

The Twistical Nature of Spoons

Also by Patti Grayson from Turnstone Press

Core Samples
Autumn, One Spring

*The Twistical Nature
of Spoons*

Patti Grayson

TURNSTONE  PRESS

The Twistical Nature of Spoons
copyright © Patti Grayson 2023
Turnstone Press
Artspace Building
206-100 Arthur Street
Winnipeg, MB
R3B 1H3 Canada
www.TurnstonePress.com

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means—graphic, electronic or mechanical—without the prior written permission of the publisher. Any request to photocopy any part of this book shall be directed in writing to Access Copyright, Toronto.

Turnstone Press gratefully acknowledges the assistance of the Canada Council for the Arts, the Manitoba Arts Council, the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund, and the Province of Manitoba through the Book Publishing Tax Credit and the Book Publisher Marketing Assistance Program.

This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, events or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Printed and bound in Canada.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: The twistical nature of spoons / Patti Grayson.

Names: Grayson, Patti, 1957- author.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20230447937 | Canadiana (ebook) 20230447996 |

ISBN 9780888017710 (softcover) | ISBN 9780888017727 (EPUB) |

ISBN 9780888017734 (PDF)

Classification: LCC PS8613.R39 T85 2023 | DDC C813/.6—dc23



MANITOBA ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DU MANITOBA



Canada Council Conseil des arts
for the Arts du Canada

Funded by the Government of Canada
Financé par le gouvernement du Canada

Canada

Manitoba 

for
David

...Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things,
is the proper aim of Art.

—Oscar Wilde, *Intentions*

Liar, liar, pants on fire

—Unknown

The Twistical Nature of Spoons

1

Blisse,

unknown prone

The hunt for loose change in the bottom of my backpack is not primarily driven by hunger, but by my craving for the sensation of hard metal pressed against my fingertips—metal that is not formed into a spoon. I will not touch the spoon. It is difficult to deny myself its comfort. It beckons. I resist. I have no intention of reaching into my parka pocket to be assuaged by its calming influence. I may never touch the spoon again. Perhaps, in the spring, I will donate my coat back to the secondhand store without first emptying it of any personal belongings. Who would suffer more from the loss of the cheap souvenir—Ina or me?

The quarters and dimes feel sweaty in my palm. I debate whether I should be wasting them, but then deposit their sum into the vending machine. At least there is the reward of the slide and clink, the accompanying *ka-thump* as the spiral coil releases my D4 choice into the lower trough. As I retrieve my purchase, I think to myself, *This confection is real*. This candy bar is chocolate and nuts and caramel, not a concoction of subterfuge and fabrications. As

Patti Grayson

I settle into a vacant waiting-room chair, I delay unwrapping the treat. I rifle through my backpack again to locate a tube of cherry lip gloss and apply the dregs. Accosting me are stomach-churning wafts of disinfectant, the flickering of the muted television set, and the unsettling code announcements spewing from the intercom. I would prefer them all vanished. Nevertheless, I will sit and wait in their midst, even if it takes all night and necessitates skipping my Brit Lit lecture and French lab in the morning. And when my mother begins her story—*my* story—I will hear her out this time, listen to her full explanation. I can control my inner seething long enough to listen.

The problem is that now, not only do I expect Ina to address my bewilderment with respect to the fiasco she created with the spoons, she also must explain why she insisted on scrambling into the back of an ambulance with a complete stranger. Especially since the man appeared to be raising his voice at her in protest right before he collapsed. My mother keeps to herself at the best of times, so why would she feel responsible for a random individual who shows up at her gallery opening? Unless he is an art critic and she was trying to woo his favour. But if his judgements and responses are that intense and overblown, who would pay attention to him anyway? It is not as if Ina's work requires a shock-value disclaimer like some trauma-inducing performance-art installation. At worst, some of my mother's pieces might gently haunt you when you close your eyes at night. So what was his complaint?

Ina must have lied to the paramedics to be allowed to accompany the man. Some cock-and-bull story. But crazed invention is, after all, my mother's specialty. Which begs the question, why am I sitting in this hospital waiting room expecting her to provide me with a truthful explanation? Odds are Ina's story will be questionable at best. It would be better for me to try and answer my own questions.

I debate removing the wrapper from the chocolate bar,

The Twistical Nature of Spoons

anticipating that the sweetness might just sit in my stomach like a stone. As I dither, I do not notice the nurse approaching until she touches my shoulder.

“Excuse me, Blisse? Are you Blisse Trove?” she asks.

