure which I like better.

Wednesday after school, Jan. 19

Joe,

Ms. Singh must have said something to Mr. T. about my song-writing because today at lunch he asked if I wanted to share what I've written. I didn't at first but he made me feel comfortable enough. Of course I can't play anything like that on my guitar so I kind of sang some of the verses I have. I think it sounded lame but he was excited about it. I didn't know the others in the room were listening until they clapped at the end—how embarrassing. He asked me about my music experience and said that learning to write music I'm composing would be an asset. I said I'd like that but I'd really like to learn some techniques and playing skills. He said he'd look into it.

The phone line was connected today so we can finally phone out. I still don't know what Mom's number is or if she even has one. We have the same number but our phone hardly rings anymore.

Thursday after school, Jan. 20

Joe,

The service man came and fixed the furnace and now the wonderful heat is all through the house! The guy smiled when he saw what Dad had done to fix it but said it wasn't that far off. He handed me the bill—I hope Dad can pay it—and told me the old furnace won't last very long but we should make it through the winter at least. That's all the time we need.

I had lunch with Kelly today and we kind of connected. She apologized for ignoring me with the whole Mel thing—she didn't know what to believe and feels stupid

now. I've never really spent much time with her because it's always been me and Mel. But Melissa seems to have left the planet and I've given up trying with her. She only does things with her student council friends now. And her old friends from the dance school who I never liked—and who didn't like me. Anyway, Kelly and I had a good time, just talking. I shared a little about my parents splitting up but I didn't feel like she was digging for dirt. She's an only child so she gets the whole parent-pull thing even though her folks are together. Kelly still tries to be there for each of them. I know that feeling.

We checked our timetables for next semester and we have three classes together.

Friday after school, Jan. 21

Joe,

Kelly's coming over tonight to study. I still haven't done much with my room because I've been studying like crazy—I hope she doesn't care how it looks. Dad has his counseling again and I want to support him but at the same time I want to have some fun. I gave Brady the death-threat and bribed him with some of our dinner. We're making seafood lasagna—at least we're trying it because I don't have all the right stuff. I watched how Simon's crew made lasagna and Spencer helped me figure out the amounts when I wrote it out. I'm getting pretty good practice for my Life Skills course.

Tracey & Spencer's Seafood Lasagna—for one pan

About 8 cooked lasagna noodles—place 4 in rectangular pan

Cook onion in butter

2 spoonfuls of butter

1 cup chopped onion (maybe not)

Add and mix (cheese mixture)

1 pkg. of cream cheese (substitute cheese whiz?)

1 – 2 cups of cottage cheese

1 egg, beaten

Spread half over noodles

Combine (fish mixture)

2 cups white sauce (mushroom soup?)

$\frac{1}{3}$ cup milk

$\frac{1}{3}$ cup white wine (beer?)

1 cup fresh crab meat (can of tuna?)

2 cups cooked shrimp (can of salmon?)

Spoon half over cheese layer

Repeat all layers: noodles, cheese, fish

Sprinkle with

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup grated parmesan cheese

Bake 45 minutes at 350°F

Add and cook under broiler till brown

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup shredded cheddar cheese

Saturday afternoon, Jan. 22

Joe,

Kel just left—I'm pretty tired because we were up watching DVDs all night. We played my guitar a bit too. She's really interested in learning how. Brady was so annoying though—hanging around and listening to everything. I think he has a crush on Kelly! The dinner we made was awesome. But Brady complained about it, so we tricked him and locked him out of the house. He banged on all the doors and yelled his head off saying how cold he was in only his T-shirt. After about fifteen minutes we finally let him in. He went up to his room and slammed the door. Happily we didn't see him for the rest of the night. When Dad came home, he ate two servings so I know it wasn't that bad.

Now she's gone and I've got to crack the books for the socials exam on Monday. We had fun but we didn't get much studying done.

PROS to living with Dad—add to list

-count Kelly as a friend (and Meg and Hannah)

-new house is okay

-Mr. T for music maybe

Monday after school, Jan. 24

Joe,

I wrote my first provincial exam—in socials—and I think I did all right. I guessed on a couple of questions but knew the answers for almost everything else. The essay part is the easiest but memorizing dates and places drives me crazy! I don't expect to ace all

the exams but I think I have a good shot at keeping my grades—if I try. I've studied a lot for the Math exam on Thursday. It'll be hard but I've gone over all the work and after the Socials one today, I know what to expect. English on Friday will be easy and I have a shot at acing that one! When I'm finished I can take the bus down to Vancouver.

With all the moving mess and exams, I'd completely forgotten about the concert *this* weekend! I'll take out enough money from the bank to pay for the bus fare so I don't need to ask for anything—except permission. I haven't talked to Mom yet but I'm sure I can stay with her and Sally for one or two nights. It feels like ages since I saw Mom and I really miss her. Now that I've helped Dad with the move, this trip back to Vancouver will help me decide for sure.

LIVING IN VANCOUVER WITH MOM—

PROS

- exciting city life
- Spencer
- job at the restaurant, maybe
- new high school might be cool
- Mom and I get along pretty good
- can look for Joe

CONS

- busy, rainy, expensive
- leaving friends like Kelly
- doing pretty good at school
- old school I know everyone
- Mom is always working and there's not much time for fun
- missing Dad

Stuck inside my head
Is the rhythm of a song
Asks the question that I fear
Where do I belong?

Torn between two places
Both so far from home
How can I decide?

T

Tuesday night, Jan. 25

Joe,

I've got an idea and I hope *this* one works. I was really bummed when I talked to Mr. T about a guitar course and he said the schedule's set and he doesn't have any time available to teach one for next semester. So I'm going to suggest something else. With me, Kelly and the other kids from the music room I know there are seven or so students interested in the guitar. If we can't have a course, maybe we can at least have a guitar club. If Mr. T will sponsor us and give us some instruction we can practice on our own. I'll ask him tomorrow. I'm going to work hard to make this happen.

Tonight the owner of the house came over to see how we were settling in and I overheard him talking to Dad.

