

# **ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE**

*By Gordon Schweers*

Sisterhood is powerful

“Uncle Sidney is here,” Aria said softly and not without a touch of presentiment.

She was standing at the window, dressed like a southern belle in bolts of satin. Kia and Lucia had tied a pillow around her waist to afford the graceful curvature of a bustle. Plumes of ostrich feathers dyed orange and green hung from the side of a hat that was several sizes too large for her head. Pearls and glass beads circled her neck and bangles of various metals cluttered both wrists. Her younger sisters stopped sorting through the piles of cloth and costume jewelry and joined her at the picture window without a word. It was a quiet afternoon, an oasis they called *family weekend* and certainly not the appropriate time for an intrusion of this nature. Uncle Sidney was shifting first one then both legs over the side of his dune buggy at the curb. His arrival - if it meant anything - signaled the suspension of their theatrics.

Like three felines with small faces, the girls stood expressionless at the window. A cold wind was stripping away the leaves from a maple tree standing in a neighbor’s front yard. Their mother noticed the pause from the kitchen and sat waiting for their melodrama to resume. The youngest of the girls, as a tomboy Lucia was attired in her father’s shirt and vest, with a black moustache painted across her face. For her role, she was meant to

act the part of the villain in a Hollywood script where the heroine (Aria) is tied to railway tracks, awaiting rescue. Instead of a Prince Valiant to the rescue (to be played by her middle sister, Kai) who would arrive but *dear old Uncle Insidious*. As the black sheep of their extended family, he had the habit of showing up at the worst possible of times, every time. Lately, it seemed as if there was no proper time left for their prankster of an uncle to show up at all. On the other hand, his timing was perhaps better than they could appreciate. Their father was tied up at the office once again for the weekend. Otherwise, he'd be sure to give Uncle Sidney a dressing down for dropping around without an explicit invitation. It was too late for the girls to pretend the family had gone out for the weekend, so that the door need not be answered when Uncle Sidney rang the buzzer. That was another annoyance. Lately, their intruder had left his manners in his dune buggy and just *walked in the door* without so much as a knock from the outside! Aria discarded her costume as quickly as possible before her uncle had the opportunity to direct his sarcasm at her cameo performance as an eleven year old *damsel in distress*.

The silence from the living room continued. This delay required an explanation. Barbara Hemmings sat waiting in the kitchen, unable to escape the paradox she was more a prisoner than a mother and a teacher. Piles of unmarked papers from her Grade 6 pupils were scattered across the kitchen table. She was several lessons behind in getting her assignments completed. Her students were unruly, resistant to any further instruction until they were graded and their assignments returned with comments written along the margins:

*“Susan is showing great promise A-” ...“Joshua is*

*conscientious but needs to improve his hand writing C+” ...“Justine shows good aptitude B+”...*

The comments were beginning

to sound trite and annoyed even herself. *How can ‘We the People’ (Barbara’s conscience demanded) consider ourselves ‘proud and free’ when all we want is an assigned ranking in our herd? Ditto her next comment:*

*”Myrna needs to show more concentration C+”*

Barbara’s workload was uncompromising. Her union had lost its case in court to limit class size with their employer, the weasels who sat in political office. Every year, the public education system was being put at greater risk by the reduction in funding from the provincial government. Those decisions put enormous pressure on educators such as Barbara and her colleagues, who were forced to mark student papers for hours in the evenings and even now, on the weekends. Fortunately her three girls were responsible young women and took care of themselves in a mature way. At all costs, she was determined to keep her girls away from the high tech gadgets that were (in her opinion) poisoning the lives of so many of her young pupils. It was a losing proposition. As far as she was concerned, this next generation was just a wee bit too tech savvy for their own good.

But Barbara wanted to know what had prompted her daughters to suddenly stop playing together. Aria had announced something to her sisters but from a distance it wasn’t audible. Before she could call for an explanation, Barbara was distracted by the scribbling of

one student, little Petén Gasbarro. His assignment was messy and to make the situation unbearable, he had drawn stupid little hearts all around the border of the multiple choice exam. Barbara was furious; convinced she was wasting her life trying to teach little brats like *Petén the pumpkin eater*. Calming down slightly, re-centering, she deserved to know just what her *three musketeers* were up to in the next room on a cold weekend in October. No question about it, giving birth to three healthy girls had disrupted her spinal alignment. The pain got worse each winter with the cold weather. For the sake of her marriage and family, she had to keep her health and emotional issues in perspective. Her reading list was full of self help books on *New Age* philosophies. From *The Power of Now* she had gleaned one important message: Stay in the Present. As a mother, she couldn't keep a disciplined eye on the girls every second of their precocious lives. Still, she wanted to know - *Was there a problem? Or would the three of them return to their game as if nothing had distracted them? Was Lucia as the youngest being picked upon by her older siblings?*

“What’s wrong, Aria?” Barbara called out when the silence continued past a few seconds.