I blink and nod.

She looms over me in her pastel scrubs, a folded piece of paper in her hand, and continues, “You’re the daughter of the woman who rode here in an ambulance? Ina?”

I nod again.

“Your mother asked me to give you this. Her companion might require emergency surgery. We’re running tests. She said you should go home for the night. There’s no telling the duration—”

“Her *companion*?” I shake my head. “My mother is not his . . .” I stop myself. Who knows what Ina has told the hospital and why? I would like to inform this messenger that, to my knowledge, Ina has not gone on a single date since my birth, and it is doubtful that, prior to this evening, she had ever laid eyes on the man who might require life-saving intervention. So *companion*? Highly unlikely.

With a vague gesture, the nurse coaxes me to take the paper. I do not.

Instead, I press for answers. “Where is my mother? Could you ask her to come speak to me herself?”

The woman squints at my bangs to avoid eye contact. “She went up to the cardiac unit. She basically begged me to persuade you to go home and get some sleep.” She chances a pointed glance to assess my reaction. Her lips are configured into rehearsed sincerity as she continues, “She doesn’t want you staying here alone. You have classes in the morning?”

I rub my knuckles across my eyebrows. I want to point out I would not be alone if Ina came out from wherever she was hiding in the bowels of this hospital. Does this note-bearer not find it odd that my mother is avoiding me? Or has Ina revealed that I have been unwilling to speak to her for weeks now—even eluding her

Patti Grayson

Christmas overtures—and is thus justified in her own behaviour? I would like to present my side of the story: the version in which Ina drags me into a corner of the gallery while ambulance attendants load a stranger onto a stretcher, at which point she prepares to abandon her exhibit on opening night, while insisting—her face full of anguish—that I hail a cab and follow her to the hospital so she can explain, as if I should just leave our own unresolved crisis simmering on the back burner.

Ina urging me out the fire exit was made even worse by Tweed Halverden scrambling toward me from across the gallery, in a state of uncharacteristic agitation. What Tweed was doing there, I cannot imagine, unless he was trying to impress a date: *Just on the down-low, I know the artist's daughter intimately, and let me tell you, she is a wacko!* And now that I am here at the hospital at my mother's bizarre request—my heart lamenting a missed encounter with Tweed—Ina simply instructs another stranger to tell me to go home and toddle off to university in the morning.

When I was a child, I sometimes resented Ina's preoccupied flurries of activity; in my early teens, it was her ever-hovering physical presence; but tonight's weird little disappearing act tops it all. Bile rises to the back of my throat. I desperately need to believe that the shame and humiliation I have been lugging around are all Ina's fault, but there is a nagging fear that should someone, anyone—perhaps even this coerced courier—be privy to both of our stories, I might not be perceived as totally gullible and innocent. My behaviour, especially my recent actions, might place me within blame's reach.

I lower my gaze to the folded paper. If Ina is choosing to be absent, the note will have to suffice. I reach for it. My mother's messenger hands it to me, then hesitates, her palm remaining upturned, the pose of a religious icon. For some unknown reason, I place the chocolate bar in her hand.

She looks down at it, tries to give it back.

The Twistical Nature of Spoons

I say, “Would you please take it to my mother? I doubt she ate much today.”

“Sure,” she agrees.

“Thank you,” I say. “I am certain you have more important things to do than deliver candy. I appreciate it.”

When she turns away, I consider sneaking along behind her. Instead, I yank my backpack out from under the chair, shove the note into my pocket, and slink out between the hissing automatic doors. “Go home and get some sleep,” the nurse relayed. But perhaps Ina should have specified which home. The one I have lived in with her my whole life? Or my Knowlton-acquired temporary lodgings?

And what of poor Knowlton? What am I supposed to say to him? He was more insistent than Ina that I take the cab to the hospital. “Imperative” was the word he used, before wringing his hands and inexplicably mumbling, “I should have known the minute I laid eyes on him.” Perhaps I can avoid Knowlton. I dig my bus pass out of my backpack and head to the stop, hoping the wait will not be long. The midnight air is stunningly cold, and I cannot afford another taxi. Thankfully, the transit shelter is vacant, but even within its glass protection, my breath rises in puffs of icy fog.

I slip into the right-hand seat at the front of the bus. It is my preferred spot. I like that there is little to obstruct the seat’s view at the same time as it provides the closest proximity to the assured *thwap* of the doors’ rubber edges sealing closed behind the passengers. I am torn between sitting back and savouring my luck or reading the note. A dull lump turns over in my stomach despite having relinquished the candy bar. I dig the note from my pocket and unfold it.