"Those repairs are done real well and that painting job looks terrific, Pete! Uncle George's old house never looked better. You should go into the renovation business. I'll hire you to do some work on my house if you want the job."

"I'd appreciate that, Tom, and I could sure use the money. But I'd also be interested in this place. Would you be selling it one day?"

"Well, I just might be. I don't need two places and the wife's talking about moving closer to the grandkids. I'm just keeping it for an investment."

"Do you think you'd be willing to work out some kind of deal if I keep working on the place? I want to make a permanent home for my kids."

"Your wife left you and the kids, didn't she? Sorry to hear that. Well, I think I could reduce the rent some more and give you a long term lease. Especially if you'll continue doing the repairs this place needs. I'll do what I can to help you out. You're a good man, Pete."

I'm happy for Dad. He's working hard to fix things and isn't just counting on luck anymore.

Wednesday evening, Jan. 26

Joe,

I'm scared! I can't reach Dad. He's at counseling and won't be back till ten. I don't know what else to do. Brady has a high fever and he's really sick. He came home from school all hot and glassy-eyed. I put him to bed and laid a damp cloth on his forehead. I wonder if Brady got sick because I locked him outside in the cold!

At first Brady just slept. Then he woke up wheezing and coughing so hard he started to dry heave. His asthma is the worst I've seen it. I gave him his asthma puffer which helped a little, then sips of apple juice he didn't want. I don't know whether to

keep him covered when he kicks off the blankets or cool him off with ice. Sitting in his room while he tosses around, I'm really scared.

*

The old neighbours are away and I thought of calling Mel's mom but she's at work. I wish I could reach Mom but the restaurant is so busy at this time of night she barely gets a bathroom break let alone time to answer the phone. Besides, Joe, what can she do from there that I can't do here?

When Grandma answered her phone, I was so relieved I almost cried. She sounded very concerned but said I'd done the right things and she had other ideas for me to try too. The old humidifier that I called "puffy" when I was little still works so I set it up beside his bed to steam him. He didn't like it but I rubbed eucalyptus salve on his chest and wiped his arms and legs with a cold cloth. He's sound asleep now and I wish I could be too.

It's not easy taking care of a sick kid.

Thursday after school, Jan. 27

Joe,

He agreed but the only time we can have the music club is after school! I can't stay because of being here for Brady! *It's not fair*. I tried to convince Mr. T to do it at lunch break but that time has to be available for students needing help—like I did, he reminded me. Zing! Clubs have to be sponsored and he can only supervise after school, two days a week. I don't know what to do. I *need* to learn how to play.

I tried not to worry while writing the Math exam but with Brady's coughing all night, I was tired and distracted. We almost took him to the ER around 3 a.m. but got his temperature down with a cold bath. Dad stayed home from work and took him to the clinic first thing—he has severe bronchitis. He's on meds now and needs to rest. With my exams, I can't stay home with him so it'll have to be Dad.

Last night, I sat holding Brady's hand in the dark when I should have been studying. Dad was an extra hour late from his gambling support group. I imagined all sorts of trivial excuses so when he finally came in, I snapped.

"Brady's got a fever and I've been taking care of him *all night!* Where have you *been?* It's time *you* took over. I'm tired of being the parent and doing everything around here! *I need a break!* I'm going to the concert in Vancouver this Saturday night whether you like it or not!"

He just stared at me—not registering everything I threw at him.

"I've got everything planned. School's out for semester break next week and I'm getting out of here!"

"Tracey, I'm late but let me explain. The car ahead of me rolled on black ice and I was the only one on the scene. But I don't have a cell phone so I couldn't call for help. I stayed with the couple until someone came. They were cut up pretty bad. The ambulance took them and I think they'll be okay.

"Thanks for holding down the fort here. How high is Brady's fever and when did he last have something to drink?"

That's when I saw the blood on Dad's shoes and pant legs. He'd been rescuing people and had probably saved their *lives!*

"Oh, Dad! I'm sorry I yelled. Good for you to help. I'm just worried about Brady—he's sicker than I've seen him for a while. And I don't know what else to do."

Dad was impressed with what I'd done. After we took Brady's temperature and gave him more water to drink, Dad took me out into the hall and said, "Do you know how to wash the blood out of these clothes? But first, Tracey, tell me again about the concert."

This afternoon, I tried to phone Mom to tell her about Brady and to remind her I'm coming this Saturday. I *had* to call her at the restaurant and thought earlier would be better when it's not so busy. But she wasn't there so I left a message with a new server I don't know. Then Grandma called to see about Brady. We discussed all the treatments that I'd tried and how much better he was getting. Then she got really quiet and asked to speak to Dad. I couldn't hear what they were talking about but they were on the phone for a long time and for some of it Dad was crying.

Friday evening, Jan. 28

Joe,

I am so out of there!

Today was my English exam and I really thought I had a good shot at acing it. *But Dad screwed that up!*

"I *have* to work this shift or I may lose my job because I already took yesterday off. Your brother can't be alone and there's no one else. It won't hurt you to miss one more day of school for something important like this."

Before he left, Dad phoned the school to give my excuse but I wanted to hear for myself how to make up the exam. The secretary was pretty sympathetic and transferred

me to the counseling department but Mr. Anderson wasn't very helpful. I left a message with Ms. Singh and hope that she can help me but if I fail grade ten, it's on Dad's head!

I'm on the Greyhound bus right now. Brady's better and he was sound asleep—I spent the whole day taking care of him. Dad said he'd be home before four, so I called Bonnie and begged her to drive me into town for the four o'clock bus to Vancouver. When she pulled up, Dad wasn't far behind so she checked with him—even though I *said* he knew about my trip. She made sure I wasn't skipping town or anything. Parents!

Dad asked, "Did you call your mother, right?"

I said, "yes" without lying, even though I didn't actually speak with her. I should be in the city by ten o'clock. If I can't reach her when I get there, I can always take the transit to Oysters and hang out until she's finished. It'll be great to see Spencer again too! I might ask him to come to the concert with me but I'm nervous about the pressure of an actual date after not seeing him for a month.