“Uncle Sidney is here, Mommy,” Lucia responded.

Another visit by Uncle Sidney, her younger brother, was unwarranted. That same morning she had insisted Philip take their three girls to the zoo at Stanley Park (or on any outing they would find stimulating) but he deflected the request. He was backlogged and had to put in extra time at the office. They were at the stage of having arguments over his workaholic schedules. His absences were becoming the norm in their marriage. But he fired back

salvos that the situation was mutual, insisting she be *rational* and went so far as to say, “*Go look in a mirror, Barbie Doll.*” Barbara feared that those bitter arguments behind closed doors were being overheard by the girls in their bedrooms. But she knew she wasn’t looking well lately, with insomnia leaving dark circles under her eyes. She was too young to be entering menopause and all the tests from Doctor Cushing’s office came back negative. Still she was awake for what seemed like hours in the darkness, feeling in the morning more tired than when she had gone to bed. Rather than supporting her, Philip was complaining she was disrupting *his* sleep and talked of separating their bed so she could have the space to work out her own problem. The problem was: she didn’t know what her problem was. Dr. Cushing refused to give her a prescription to help with the insomnia, stating that she perhaps needed a lifestyle change – but he didn’t suggest what that change entailed. As far as she was concerned none of the significant men in her life were offering her any support. After a career spanning 14 years, Mr. Rawley had placed her on a month’s probation. Piles of papers on the kitchen table needed to be graded and returned on Monday morning. Having lost her sense of equanimity, she feared she was perhaps a week or a month away from coming apart at the seams. In a homeroom with 43 pupils, it was futile trying to instruct children who spent more time on *Facebook* than doing assignments. Now Sidney had arrived on her doorstep like some condescending court jester. This was the last straw.

Barbara took a deep breath and tried not to be irrational. There was a mortgage to pay, upkeep of two cars, personal and property taxes, and the expense of raising a family at a decent standard. Their eldest was a protégé. It would take a great deal of money to

put Aria through medical school, or some other expensive career, once the child set her sights on a profession. With all of those plans and dreams, they needed both salaries coming in at the end of the month, each month. *But when are we going to get time together as a family?* Her girls were growing up in a single-parent-home with her husband at the beck and call of those who worshipped mammon. If she just had another 4 or 5 hours to herself, she'd be caught up. Barbara thumbed through the largest pile. Twenty-nine papers were left to be marked:

*Betty Jay asks too many unnecessary questions in class..." Shut up and sit down, Betty Jay!*

Meanwhile her three musketeers rushed the front door. The opportunity to proclaim her right to privacy slipped through her fingers like ice cold water. Her girls were jubilant even before she had the energy to get up from the table. Her hands were trembling.

"Uncle Sidney! Uncle Sidney!" the girls were screaming with her brother's arrival. As usual, he didn't even have the courtesy to knock on the door.

Barbara flipped through a list of responses in the course on *Anger Management* she had taken for additional credits in the summer. The first rebuttal would exasperate the situation with her brother: she could be a bitch and say *Get out - and don't come back!* The second response was to resort to passive aggression, pretending she wasn't really at the boiling point. The third response was

deemed the most appropriate. She'd tell her brother (calmly) "*I love you Sid but I'm swamped with work. Please come back at a better time and call before you come over next time.*" Feeling emboldened, she'd add: *Better yet – just leave us alone and don't bother showing up, with or without an invitation.*

Her angst subsided after several seconds. Barbara rose from the table, determined to take control of this next crisis. She was a teacher, a professional. In the living room, Sidney had broached the castle moat and was being welcomed like a liberator. His Nordic features were partly covered by a mane of hair and he was shouting back comments to the three girls. Lucia had attached herself to his leg. Kai had leapt in to his arms and Aria, ever the dignified lady, stood on her tip toes at his side with a sanguine expression befitting the charm and poise of a debutant.