Its surface is covered in a hurried scrawl:

Patti Grayson

Blisse,

I wanted to explain when you got here, but it has to wait. Don't return to the hospital for now. (Thank Knowlton for staying back at the gallery for me when you see him.) Not that I blame you, but hating me won't solve this.

Ina

It is a good thing the bus ride is short. I cannot wait to ball Ina's cryptic blather in my fist and toss it into a snowbank. And how dare she expect me to thank Knowlton for doing her bidding? We both owe him inexpressible gratitude. She should be thanking her lucky stars for his help, not ordering me to deliver her platitudes.

I practically sprint the two blocks from the bus stop. By the time I reach the porch, my bare hands are so cold, I can hardly crank the key in the lock; still, as I push open the door, I have the urge to turn tail and run back out into the frigid January air. After weeks away, I had anticipated a feeling of familiarity to wash over me upon entering the foyer, but I neglected to brace myself for the brash reminder of my sudden departure. Although Ina appears to have made an effort to hang some lanterns for Chinese New Year, the foyer is still brimming with Christmas decorations. One entire section of the yuletide display lies in a jumbled mess. My heart pounds. In the midst of the disrupted corner, Santa's elf trio sit like injured accusers awaiting the return of the culprit to the crime scene. I half fear they might begin to tremble in my presence, but they remain inert. One no longer grips his toy hammer. The middle one, with his perfect, merry little elbows-out symmetry, is missing his elfin hat—severed raw porcelain marks his hairline in its stead. I assume the third has not sat upright since I bolted from the house. His arm lies detached; I can see into his hollow cavity. My tears well up as much for their wrecked state as for the violent streak I had not known I possessed. I mirror their blank stares as I remove my boots and make my way to the kitchen. It is better not

The Twistical Nature of Spoons

to look. I refuse to remember Ina toppled in their midst, calling after me, “Please, can I just have your forgiveness, Blisse?” Just? Why would she ask for the hardest thing to give?

I head straight to my bedroom and drop onto the narrow mattress, reaching my hand under the bed to feel the hard edge of the canteen. Ina must have picked it up and stowed it away again. There are traces of her jasmine perfume—her one personal splurge—on my pillow, as if she was lying in this same spot not long ago. I imagine her ransacking my room for clues to track down my whereabouts. Over the past weeks, while lying awake tossing and turning on Knowlton’s pay-by-the-month-hotel daybed, I have wondered how long it would be before she found me.

I breathe in and out slowly. The house creaks from the cold; the furnace blows a warm, albeit hollow, emptiness to compensate, its mechanical rumble oddly comforting. I cannot remember many occasions when it was just me and the furnace alone in the house. There was always someone renting the upstairs rooms, and Ina seldom left to go anywhere once I arrived home from school each day, unless I was in her company.

My ribcage contracts with a sudden thought. Perhaps Ina could not bear the solitude after she evicted Knowlton from his rooms and I flew the coop. Despite her widowed declarations that she would never love another man, her isolation may have driven her to take a lover. Is my mother having a tryst with the man who collapsed at the gallery? Perhaps “companion” is an apt description. I cannot know what Ina has done in my absence. Maybe she was trying to end their relationship earlier this evening and he was reacting to that, not her work. He did seem to be spewing nonsense; she might have decided to be rid of him. Everyone, including me, had turned to stare when he shouted something that sounded like “sock and buskin!” Perhaps he had a stroke and his words were all garbled; but then again, I heard him clearly pronounce Ina’s name seconds before he collapsed. So much chaos ensued—I swear a

Patti Grayson

scarlet aura was pulsing around him before I realized the ambulance had arrived, its red lights flashing through the windows and splashing across the gallery walls.

I sit up to switch on my dresser lamp. It flickers like the bulb might be dying. Willing it to remain lit, I tap the shade, knowing that my actions are senseless, perhaps as futile as hoping that Ina's testament of undying devotion to my father's memory remains intact—that she has not fallen for another man—and that her past behaviours can be explained by her deep and lasting grief over my father's passing. This is the one consoling fundamental I have clung to for weeks now. But it is just as likely that the man from the gallery is actually her lover, and that she has already done something to deceive him—as she has me.