I brought my guitar but it's in the luggage compartment with my duffle bag. I've got my backpack with me, like always, and since my courses are finished now I don't have any homework to do so no school books to lug around. Yahoo! I can read my paperback and write. I'm going to have to get a new journal soon because this one is nearly full and the cover is almost falling off. Who'd have thought I'd go through it so fast. Is it helping me deal with my feelings? Yeah. Is it changing things? I don't know. Maybe.

Besides writing about my thoughts and what's going on in my life, I've been playing around with more lyrics and ideas for songs. I write some of them in this journal but because I end up scribbling and revising lines so often, I also write on a scrap of

paper or something then copy them out. Sometimes something I've written in here reworks into a verse. I'm not the greatest poet but the words are real and all about how I'm feeling these days—mixed up and melancholy. And homeless—I don't know where I belong.

Where do I belong?
How can I be free?
I try so hard to find my place
And struggle to believe

Am I alone to make it through?

It's been more than two hours on the bus and we're just driving through Merritt. I missed seeing it on the drive with Dad two weeks ago. Merritt's a small Interior town—even smaller than Vernon—but I like it with all the dry, surrounding ranch land. Real cowboy country. Every year they host a huge country music concert—"The Merritt Mountain Music Festival"—showcasing pretty famous country artists and bands. The huge party lasts for five days or more. I really wanted to go last summer but Mom said I was too young. She'd heard about the partying that goes on in and around the campsites. This summer, Keith Urban's coming. Maybe I can go with Kelly and some of our other friends. Dad's got the camping gear. Hey, it's halfway to Vancouver so maybe Spencer could meet up with us!

I'll try to sleep—it makes the time go quicker. And who knows where I'll have to sleep at Sally's place—probably on the floor. I have my old walkman and CD case with me for this trip to drown out the noise. I'm thinking of saving up for an MP3 player since I didn't get one for Christmas. Either that or wait until April for my birthday—if anyone has any money. Big IF. I better count on buying my own.

I'm going to sleep. If I'm lucky, I won't wake up until the city lights. Yippee!

Friday night

It's great to be back in the city, Joe, but I sure surprised Mom!

When I got off the Greyhound, I caught a city bus to the restaurant and showed up lugging all my stuff. Spencer saw me first and helped me through the back door then gave me a big hug. Wow!

Before chickening out, I said, "I've got two tickets to the Chicks tomorrow night. Want to come?"

He gave me his gorgeous smile and said, "Sure! I'll see if I can get someone to cover my shift."

The concert's going to be awesome! Two of the other servers didn't look so happy to see me—obviously the tip thing isn't completely forgiven. Or... maybe they're jealous of me and Spencer. Ha *ha*!

As we were moving my stuff out of the way, Mom walked by carrying an order and almost dropped the plates when she saw me. It turns out she *did* forget about the concert and didn't get my message from the dim-wit who took my call. As soon as she delivered the plates, she dragged me into Allan's office and started snapping at me—her hands on her hips.

"Tracey, what are you *doing* here? You can't just show up *unannounced*. Wait! Does your father know where you are?" She reached for the phone.

Finally I got through to her that I *didn't* run away or anything—why does everyone think I'd run away? She was more relieved than angry to hear it was just a communication screw-up.

She still sounded pretty put out, though. "It's a very busy weekend for me! It's my last shift at Tim Horton's tomorrow *and* I'm moving into my new place on Monday."

Monday? It sounds like I timed it perfectly—I get to help a parent move AGAIN!!!

And then, "Knowing I'm staying with a friend, it's presumptuous to assume that you can stay there too."

It's just for two nights! Aren't I her daughter? Didn't we live together down here for a month and a half? *What gives?*

Really late, too late?

Mom's friend is Allan! She's living with *Allan*, not Sally! Why didn't she tell me? Duh! Why didn't I figure it out?

They both seemed really weird tonight when she told me the situation. What exactly *is* the situation? How long has *this* been going on? I knew that she couldn't afford to stay in the hotel any longer and needed another option until her new place is ready. I knew she and Allan were *friends* and he's always been really good about helping us out of all our "emergencies" but I didn't know they were um, *together*. Or are they? Isn't she still married to Dad—separated but not divorced?

I like Allan all right—I just feel really uncomfortable about this.

But there's something different about Mom. She has a new haircut—which looks okay—but it's something else. Mom doesn't look so old.

After the restaurant closed, Allan drove Mom to his condo first and then came back for me and my stuff—with the sports car that's all he had room for. She had a bed made up for me on the couch. Apparently she's sleeping in the spare room, *not* with

Allan. *Whatever*. They kept giving each other nervous looks but I could read their guilt like a book. Allan made herbal tea and a tuna sandwich for me. We all tried to act casual, like it was an everyday event for me to come to tea at my mother's *boyfriend's* place—but the tension filled the room like a dense fog.

Now they've each gone to bed *separately* and I'm sitting here in this incredible room feeling pretty overwhelmed. I'm stunned about discovering their big secret and finding myself in my ex-boss' house. This is just too weird!

The place is very impressive, though. I knew Allan had money but he must be really rich! His condo overlooks Stanley Park and the North Shore mountains. Even at night it has the most incredible view—I recognize the string of lights on Lions Gate Bridge. It has two bedrooms but it's about twice the size our basement suite was. It must be designer decorated because everything “goes” and it's very modern and manly. This huge, dark brown couch I'm sleeping on feels like a suede *bed*. I think that's real art he has hanging on the walls too.

I'm so tired and shocked I forgot to tell Mom about Brady and how sick he is. Come to think of it, she didn't ask about him either.

Saturday morning, Jan. 29

Joe,

I don't really have plans for today. Mom went to work for her last day at Tim Hortons. With the extra money she's earning as manager at Oysters, she doesn't need to work both jobs anymore. Good for her.