"What have you brought me? What have you brought me?" Lucia begged. Aria stood back, amused by such avarice. Even at 6 years of age, Lucia held the conviction a hefty reward was attached to her affection. Men were the stepping stones to candy, presents and, not the least, compliments. The moment Barbara interrupted their fracas, years of professional experience took control of her personality. As if carrying a whip and chair, she demanded respect from the young cubs she had for daughters.

"Stop using people to get things off of them, Lucia!" she said, taking a deep breath. "Kai, get down." She took a short pause, counting to five to control her high blood pressure: **One** – one

*hundred – Two – one hundred – Three – one hundred – Four – one hundred – Five – one hundred.*

“Daddy doesn’t listen. Why should we?” Aria responded - with a smile to her uncle. Before Barbara lost her temper, Uncle Sidney interceded.

“Hey, matter of fact, I did bring over something that will turn *a six in to a nine*” he informed his audience.

“You would do well to *cut your hair*,” Barbara enjoined, repeating a line back to him from the same song.

“Oh no, please, not more plastic junk!” Aria interjected, anticipating her uncle’s poor taste in practicality. His previous gifts to the family were consistently labeled *Made in China*.

“Wait ‘til you see this one, Delilah!” Sidney stepped outside the open door for a moment and returned with a box from the alcove of the front porch. He came back inside, holding it above his head.

“Tah Dah!” he announced.

“Ohhhhhh,” crooned the girls in one voice, “An *Abracadabra!*”

“You’re taking that back,” Barbara insisted.

“Too late,” Uncle Sidney said, “I lost the sales receipt”.

But the girls were all shouting at once; Lucia insisting it was *her* gift. She had her arms lifted upwards and was repeating, “Mine, mine, mine.” Kai was bouncing up and down on the spot in excitement. At school, the kids in her class were talking about this new electronic wizard called *Abracadabra*. A few were even bragging about owning this marvelous new invention. When Monday came, she’d take revenge on the whole pack. But Aria pretended to be disinterested and critical. She swung her opinion over to her mother’s quadrant on the compass.

“You’ve done it again *Uncle Insidious!* This *isn’t* Christmas. You can’t afford expensive gifts when you’re driving around in a contraption with no heater!” Her long fingers adept at finding the right ivories on any keyboard indicated the open buggy he had parked in their front yard. It looked like the red carapace of a crab, with chrome exhaust pipes sticking out its posterior like antennae. Sidney was unperturbed. If anything, he was premeditated with his kith and kin. At this juncture, criticism was counterproductive.

“Let the party begin!” he shouted as he pushed his way in to the living room. *Abracadabra* was placed like a centre piece on the coffee table. In a flash, three girls laid hands on the box. The cellophane wrapper came away from the package with the sound of rushing water. A stuffed toy looking like an authentic leopard

with spots emerged from its cardboard enclosure. The toy's data logger activated. With an upper class English accent, the leopard's eyes flashed and it said, "*Well - it's about time you let me out of my box. I am smart and I am at your service!*"

As a group, the girls and their mother were hysterical with laughter. Responding to their appreciation, the *leopard* turned its head from side to side in the tradition of a Charlie McCarthy and launched in to its Billie Holiday theme song, *I can't give you anything but love, baby*. Barbara was lost for words. The animated gift had taken her completely off guard. She hadn't laughed this hard since the summer months.

"Well ladies, it looks like I picked a winner for a change," Uncle Sidney announced above their laughter. But his assertion only survived seconds before getting entangled in the vacillation of family conflicts. The **Operator's Manual** fell to the floor where Kia pounced on it and began to flip through 110 pages of detailed instructions. In a second, Aria snatched it away, calling her little sister a *dummy*.

Her mother demanded she apologize to her younger sister but Aria insisted there was nothing wrong with titles like *Windows for Dummies*. Barbara turned her frustrations back against her brother.

"Look what you've started," she insisted. "You're taking it back, that's final."

Flipping through the instructions (written in the official languages of sixteen different countries) Aria said, “Look at this nonsense! Do they think we can’t figure out the simplest thing...or what?”

“Get Mum’s iPod! I want to be the first.” Kai ran in to the kitchen where the Apple iPod was sitting on the counter in its charging holster. She was back in a moment. After entering the access code, she commenced tapping letters on to the plastic face of the tablet. Lucia was grabbing at the tablet but Kai was careful to keep it to one side. Barbara was yelling to put back her iPod while Sidney was providing her with free advice: *Hey, Barb, this is awesome - don’t sweat the small stuff, okay?*

“I can’t wait to see this one!” said Aria to her mother. Lucia persisted, trying to get control of the iPod. She looked ridiculous with a black moustache painted above her lips like wavy lines of calligraphy. But with the masterful flourish of a matador about to deliver his final muleta, Kia tapped **SEND**.