I jump off the bed and dash to the bathroom, desperate to not find an extra toothbrush in the glass by the sink. I feel like a crazed intruder rummaging through the medicine chest, but if there is evidence that a man occupies space in Ina's life, I need to know. It is not just that she is ultimately the reason Tweed thinks I am an out-of-my-mind freak—it is that for my entire life, she swore her everlasting love for my father. She swore she would go to her grave his widow and with her life fulfilled by their love. She told me that when she repeated the until-death-do-us-part vow, she meant until her own death, not just should death separate them. And I believed her. I took solace in the romance of it even when I felt disadvantaged by not having a father. And when I was finally deemed old enough to hear the tragic details of his demise, I believed that the strength of her love must have been the one thing that allowed her to carry on. Just as I believed in the origin of the spoons.

I sweep the contents of the under-sink cabinet onto the floor. There are feminine products, body lotions, and empty shaving-gel containers, all pink and pastel. Not a masculine product in sight. I shove the items back in helter-skelter and head to her room. Putting my nose to her linens, I sniff around for a whiff of something

The Twistical Nature of Spoons

that suggests Ina has invited a man into her bed. There is jasmine eau de toilette, but nothing more. A fringed shawl that she must have decided would not be part of her evening's outfit lies strewn across the bed, next to the ratty peach chenille housecoat she has worn ever since I can remember. Mornings were always Ina in that matted mess of a garment. There is no hint anywhere in the room of a man come to call.

I make a determined beeline for the basement stairs but sit down halfway to the bottom. Ever since Ina stopped using the kitchen table as her crafting space and moved her work down a floor, she became protective of what she christened her "cellar sanctuary." I sometimes whined about not being invited into her workshop, but it was not as if I wanted to watch her string glass beads or paint pet rocks; it was simply my exclusion that goaded me. That, and I missed hearing the little intermittent humming sounds my mother made when she was busy at her task. She never installed a lock on her workspace. "I don't need to bolt the place down, Missy Blissey. Because I trust you." If there was one singular, crystalline priority in my childhood, it was the code of trust. There was no option, Ina insisted. In that confidential hush that only applied when we spoke of my father, Ina declared that she and I shared a secret that could never be revealed. If I decided to trespass into Ina's workspace below, it came with the risk of diminishing my A-plus level of trustworthiness in her eyes. It had made good sense to avoid that breach.

But what has Ina been hiding down there? Earlier this evening, seeing her recent work all gathered into one gallery space for the first time—instead of in a craft-show booth or stacked up on our kitchen counters—it was evident that her work has been—as Ina might describe it—"kicked up a notch." And although there is no indication of a man's presence in the house, some transformation has taken place in her workshop. There are obvious hints of new inspiration in her most recent pieces. Perhaps I should not have

Patti Grayson

kept my distance at first when I arrived at the opening and saw her standing with her unknown “companion”; I should have marched right up and made her introduce me to the disgruntled man the minute I spotted them together. Would they have cringed under my scrutiny?

Because one thing has become clear to me over the past weeks: trust has been abandoned like a glass slipper at the ball. Ina claims she wants to tell me the whole truthful story, but I am prepared for more subterfuge. What I must attempt is to piece my own memories together, comb through the pertinent spoon details, and try to make sense of all that I understood and came to believe. Perhaps something buried will come to light and help elucidate how I ended up here tonight, in my present state, on these cellar steps. If nothing else, I am certain my dredging will serve as a reminder for me to remain on guard. As should you. When Ina starts telling you her side of things, be aware that she is capable of elevating deception into an art form. Pay close attention. There is nothing up *my* sleeve, but as for Ina’s? Do not say I did not warn you.

Ina

encounters

Nineteen years ago, a man walked into a bar. If you're waiting for the corny punchline, better brace yourself. This is more on the scale of a cosmic joke. Cue the drum sting anyway, *ba-dum tss!* Although it's almost two decades back, it's not as hard to remember what happened, as it is to remember why. Like, who was I back then? And why was I so stupid? You can't just sidle up to a library shelf and expect to find the answers to those kinds of questions. Blisse probably told you I'm going to spin a yarn—try to pull the wool over your eyes—but I've been laddering down on my mistakes, and I don't intend to repeat them. What I'm about to tell you is the honest-to-gawd's truth.

It was an unseasonably warm early spring evening in the late 1970s and a man walked into the Three Sheets Tavern where I worked. I glanced up when the glass chime tinkled at the door, but my eyes shifted back to the bar's front window, out to the lights of the Lakehead Harbour beyond. The port had started hopping again. First the icebreakers, then the freighters making their way

Patti Grayson

in and out, headed through the Great Lakes and down the St. Lawrence.