I wanted to spend some time with Mom but that'll have to wait. Allan had to do some ordering at the restaurant and is gone all day so I can't grill him either. They left together just before seven—at least that's what the note said when I woke up. It's ten o'clock now and she's not back until two-thirty. They left me a set of keys to the condo, a note with the address and a carefully drawn map of the area—and a twenty. Somehow I know that's from Allan. I'm not meeting Spencer until tonight so I have some free time before she's home. And I know just who I want to see!

I'm going to try again to find you, Joe, and see if you're okay. Since the condo is on West Hastings Street and some homeless shelters are east on Hastings near Main, I know how to get there on my own. It's a ways but I can check out the shops in Gastown on the way. It's not raining so I don't mind the long walk and I'll scan the faces of the people on the street as I look for you. Joe, you've just got to be out there somewhere!

Saturday afternoon

Where are you, Joe?

I wore your coat so you'd recognize me.

I checked the registration records in *three* shelters.

I looked in store windows and searched up and down the lonely streets.

Two policemen stopped and asked if I was lost. They made it clear that they didn't want me hanging around the area if I was alone. I asked if they knew you.

No one knows you, Joe.

I tried but I couldn't find you.

Did you move?

Did you get sick?

Did you *die*?

Or... did I just imagine you?

I look outside to change
The world that is so new
Daily struggles to survive
Am I alone to make it through?

I made it back to the condo without getting lost, and not too late in the afternoon. Mom was already back from work and starting to worry but once she saw me, she calmed down. We had a cup of tea together, looking out over the water and park. She looks very comfortable here.

Joe, I'm feeling disappointed about not finding you but I'm also feeling puzzled and...hurt that she didn't tell me right away. We talked about Brady, Dad, the new house, the new-old house, school, exams, the concert, and her jobs . . . everything but her and Allan. Mom's very concerned about Brady and upset that she didn't know he's sick.

She said, "I'm upset that you didn't tell me right away."

"*You're* upset! What about me? I had no idea *this* was going on."

Then she launched into a "Praise be to Allan" campaign.

"I'm sorry, Tracey! It all happened this last week. Allan has been so wonderful! He let me stay here until I move. He offered me the management job with a good salary and full benefits. He also helped get my money back from the landlords and drove me around looking at apartments but Sally ended up finding one for me."

Allan *also* treated her to painting classes that just started and it's obvious that she's excited to be getting back to her art. Mom said the course and materials fee is just a loan. I think she should let him pay, if he wants to. *I'll* take guitar lessons if anyone's willing to pay! And even though this living arrangement is supposed to be temporary, it's cool how he hung her mirror in the hallway between the two bedrooms. I told her I liked her new hair style and her new clothes too. Mom looks good.

She's gone to work at Oysters now but before she left we talked about the plans for tonight. Luckily she knows Spencer and likes him or I might not have been allowed to go—ticket winner or not. She acted all harpy about it being a date—it's not like Spencer and I are *doing* anything. We're just going to the concert together because we both like country music. He happens to be cute but I'm really just glad he's my friend.

I've got my best jeans and white shirt to wear—just wish I could've borrow Mel's cowboy boots to complete the look. I better get ready and wash my hair but it'll be weird to be naked in Allan's shower.

late Saturday night

The concert was fantastic! I've never been to a big concert before and it was incredible to be that close to the stage too. Everyone around us stood most of the time and we all sang our lungs out. Spencer's so much fun—I'm glad I asked him.

I wanted to clear something up first, though. After he picked me up at seven, I blurted out that I was really only fifteen *almost* sixteen. He didn't seem that surprised—like he already knew. I asked him if we could still be friends and he said, "Of course, Chick!" I'm glad I got that straightened out—it was stupid to lie.

At the stadium *he* bought me a pizza and diet Coke. I couldn't believe our seats—we were SO close and would have cost a fortune if I hadn't won them. It was fantastic! The Dixie Chicks are great performers and sang all their classics as well as some cool songs from their new album. Afterwards we went out for dessert so we could talk about the concert and other stuff. We sang the songs from the new CD on the way back. He said he loves to hear me sing.

Spencer found a parking spot right in front of the condo building and we sat while his noisy car idled and choked. He's proud of it but I bet Dad could get it running better. We laughed and talked—neither one of us wanted the night to end.

“Who are you and your mom living with now?”

“Oh, just some rich old uncle we found.” Obviously he doesn't know about her and Allan and I'm not going to be the one to tell.

“Well, I'm sure glad you're back. Are you here to stay, Chick?”

“Believe me—I'm seriously considering it.”

He smiled his electric smile then leaned over and kissed me! It was a quick shock the first time—I wasn't expecting it. He laughed. He looked in my eyes and said, “Ready this time?” And he gently touched my lips with his and it was slow, and soft, and mushy, and tasted delicious—like the apple pie he'd just had. I was in another country, on another planet. It was the best kiss I'd had *by far*.

“You better go in now. It's almost twelve and I promised your mom. Thanks for asking me to the concert, Tracey. I had a lot of fun.”

I was up the elevator and in the condo before I knew I was walking on my own feet. I wasn't sure I even thanked him for the ride. What an awesome, perfect date!

PROS to living with Mom—add to list

-Spencer!

-going to concerts!

Sunday afternoon, Jan. 30

Joe,

When I woke up this morning, Mom was waiting for me with a mother-daughter plan. No more early morning shifts at Timmies! We went out for an unbelievable brunch—I went up to the buffet for three servings! I don't care if I put on a pound or two. I told her about the concert and how much fun we had. She laughed when I described the part about me standing on my seat to see the drum solo and almost falling off before Spencer caught me. She told me about a U2 concert she went to when she was younger and how much fun she had too. Talking like this feels like old times, like when we lived together—just the two of us.

She phoned Dad, and Brady's doing much better. That's a relief.

Then she looked me straight in the eye and asked, "How is it at home, with your father and Brady, *honestly*?"

"Well, Dad's really trying—you'd be amazed at how he's working on the house and taking extra shifts. He's getting counseling and doesn't party anymore. He and I cover most of the jobs around the house and he spends time with Brady—when he can."