Her text message flew instantly across the room and in to the digital decoding brain of the *leopard*. In the space of several milliseconds, Kia’s message was converted from written text to encrypted human speech. The *leopard* swiveled his head as if aroused by some great impulse. His eyelids opened and closed quickly and his lips began to move, delivering a message to a world populated by Lilliputians:

*“Date colon October 14. Time 1 colon 25 PM. I am Kia Rachel Hemmings. Grade Three “B” student at Barsby Elementary. I’m going to be a trapeze artist when I grow up. Sisterhood is powerful. Yours Truly - Kia Hemmings.”*

The feat, from both the *leopard* and Kia, was applauded by everyone in the room. Kia beamed with conceit and went so far as to curtsy like a prima donna. The least affected was Lucia who persisted by grabbing at the iPod and demanding her turn. Her sister stepped in, taking it away from Kia for her own purposes. “Okay, Miss Macbeth,” Aria said to Lucia, “let’s go to in to the kitchen and enter your message.” The two girls left the living room, holding hands. Kia followed out of curiosity. Alone for a few seconds, Sidney had the opportunity to talk to his sister.

“How are things going for you?” he asked. “Where’s Philip?”

“He had to work,” she said, exasperated. “Please, Sid, you’ve got to stop buying my girls expensive things. We can’t afford this stuff. You’re teaching them they need these things when they don’t and we can’t afford them anyways.”

Sidney shrugged off her criticism. He was well aware of his sister’s financial challenges. He didn’t bother repeating that his money only had a purpose when it was shared. The commission on his latest comic book series, *Captain Zappo*, was generous. As an illustrator, he lived off of his creative impulses, leaping from one island of inspiration to the next. He was childless, a bachelor

who was getting paid royalties on *action packed adventures* where his protagonists defeated the sybarites and saboteurs of the dark kingdom. Furthermore, when he had a theme in mind, Sidney made a point of dropping in on his nieces and running his themes past them for their opinions. Those young girls were ruthless. Especially his favorite, Aria. She had complained the loudest about the success of his latest series.

*“Oh gaud,”* she had wailed, *“you call that a punch line? It’s so childish, so venial: ghastly juvenile. Who but some boy wanting to be a big deal would believe this junk?”* Her criticism was surgical in nature.

*“Furthermore - Uncle – maybe your superhero can send flames shooting from the palms of both hands but he looks like a cross between Schwarzenegger and a baboon.”*

*“That’s just it,”* Sidney had said in amused self defense. *“It’s for a –ah- targeted audience.”*

*“It’s for boys who have guilt complexes about their masturbation,”* Aria countered. *“Uncle Sidney, stop kidding yourself, okay! They’ll laugh you out of the office if you show up with this garbage tucked under your arm!”*

*“I like parts of it,”* Kia had added to the conversation. When pressed for a reason, she was unable to supply an explanation. But in truth, she liked pictures of muscular men in tight clothes doing

damage to the evil ones. Her older sister smiled at her, knowing the reason but polite enough to respect her sister's foibles.

So, all things considered, in recognition of such scathing contempt, Sidney had purchased the *Abracadabra* as a gift from the payment of his first royalty on the comic book series. *Captain Zappo* was becoming a landslide success with over 2.6 million copies sold over the counters to pubescent boys who indeed pined to be all powerful and destructive like his protagonist. Sidney suppressed a smirk when thinking of Aria's comment about the flame throwing *El Capitan Zappo*.

The girls marched back in to the living room in single file, with Aria poised like a queen at the head of their column. *Ah*, thought Sidney, *the vestal virgins have returned*. The expression on their faces bespoke of a great and shared secret. They knelt down on the carpet like Nubians

and faced the *leopard*, awaiting his lordly intervention. Aria produced the iPod and said to Lucia:

“Okay, little sis, hit **SEND**.”

Lucia's eyes were sparkling. She moved her index finger around in the air as if following the flight of a butterfly. The insect apparently landed on the right key and she stroked its painted wings with an ever so delicate touch. The text message flew across the room with the speed of light.