The man who walked in regained my full attention when he stalled in the entrance—as if making up his mind about the place. He turned as if to leave. At that point, I pegged him for a crewman or a stevedore. Sculpted cheekbones, five o'clock shadow, dark hair that hung past his earlobes and fractured at his collar. Unkempt. But not cheap-campfire-wieners-on-a-stick unkempt. Think sizzling appetizers tossed haphazardly on a platter.

He glanced around both halves of the bar before dodging away from the midweek pool tournament on the one side, beelining for the table set closest to the back on the other, the one next to the men's room. None of our regulars sat there unless it was the last table in the place. You could smell the disinfectant pucks in the urinals from that table—a gross addition to the two-for-one combo of stale beer and cigarette smoke. Not that I smelled rosy myself after struggling to haul down the oversized playoffs banner for my boss Antony's defeated Maple Leafs on an unexpectedly balmy day. It was the time of year when warm temperatures trick you into believing you've seen the last snowfall, but the furnace won't knock it off because it can't believe its own thermostat. I would have appreciated the man-who-walked-into-a-bar taking a vacant stool up front, saving me the extra steps to serve him his poison. But I forced a smile as I approached the back table because Antony insisted that the Three Sheets creed was to try and show even the unruliest drunk some courtesy. "If a guy can leave with some dignity, he won't be cursing my place with the evil eye or nothing." Antony's superstitious nature could only be matched by my mother's, and since she had good reason for her beliefs—with my father's life ending under a construction ladder when I was still in diapers—I figured I shouldn't question Antony's precautionary wisdom either. So I concentrated on relaxing my scrunched-up nose as I crossed the bar, and beamed as if I hadn't a care in the world.

The Twistical Nature of Spoons

I placed a cardboard coaster down in front of the man, courtesy of Molson Export Ale. I liked working in an establishment that provided coasters. And these, with their nautical theme, made me feel as if I could smell a stiff ocean breeze filling canvas sails. Not only did they do a bang-up job protecting the tables against water rings, but they also showed off our cheap bar glasses to their best advantage.

“What can I getcha?” I asked the stranger tucked next to the men’s room door.

Without looking up at the smile I was offering, he responded, “Vodka, neat, please.” He then fiddled with the coaster until it was perfectly straight, square to the table’s edge.

Right off the hop, I tried to guess why this guy wouldn’t look me in the eye—painfully shy, culturally divergent, simply rude, or something to hide? Call me an idiot—because what did it matter?—but there was an urgent need for me to know. I didn’t, for one second, consider what I would do with the information once I had it. Did I want to teach him some manners or offer comfort for whatever had driven him to a guarded life? A few minutes earlier, as I’d wrestled with the Leafs banner, I’d been focussed on the end of my shift and walking home to a nice bathtub soak with the stack of front-cover-removed crafting magazines I’d lucked into earlier that week in the back alley behind the drugstore. But that instantly changed. I felt an inexplicable need to grab the attention of the man-who-walked-into-a-bar. I forgot about my sore calf muscles and platform-heel-pinched toes and decided to make the most of the stranger’s presence.

I straightened my back, lifted the damp curls off my neck and let them fall over my shoulders, before repeating his order to him, “Vodka, neat.” And then added, “How refreshing. Lotsa loner guys come in and order something ‘up’ just to watch me shake their drinks.”

This caused him to sigh and rub at one of his eyebrows with his

Patti Grayson

middle finger, his index finger and thumb left hovering delicately over his forehead. His hands looked rough enough to have recently loaded ship cargo, but with that genteel hand positioning, there was only one conclusion. Artistic type. That explained it. And that practically sealed his fate for me too. Though I could totally relate to the aching desire to create, I'd sworn off fraternizing with artists. My past encounters with them and their ilk had more often than not left me to personally clear up their tabs at the end of the night amidst their grateful, shit-faced promises to paint me, sculpt me, take me on tour when they secured a record deal.

Without looking up, the stranger said, "If I wanted my vodka chilled, I'd merely place it here, over my heart." His left hand clutched his down-filled vest over his chest.