A lump caught in my throat and before I could stop myself, the rest poured out. How I feel responsible for Brady getting sick, how Buster keeps running away, how I have to do most of the cooking and cleaning, how the furnace didn't work at first and the

phone took all week to be connected. I told her about all the unpacking I still have to do. And don't want to do. How I missed another party and the trouble I've had with Melissa. How I barely have time to play the guitar and there's no money for lessons anyway. I've been working really hard at school, but probably failed the Math exam because I was so tired staying up with Brady. And I completely missed the English one!

It surprised me that this was what finally made me cry. And once I started, Joe, I couldn't stop! I sobbed and sobbed and sobbed. And she let me. She didn't tell me to stop or say, "It's okay." She just held me so I could let it all go. When I was finished, I felt better. I didn't know all that was locked up inside. It had been so hard carrying all that responsibility. My honesty also cleared the way for the things she had to talk about.

"When I left Vernon and realized that the marriage was over, I resigned myself to getting a divorce, not to remarry necessarily, but to protect you kids and me from any more debt. I even went to see a lawyer who is drawing up the divorce papers.

"I began to feel something for Allan in December but didn't recognize it as anything except much needed friendship. I wasn't looking for a romantic relationship with *anyone*. It was Christmas Eve, talking about your tip incident and my plan for the homeless Christmas dinner, when we shared our feelings for each other."

She started to laugh. "He said he'd been in love with me from the moment I accidentally jammed the whipped cream dispenser and sprayed topping all over myself on my second day at work!

"I tried to hide the changed relationship because I thought it would upset you. It's still so new that I am not completely sure myself. The employee/employer relationship complicated things too. When we had the flood and moved into the hotel, Allan offered

to pay for anything we needed but I was too proud to accept his help to support *my* kids. I did accept the manager's position though, because I think I earned it. It makes a big difference in my salary and security but I still needed a temporary place to live.

"Tracey, I am sorry for not telling you sooner but I wasn't sure how you would handle it." Her eyes had a pleading look.

I'm beginning to accept the fact that Mom and Dad are no longer a couple and can see there's little love *or* trust between them anymore—I'm not holding out hope for reconciliation. And seeing Mom now, there's no denying that she's never looked better. Allan is good to her and for her. It's like the mountain of worry has lifted off her shoulders. Or, her heart isn't so broken anymore.

"I am not sure how serious it will become with me and Allan. We'll have to give it some time. Right now, I am very thankful for his friendship but I am still committed to moving into my own place. I want to follow through with my goals to become independent and support you and Brady on my own. Tracey, if you want to live with me in Vancouver, I *will* make it happen. If you decide to stay in Vernon, I will talk to your father about giving you more free time. You shouldn't have to work so hard to fill my shoes. I'm sorry so much has landed on your shoulders."

If I decide to live there. Here or there? What should I do? Where do I belong?

I gave Mom a hug. The song, "I Hope You Dance" by Lee Ann Womack drifted into my head for some reason.

She stroked my hair and didn't let go for ages. Then she whispered, "I hope you can forgive me, Trace."

"Mom, I already have."

*

After all that, I felt like I needed some time to myself. I walked towards the Park and made my way past the lagoon with the Canada geese following me, looking for a meal. I walked the path around the empty pool till I came to the shoreline. Right away I saw the balancing-stone figures—Inukshuks—on the rocky beach below the sea wall. Many of the stone towers have fallen over in the wind and waves but the remaining few stand strong and sure, at least for now. Like people facing hardship, some fall apart and some stand tall. I'm still standing through all that's happened. I can hear a song in that.

I headed north towards nature's rock sculpture—Siwash Rock, Allan calls it. I walked quickly along the seawall and let the wind and spray from the stormy waves wash over me. I was one of the few people out there and the weather's probably the main reason why. But in your long coat, Joe, I'm warm enough. I love it.

In my mind, I tried to process all the new information about Mom and Allan. He stayed away the last two days—giving us a chance to talk. So I haven't seen much of him or the two of them together. But now I understand why her face has softened with smiles and laughing eyes. *Mom is in love with Allan.* . . . Even writing that down makes it more real so I guess I'm getting used to it. I've never seen her look like this—certainly never with Dad. In Vernon, I only remember the closed-off eyes in the pinched face of a stressed-out woman. Looking back on the weeks that I lived here with her, I didn't see any changes because I didn't even really *see* her. At first, I blamed her for everything that had gone wrong with our family and was more concerned with what was going on in *my* life. Besides, she was always working and so tired from juggling the long hours. Since she told me about Dad's gambling addiction, the money problems, what she's tried to do

for us kids, and what has unexpectedly happened with her and Allan, I have a better understanding of my mom. I can also see this is a new start for her.

And for Dad. After the initial shock of Mom leaving, he's started to stand on his own two feet again. He's getting help and has stopped partying and gambling. The shifts at the mill are more regular so his paycheques have been bigger—even if they're still paying off debt. He's made a deal with Tom, the landlord, and he's working on his and a friend's car in the garage out back. He mentioned his ball team starting practice this spring and I overheard him telling Brady about a special camping trip this summer. But as much as Dad has improved, he's really busy and I know he's not able to pick up all the slack that Mom left behind. I tried but I can't do it either. I now realize that she did *so much* for our family even when she didn't "work." She had a full-time job taking care of us and that was important. Now that I know for sure that Mom isn't coming back, we have to do some things differently. It has to change.

Because *everything* has changed. Mom's life is here, in Vancouver, and maybe with Allan now. Allan's a decent guy and he's certainly been good to her—to me too. Once she moves and gets settled in her own place, she has a chance for a brand new life. Mom will make a home for me. Brady too. If that's what we decide.

Mom and I are really close but she doesn't *need* me now. Dad needs me. Brady needs me. Even some of my Vernon friends need me. Other than Spencer, I don't know anyone here. Joe, you might need me but I can't find you. The city is exciting, busy and fun. But it's also scary, and cold and lonely.

I guess I'm still a country girl. That's where I belong!

I'm a country girl.
That's where I'm from.
Been to the city
And back I've come.

But how can I go back to all that responsibility? It's too much work—we need help.

Along the seawall I came to Siwash Rock—broken off and independent but still connected to the cliffs along the shore. It showed the wear and damage of centuries of wind and waves. But it still stands strong. Walking as far north as the seawall goes before turning east, I stood under the Lions Gate Bridge and listened to the rhythmic thump of the cars that passed overhead—like the heartbeat of a living thing. The two shorelines separate for so long but now connected by this iron bridge—helping both sides.

The wind whipped my hair around my face and puffed out my coat. I jammed my fists into the pockets to keep warm. My jeans plastered against my thighs but flapped at my ankles. I wished I'd worn some kind of hat too because finally my frozen ears forced me to turn around. I thought of how damp and cold it can sometimes feel on a winter day in Vancouver—even without snow and ice. The cold can bite right through. I wondered about you, Joe, and if you're warm enough. I know winter is especially hard for older people. I thought of Grandma and how she complains about the severe cold in Edmonton this year. Suddenly an idea slipped into my head and made me shiver—with possibility. I think I know the answer!

Back from my walk, I feel refreshed and my head's clear of worry for the first time in weeks. I'm all excited to talk to Mom about my idea but she isn't here. The note said that they'd gone shopping for some things for the new apartment. I've been drinking tea and writing in my journal for a long time.

Water Damage by Tracey Ann Waters

Rains pour down around the clock
Waves crash hard against the rock
Floods rise up despite the lock
Life's been hard on me.

Water damage everywhere
Never more will this girl care
What I expected to be fair
How strong can I be?

Chorus: How strong can I be?
 Alone, I'm only grasping, free.
 It takes more than one, I see
 To weather all eternity.

Some things change and start again.
The way is wet and courage thin.
We carry on, when we begin.
How strong can we be?

Life before the breaking fall.
Together we'll stand strong and tall
Against the storms that test us all.
How strong can we be?

Chorus: How strong can I be?
 Alone, I'm only grasping, free.
 It takes more than one, I see
 To weather all eternity.

Family now and from the past
Home slips through the fingers fast
Hope and pray that love will last.
How strong can we be?

Water damage will not cease
But our love grows and will increase
And be the strength that grants us peace.
How strong can we be?

We'll stand tall against the sea
That tries to damage you and me.
Watch out world, just wait and see
How strong you and I can be!

Sunday night

I was practicing my guitar when they walked in together. They're really nice about my playing even though I only know a couple songs. I didn't share the one I just wrote—it's not ready yet. Then Allan brought out his dusty guitar when I coaxed him and we tried out a few things together. He's not very good but he's better than me. Mom was singing along—I forgot what a good voice she has—I haven't heard her sing in years. I saw Allan look at her and felt embarrassed to see the brightness in his eyes.

We had fun but then it was time for them to go to work. Just before they left, Mom said, "Tracey, will you be okay on your own again?"

"Yeah, sure. Allan's TV is great. Oh, Allan, can I go on-line and see what Kelly's up to? I want to talk to her some more about the guitar club I'm putting together."

"Knock yourself out."

"Thanks."

Mom said, "I'm hoping you'll stay for a few more days. I'd really like to talk some more and I'd also like your advice and moving expertise."

Ha. I *am* good at that.

I have the week off school for the semester break but plan to go back up to Vernon on Monday. I wouldn't want to stay here at Allan's for much longer but it'll be okay at her new place. And I can work on my idea from here.

Ria's Grocery List:

Milk
Yogurt
Butter
Whipping cream
Eggs
Veggies and Fruit
Steaks
Chicken Breast
Teriyaki sauce
Coffee
Tea
Cocoa
Icing sugar
Baking pans
spatula
Furniture wax
Air freshener
Tampons

Monday afternoon, Jan. 31

—one more moving day!

Joe,

This was the smoothest move ever. Partly it's because I know what to do and what to expect. Partly it's because she hardly has any stuff!

Early this morning, Allan helped us load the boxes, clothes, mirror, and my guitar and bags into the van. Some second-hand furniture she bought was already inside. He drove us to the new apartment, helped us unload, and then went to the restaurant. While we were unpacking and setting stuff up, the new phone rang—Allan, just checking that it was connected and we were fine. He's got it bad!

Then another delivery came—her new bed. I didn't want to ask her how she was paying for all this stuff—it's none of my business but even with her management job, I

think Allan might be helping a bit. She's going to have to get some more furniture and she asked Dad to send some things from Vernon—they should be arriving tomorrow. In the meantime, I can sleep on the air mattress. She doesn't have much, but she has the basics. It's bright and freshly painted, the carpets are new and the appliances are pretty good too. And *everything* works. I checked the toilet first.

In the afternoon we got groceries and I'm making dessert. We're having a special dinner together, just the three of us, in her new place.

"What, no work?" I asked. It makes me kind of nervous too—it sounds like more talking and I don't think I can handle any more honesty and secrets. But then, *I'm* keeping a secret.

Finally I got a chance to talk to Mom about it. And about my decision.

"Oh, Tracey. I was looking forward to you living *here* with me. Permanently. But I can understand your reasons and I think you have made a thoughtful and mature decision that helps the others too. I just want you to promise me two things. You *must* have the time to pursue your music! You are showing real talent! If Mr. Travers will help set something up, I want you to have the time to participate. Otherwise your father and I will find a way for you to have professional lessons.

"Secondly, something for me. I want you to promise to visit me here. Often. You and Brady can come for some holidays or even just for the weekend once in a while. I will work something out with Pete but I want your commitment too. I still *need* you, sweetheart!"

I gave her a hug and we both had some tears.

"I need you too, Mom! Of course we'll come down together and on my own. I was thinking about trying for the summer job at Oysters. What do you think of that?"

"I think my daughter has some very good ideas!"

Mom picked up the phone but I stopped her—it's my idea and I want to do it. First I called Dad and talked about my proposal. He had a few hesitations but is willing—if Mom is. Then I phoned Grandma Rose. She's pleased that Dad liked the plan too.