Wow. A statement like that was shouting one thing: poet. And poets were the worst kind of artist. Rarely flush. What poet gets a big book advance to squander? But even though his sappy line should have made me turn tail, there was something so raw and naked about his delivery that my breath caught like a hiccup. As I hesitated, it was as if his heart's chill seeped through his ribcage, skin, shirt, anorak, and down vest to make me shiver in my own perspiration. He was clearly cold from the inside out, unlike half of Thunder Bay's population, who had donned shorts to delight in the feel of wan late-April sunlight striking their gooseflesh, despite the snow piles still melting in parking lots. The illogical notion struck me that, even with all those layers of protection, his heart was suffering from frostbite. I felt compelled to upgrade his free peanuts to a warm bowl of roasted cashews, on the house. When I turned to do just that, he raised one finger to stall me.

Reaching into his jeans pocket, he placed a twenty on the table, staring at it intensely as if memorizing its serial numbers. "Make it a double, please?"

I'd heard that line a thousand times. The request for a double often expressed more than a drink order. There could be

The Twistical Nature of Spoons

accompanying desperation, loneliness, jealousy, joy. So much of the bar biz was fuelled by citizens celebrating or folks down on their luck. But right in the middle, there was a no-man's-land where a person just wanted a strong drink. My stranger's request seemed to originate there, but with an extra twist. It was a drink request with subtext: *if I order a double, will you leave me alone?*

I still hadn't moved, so he finally looked up at me, his regard so piercing that I glanced away. And then, who knows what possessed me? I said, "Before I can serve doubles, I need your name."

He sighed, more audibly.

Why was this guy getting to me? First he inspired kindness. Now he was provoking me to be a pain in the ass.

Fiddling with his coaster again, he mumbled, "Your northern liquor laws are peculiar." He turned it perpendicular to the table.

"It's not policy," I responded. "I just can't risk messing up the orders. You can see I'm run off my feet here tonight."

He glanced at the smattering of patrons, none of whom were beckoning me, and then proceeded to trace his finger around the edge of the coaster, like a runner on a baseball diamond. Around and around. Half a dozen home runs. At some point, he decided to play. "Taras," he said.

"Pardon me?"

"My name. Taras."

"Ter-race, like a garden?"

"You have the syllabic emphasis incorrect." He repeated, "Taras."

"Tear-ass?"

"You can rhyme it with 'harass,' if it makes it easier for you," he said, motioning with his hand as if bestowing permission.

My cheeks flamed. "Humph," I said, letting him know I thought his gesture patronizing.

"Though it would rhyme better with 'hair loss,'" he stated. "Ta-ross. My father named me for a famous poet from our homeland. Taras."

Patti Grayson

Nail on the head! Poet. Just as I suspected. I wanted to ask what homeland that was—Terre-Oz? He displayed no trace of a foreign accent, except maybe when he said his own name. Nothing un-Canadian about him, but obviously not a local. Instead, I relented. “A neat double vodka it is, Tear-oss.”

“But wait,” he insisted. “Where do I find reciprocity? You have not offered up your own name and I feel cheated.”

“Cheated?” I snorted.

“An unpleasant sensation. One should experience it, but not repeatedly. I think the cause of ulcers and lunacy—”

He would have gone on, but I interrupted him. “Ina.”

“Eye-nuh?” he repeated, trying my syllables on for size. “Diminutive of what?”

I stared at him.

“Is it short for Angelina? Katarina? Delphina? But then, I suppose you’d pronounce it, *Ee-nuh*, not *Eye-nuh*?”

“It’s just plain old Ina,” I repeated, not about to reveal that Ina was actually short for Regina—not pronounced like royalty, but rather like the Saskatchewan city where I suspected I’d been conceived, since my mother, without a shred of irony, had bragged about seeing the Mountie Musical Ride while on her honeymoon. Out loud, I said to the man-who-walked-into-a-bar, “Just say to yourself, ‘Ina ... rhymes with the private part.’ Hard to forget that way.”

He blinked several times, as if I’d managed to embarrass him, but then he tapped his temple and said, “I have committed it to memory, Ina-Rhymes-With. Never to be forgotten.”

Unwilling to give him the last word, I said, “Well, with introductions out of the way, does Mister Genius still require a beverage? ‘Cause if so ... I-na gonna get your drink now, Tear-oss.”

As I turned toward the bar, a reluctant sideways grin laced his face, compelling enough to make me wobble on my heels.

I’d barely set the glass down on his table when he reached for it

The Twistical Nature of Spoons

and shot it back like a drink of water. His bottom lip quivered for a split second, but otherwise there was no response to the bite of booze at all. I waited. This was the time when your hardcore drunk usually said, “Another, please.”

“You spiked my drink.”