"We're like two peas in a pod, you and me, because we think alike."

"What do you mean, Grandma?"

"Well, ever since our phone conversation when Brady was sick, I put my house up for sale. I'm packing my stuff—all on the sly! Besides, truth be told," she said, "it's getting awfully lonely and far too cold in this big old house for little old me."

She doesn't know when she's moving but was planning to tell Dad once her house sold. I've been thinking that Grandma is lonely and ready to leave Edmonton to be closer to us. She wants to help out but doesn't know if we want her.

Just what I thought—we need *her* and she needs *us*!

Then I phoned Dad back and he talked to Mom. Then he phoned Grandma, she called me back—with the chocolate cake recipe, and Mom talked to Brady.

I don't know how many calls we made but my idea's going to work! Between Dad and Brady and Grandma Rose and me, we'll *make* it work!

Rose's Never Fail Chocolate Cake
Just follow the directions—easy as...cake!

Preheat oven to 350 °F

Grease and flour two 9" round pans.

Mix in large bowl:

2 C white sugar

¾ C butter

Pour over mix:

1 ½ C boiling water

In another bowl, sift together then slowly add to first bowl mixture:

2 C flour

¼ C cocoa powder (more is good too!)

½ tsp salt

2 tsp soda

In a third bowl:

beat 2 eggs

add 1 tsp vanilla

Add to first bowl and mix well.

Note: this is a very liquid mixture—it's supposed to be!

Pour half of batter into each pan and bake for 35 minutes or until the cake springs back from light touch.

Ice with plain butter icing—so delicious and perfect every time.

Tuesday night, Feb. 2

Joe,

When Allan rushed in last night, we had a late dinner together—steak and grilled veggies *and* chocolate cake. It turned out perfect—I love baking. The mix-matched glasses, the garage sale dishes, and the new placemats she got at the dollar store all looked pretty good set up on the new/old table.

I found a candle to light and said, "If only we had flowers—the table would be perfect!"

Poor Allan—you should have seen his face! He probably would have brought some if he'd thought of it and we could tell he wished he had. I didn't mean to make him feel bad! Mom and I laughed and said it was just perfect the way it was—but I bet he brings flowers the next time she cooks for him.

When we told Allan about my idea and all the calls, he laughed and said, "I should have arranged a conference call for you!"

We had a good talk about it and when we all did the dishes together I asked, "Mom, where are your good dishes from your grandmother?"

"They're in my friend's basement in Merritt for safe keeping. I stopped at her house on the way...in September. I'll send for them soon."

"Tell me about her, Ria. Was your grandmother special to you?"

And Joe, that's when something really interesting happened!

Mom said, "I know very little actually. Her name was Elizabeth. She was married to Joseph MacAllister, the well-known architect who built many of the downtown landmarks. They had two sons—one is my father.

"My grandmother died before I was born and my grandfather became so depressed that over a few months, he gambled away his entire estate. He left in shame and the family never heard from him again. That was more than thirty years ago—he would have passed away by now."

I was fascinated to hear this unfamiliar story! I already knew the sad fact that she didn't speak to her parents—since *I* was born. But I didn't know that Mom had never known either of her grandparents—or what had happened to them.

And when I heard these details, I also thought about you, Joe. Your name is Joe, short for Joseph, right? It's not an uncommon name, but you also said you worked on many of the "grand" buildings downtown. Were you the architect? Your tragic gambling story was so similar as well. I thought that it was all more than a coincidence. Could you be the same man? She thinks he'd be dead by now but I *saw* you. You were alive—pretty old, but still alive. I just don't get why no one seems to know you.

When I suggested the possible relation, Mom said it wasn't possible. I'm not convinced and asked her if she had any old photos of him. There's an old leather album at home in Vernon—I can't wait to check it out. Somehow I know there will be one of the "strapping young man" you used to be, Joe.

Who are you *really*, Joe? Are you still alive somewhere or are you some kind of guardian angel that came to help me just when I needed you? Way back at the end of November, you said I'd be okay and not to give up hope. Well, you must be my angel because you've helped me work a lot of things out. Even my little pebble of an idea made lots of ripples on the pond when I finally threw it in!

* * * * *

Victoria's Day Planner: Wednesday, February 2

Painting class @ 1:00

Oysters after 4:00

Notes:

Finish next week's staffing schedule

Arrange linens order for Friday's function

I haven't written in here for days but I feel so mixed up. The surprise of Tracey showing up, the move, and talking about me and Allan has set me off kilter. It was unexpected but it's been so good to have her with me again! Now she has decided what to do but it's not what I planned. She wants to stay in Vernon with her friends, get into her music program, and help her Dad and her grandma. Tracey has a good idea and has shown real maturity. Poor Rose has been lonely in Edmonton. She needs to be needed. It will be good to have her more a part of the kids' lives and she'll be a huge help and positive influence for Pete. I would only agree to Tracey's plan, though, if I keep a second home for the kids here and they visit regularly. Thankfully, she and Pete agreed and the kids will come for spring break when I'm all set up for them.

The moving van arrived yesterday with the things Pete sent down. It's all my old boxes of treasures but also the old couch, an extra bed, lamps, and a few other things he doesn't want. I had a funny feeling seeing this stuff from the old house and if Tracey wasn't with me, I probably would have had another cry.

I also feel badly about going to my painting class with Tracey here but Spencer called and she's excited about going out with him.

She won't miss me at all.

* * * *

Wednesday morning, Feb. 2

Joe,

I'm having fun with Mom and I'm meeting Spencer this afternoon but I'm kind of ready to head home on Friday—especially with my decision made. Dad called and said

he's painting my room bright yellow—like I was hoping for—and Grandma's sky blue, as she requested. I think he's excited. I want to see it too! Grandma's coming in time for Valentine's Day—whether or not her place is sold. She's selling the furniture she doesn't need and shipping the rest to our place. If the roads are okay through the mountains, Dad will drive up but otherwise she said she doesn't mind taking the bus.

"If Tracey can do it, then why can't I?" She's hilarious.