“Huh?” I said. “No, I didn’t.”

“Oh, but you did, Eye-nuh. Perhaps only an eye-dropper’s worth. But I can taste it.” He nodded with appreciation.

“Taste what?” I demanded.

“It is either hapless compassion or ... soulful yearning. Or both? They can taste similar mixed with vodka. Indistinguishable—like a melody one is hearing for the first time.” He looked up and searched my face. “Ina, may I enquire? What is the secret of your uplifting concoction?” he asked.

“It’s straight booze, like you ordered.”

“Until *you* served it,” he countered in a tone way too earnest for a pick-up line.

“Riiiiight,” I said, shaking my head at him. I reached my right hand out to clear his glass, but he caught me gently by the wrist.

He said, “I’ll keep the glass. I like to stare into them when they’re empty.” Then he turned my hand, palm-side up, and ran his own hand over mine to flatten my fingers, which I’d unconsciously balled into a fist. Before he released me, he peered at my palm; his head drooped, and he gently curled my fingers back into a fist and let go.

I swiped the twenty off the table. *Ass-crack weirdo*, I thought in an attempt to summon some defences. Even for a poet, he talked insanely. But his words had touched a nerve. And his touch had unnerved me. Go scrub my hand or never wash it again? Antony, although careful to be courteous about it, did not put up with the clutch-and-grab crowd in his establishment—he could turn politely menacing if push came to shove. The regulars knew this and kept their hands to themselves—one of the reasons I stayed

on at Three Sheets. But Antony was kicking back with his buddies on the other side of the bar, cleaning up at the pool table, leaving me the run of the place with him only a shout away. I should have called him over right then and there.

When I returned with Taras's change, his empty glass had been refilled. The coaster was cockeyed beneath it. I squinted at him and then at the clear liquid contents. For some reason, I glanced over my shoulder as if some imaginary barmaid had come and refilled it for him. It couldn't have been Antony; the click of colliding billiard balls still sounded amidst jeers and cheering. Water from the bathroom tap? But I hadn't noticed Taras vacate his chair.

"What the hell?" I said, angry that I couldn't pose a more intelligent question.

"I beg your pardon, but I thought we had an agreement," Taras responded.

I squinted even harder at him.

He added, "When I made it a double and you decided to leave me alone back here."

"I didn't ... I wasn't ..." I sputtered. How could my fleeting thought have become a verbal contract? I took a step back from him.

He smirked into his glass before he downed the contents a second time, but any sign of glee was wiped away by a second wince. Not tap water, then, unless he had an aversion to chlorine. Continuing to clutch his change in my right hand, I stuck out my left and motioned for him to give up the glass.

He ignored my gesture, methodically reached into an inner pocket of his vest, and produced a small silver flask.

"Hey, you know you can't do that in here!" I hissed, checking over my shoulder a second time. "Antony is a good guy, but he doesn't put up with shenanigans."

"Go ahead, call your boss. By the time he ambles over, the evidence will have vanished." He unscrewed the cap, poured out a stiff four fingers, and took it in two gulps. He waved the glass at me in

The Twistical Nature of Spoons

a salute. “But at least you can feel saved then, yes? Perhaps you are secretly in love with the boss. Trust that he will leave his wife and children?”

There wasn’t an ounce of truth in his taunt, but it irked me enough to ensure I wasn’t going to call Antony over. “Give me the glass and head home, Tear-oss.” Disappointment crept into my voice, though I couldn’t say why. “Wherever that might be.” I signalled again for him to hand it over.

At the sight of my outstretched hand, he jolted forward. He was staring at my left palm, eyes narrowed. I wondered if he’d emptied that flask and was about to pass out, but his focus remained fixed on my hand. I withdrew it as if it was in danger. That provoked him, and he sprang from his chair. I opened my mouth to call for Antony, but Taras shook his head vehemently, and pressed his hands together in a pleading gesture.

“Wait!” he insisted. He pointed a finger to hold me there. “Don’t,” he said, a cross between a plea and a warning. “How did you get that scar on your palm?”

I whipped my hand behind my back. “I accidentally broke a bottle.”

Taras winced. “Working here at the bar? Or at some other pursuit?”

I shrugged. It was none of his business that a year earlier I’d been down at the harbour, as had been my habit at the time, launching an emptied lemon gin bottle with a message stuffed inside it. Glass bottles had become my obsession, and I’d been brainstorming ways to transform them into artsy objects. My creative ventures didn’t include shatter-proofing. Having polished off the dregs of the gin that evening, I was slightly tipsy on the rocky shoreline.