Grandma will do some of the things that Mom did around the house but no one will ever replace her completely. Rebecca Lynn Howard's song, "No One Will Ever Love Me" *like my mom* is exactly the way I feel.

I still need my mom and will always love her.

* * * * *

Victoria's Day Planner: Thursday, February 3

Oysters after 5:00

Notes:

Spend the day with Tracey

We had a great day shopping and talking and laughing! We each bought new clothes, had a great lunch on Robson Street, and shared even more about each others' lives. I told her I'm in love with Allan and she didn't sound surprised at all!

After having her back for a while, I'll be so sorry to see her leave again. But Tracey realizes I was taking time off to play. This week wasn't real life. She is sure of her decision but along with her humming, she doesn't realize just how often she mentions her

dad and Brady, her grandma, the new house, school, and especially all her friends. She misses her home and it's clear that is where her heart is. I have to let her go.

What a difference a month can make! February really is *our* New Year's: new starts and matters of the heart.

* * * * *

Thursday night, Feb. 3

Joe,

It was good to be off school this week for the semester break. I didn't have to worry about studying or homework—for a change! Mom called Ms. Singh and made arrangements for me to rewrite the English exam later. When the new courses start this Monday, I'm going to talk some others into signing up for the guitar club so we'll have a decent group and can all learn from each other. I really want to learn how to pick and chord better but also want to learn how to write down the tunes and rhythms in my head. Mr. T. said he'd show us that too. Maybe we could get good enough to form our own band—country, of course! I'll call it "Me and My Gang"—just like the Rascal Flats song. Yee haw!

I'm also looking forward to seeing my friends and will keep trying with Melissa. Kelly got Mom's new number from Dad and she's called the last three days asking when I'm coming home and keeping me updated with home news. She's passed some of my stories on to Meg and Hannah and I know they're jealous about me going to the concert. But they're dying to hear more about my date with Spencer.

Well, two dates, actually. Since the sun was shining yesterday, he asked me to go roller-blading along the seawall. I rented the skates and even though I'd never done it before it's like ice skating and I got the hang of it pretty quick. It was a great excuse to hang onto Spencer while I was learning too. We went to Starbucks on Denman, at English Bay. It was such a springy day, we could sit outside in the sun and drink our mochas. That's when he kissed me again! Ahhhhhh. That's a Vancouver memory to hang onto!

Spencer and I talked about me moving back to Vernon so we're just going to keep it casual but we can msn. And the deal-maker for Mom is that Brady and I come down to visit once a month or so and at least part of the holidays. Spring break is coming up!

Mom and I had some great times this week—even helping her move and get settled, *again*, was fun. But I know she cut her time with Allan to be with me. I'm glad that with only working one job, she has more time to do other things—like her art. She was shy to show me the canvas she began working on but you can tell she really loves painting. We also went shopping with her last Timmies paycheque. I convinced her to get a cell phone so we could reach her wherever she is. She helped me pick out some new jeans that are long enough but fit my butt really well, two awesome T-shirts, runners, and I paid for the orange cropped sweater. They were mostly on sale so we got some great deals on stuff I won't find in Vernon. We also shopped at the second hand store and found a few more great pieces—and we both tried on sparkly evening gowns, just for fun.

When I get home, I'm thinking of buying my own cowboy boots with what's left of the money I earned at Oysters. I'm past borrowing stuff from friends. Maybe I'll apply for a part-time job—or wait till I come back in the summer. Allan said he'd give me a

good reference either way and that's saying something after all the trouble I caused. I'm going to find out more about that soup kitchen at the shelter in Vernon too. I never knew about it before—I didn't know *anything* about homelessness actually. I sure never thought there were homeless people in small towns. I'm going to see what I can do to help. Maybe Kelly or Meg and Hannah, will go with me—more people helping can make a bigger difference.

At the beginning of the week Mom was nervous about what I thought about her and Allan. Now I can honestly tell her I think he's cool and I'm okay with them being together. Once the divorce is finalized, they may get more serious but for now Allan wants to help her get back on her feet and she'll let him. Just like Dad's going to let me and Grandma *and* his new friends help him.

Through all this break up with Mom and Dad, I see that being independent isn't always a good thing—sometimes we need to lean on others and we all need help once in a while. I can't help but think what you'd be doing now if you'd let someone help you with your gambling problem, Joe.

I tried so hard to find you again. I don't know for sure who you are, but you will always hold a special place in my heart. You showed me so much about having faith and hope during the tough times. For so long, I was hurt and angry and miserable about everything. I didn't know where to live or if I even had a home to go to. I guess you could say I was homeless for a while—like you, Joe. But now I know that home is where you get the love and care you need *and* where you are needed.

It's where you belong.

* * * * *

Friday morning, Feb. 4

Joe,

I'm on the Greyhound bus and a perfect song is on my walkman—"Who Says You Can't Go Home" by Bon Jovi and Jennifer Neddles.

That's where I'm heading—home!

This old journal is almost full—I've been writing in it for *five* months. When I left this morning, Mom slipped something flat—wrapped in fancy paper—into my duffle bag but I can tell it's a new journal. I might use it to write my lyrics in—and the music, once our guitar club learns how, I feel good about my decision to go home and don't know if I need to write all my feelings down anymore.

They seem to be coming out in songs instead.

Where Do I Belong? by Tracey Ann Waters

Stuck inside my head
The rhythm of a song
Asks questions that I fear
Where do I belong?

Torn between two places
Both so far from home
How can I decide?
Feeling lost and all alone

Chorus: Where do I belong?
 How can I be free?
 I try so hard to find my place
 And struggle to believe

I look outside to change
A world that is so new
The struggle to survive
Am I alone to make it through?

We help each other grow
And make a fresh new start
Two homes can sometimes be
Apart but close in heart

Chorus: Where do I belong?
 How can I be free?
 I've tried so hard to find my place
 And struggled to believe

But now I know...

I'm a country girl.
That's where I'm from.
Been to the city
And back I've come.
'Round the corner
And start again.
With the rhythm of a song
That may never end.