“Freaky,” I said, remembering, “because one minute, glass is so smooth and enchanting. The next, it’s deadly. Know what I mean?”

His intent focus redirected to my face. “Unyielding, even though we see right through it.”

Patti Grayson

“But we can also see our reflection in it,” I said.

“At light’s behest,” he agreed.

“Yes, depending on the light.”

“Exactly!” His tone turned intimate. “And the wound? What was to blame? Labour or love?”

I snorted, wondering how he sensed there was a story to coax out of me. But I still wasn’t about to admit to the strangest of strangers that I’d been attempting to send a message with an elaborate pen-and-ink-sketched border to an as-yet-unmet future husband. It was bad enough cramming my vulnerability into a bottle for art’s sake; I wasn’t about to compound that by confessing to it. That week’s criteria had been a man with respectable career ambitions; I chose a Buckingham Palace guard, hence the gin. Back then, my plan had been to save tips, travel the world, seek out artistic wonders, and cross paths with the finders of my messages. That particular blood-splattered note never did get launched.

Taras interrupted my thoughts. “Did you faint? Cry? Swear? Scream to the heavens?” he persisted.

I was back in the bar. Pool balls clicked. Glasses clinked. “I caught the bus to the hospital,” I said. “I can tell you, Taras, the driver wasn’t keen on letting me on with my hand wrapped in a blood-soaked sweater. Took five stitches.”

He mumbled, “So this is her pronouncement.”

I thought he was referring to me mangling his name. “Tell me again how you say it.”

He ignored my request and gestured for me to display my palm.

I shook my head, offering him his change which I’d retained in my other hand. “You should leave,” I repeated.

“I must see it,” he said, and then muttered in a self-deprecating way, “I checked the wrong hand.” When I refused to cooperate, he drawled, “Eye-nuh, free will is a philosopher’s fabrication. You think you choose not to show me? There is no choice. There

The Twistical Nature of Spoons

cannot be. I did not choose to find you here tonight. Yet here we are. Inescapable fate, Ina.”

He shrugged, with a hint of apology, a layer of acceptance, as if we'd both been victims of some scam for which there was no recourse. His lopsided grin flickered in and out of regret and mirth.

I glanced around the room to avoid the expression on his face. The patrons who had craned their necks when Taras had sprung from his chair had already lost interest, turning back to their drinks, their companions, the muted TV with its sports stats scrolling across the bottom of the screen. The room, although familiar, also seemed unrecognizable. Like the feeling you get when you return from a holiday, and there's your chair and knitted throw just where you left them, but it's as if they've been having a life of their own without you, changed in some subtle way, so they don't feel like yours at first glance. That's the shift I felt while Taras waited for me to show him my hand, as if maybe time had passed in the room, and I hadn't been there to experience it.

I thrust his money at him. “Take your change and hit the road,” I insisted.

He awkwardly juggled his empty glass in an attempt to accept his bills and coins. A quarter fell between our hands. We watched it roll across the plank floor, neither of us moving to retrieve it.

“As you wish. But you can't alter the outcome any more than you can erase that scar—your extra lifeline.”

I turned to see Taras's face, but he was already staggering toward the door, bellowing, “Amethyst. From the Greek *amethystos*—not intoxicated! Never give up your gem before the night is done.” He laughed maniacally.

An extra lifeline? What was he talking about? But before I could check my scar, I realized that deposited in my right hand, in place of his change, was a small spoon. The kind you buy at a souvenir shop. Taras had somehow put it there, but I hadn't felt a thing. The silvery bowl was stamped *Thunder Bay*. There was a mangled

Patti Grayson

twist in the handle and embedded at the end, an amethyst stone the colour of grape Lik-M-Aid. Teetering on my heels, I zigzagged between the tables in pursuit of him. I wanted to tell him to shove his poor excuse for a tip up his poetic derrière.

His stagger turned nimble as he approached the exit. He flung the door open. The temperature outside had dropped, and fog had rolled in from the harbour. The Three Sheets neon sign blinked a blue sheen, first illuminating Taras in the enveloping fog, and then casting him in eerie dimness. Blink. Blink. In one fluid motion, he toasted the air—“*Dai Bozhe!*”—and smashed the glass on the sidewalk. The door swung shut behind him. When I shoved it open again, the sidewalk was littered with glass shards, glittering under blue neon. Blink. Blink. Taras was nowhere to be seen.