“Your father’s clothes don’t fit you too well,” Sidney observed, indicating the leather waistcoat that dragged like a full length dress on the floor. The girls took no notice of the comment, captivated by the possibilities of their new encryption. *The leopard* came back to life. Cocking his head to one side, he announced in a firm monotone:

*Date colon October 14. Time 1 colon 38 PM. My name is Lucia. I want a new purse and running shoes. Mummy, I need an allowance so as to buy my own things. Kia and Aria’s clothes don’t fit me. I want my own clothes not hand-me-downs. My own new coat. I want a serving set for my doll house.*

*Sisterhood is powerful. (Aria for)... Lucia Maria Hemmings.*

Everyone in the room (even Sidney) clapped and laughed. Lucia’s comments were in character; even more so when spoken from the computerized lips of a *leopard*. It was Aria’s turn next. She paused for a moment looking back with a smile at her family in the living room. The kitchen table was awash with piles of marked and unmarked papers from her mother’s classes. Though she had skipped a grade, the School Board insisted Aria attend a completely different school, rather than have her mother as her home room teacher. But in amongst the piles of unmarked papers, she spied Petén Gasbarro’s submission with its tiny hearts drawn around the borders. She could well understand her mother’s insomnia and level of exasperation. She took the iPod in hand; aware of the impact the wrong message could send to the group waiting just one wall away in the next room. A few minutes later

she flashed the face of the iPod at her captivate audience and hit **SEND**. The leopard's dark irises blinked and the microphone embedded in his modular brain commenced speaking on the behalf of his new mistress.

*“Date colon October 14. Time 1 colon 45 PM. My name is Aria Michelle Hemmings. I am the luckiest girl in the world. My sisters are steadfast. Our Mom is wonderful and dedicated to our welfare. They say I am very smart but I owe everything I have to my mother. We love her with all of our heart. PS. Even uncle insidious is tolerable at times. Sisterhood is all powerful. Aria Hemmings.”*

The reaction in the living room was encouraging. Kia and Lucia applauded. Barbara wiped a tear from a tired eye. Sidney responded by jumping up from the sofa and demanding the iPod from Aria. He wanted to retaliate in kind with his own text message. But Aria refused to hand it over. She kept the tablet behind herself in one hand with her back against a wall. Their game had commenced. Aria turned and ran to her room, attempting to hide the iPod under her pillow but Uncle Sidney was directly behind her, wrestling to get control of the iPod even if it meant playing a little hardball in the process. As an eleven year old, Aria was getting the attention from her uncle that was non-existent from her father. With the iPod in his possession, Sidney ran out of her room and began punching in a message to the surface of the flat tablet. Aria was left sprawling on her bed, laughing and out of breath. She had to keep that hippie uncle of hers on a tight leash with her intuitive quips. Uncle Sidney's latest

partner was (as far as Aria could decipher) just like her. Once when they were leaving, Dianne had whispered, *Just you wait - I'll have him marry me yet!* And she even *winked* at Aria at the same time! Yes, Uncle Sidney was in for a big surprise. Dianne was just the woman to clip his wings. She'd have him cutting off his braids and selling that silly car of his for a family sedan.

Meanwhile Uncle Sidney had gone histrionic. He punched in his message while walking down the hallway. Rather than enter the kitchen, he skipped back in to the living room. Flashing the face of the iPod with great flourish, he waited for Aria to rejoin the group. With four women giving him their attention, Uncle Sidney tapped **SEND** by dropping the tip of his finger from a great height. He accompanied his missive with the whistling sound of a falling missile. His texting began, spoken to his captive audience through the intermediary of the *leopard*.

*Date colon October 14. Time 1 colon 53 pm. My name is Sidney James Twill. I am an illustrator who is doing very well due to the insights of 3 nieces who don't know what the hell they are talking about most of the time. Barbara, you are wonderful. Lucia, one day you'll win the lottery. Kia will fly through the air with the greatest of ease. As for Aria, she reminds us of the Statue of Liberty and even looks like her when she wears a tiara during Halloween. I love you all in spite of so many flaws. Love Uncle Sidney James.*

When the *leopard* finished, the room was silent. The girls were unsure if they had been complimented or insulted, perhaps both.

Lucia broke the stalemate by demanding another turn. She wanted another try, another opportunity to accumulate more surrogates on her wish list of life. They had expected their second child to be a boy but when Kia arrived, Philip and Barbara tried again but the dice decided not to come up with doubles. Barbara was breast feeding Lucia in the maternity ward when Philip came and told her how disappointed he was she hadn't produced the son he deserved. As if by osmosis, Lucia was destined to always feel inadequate. The power struggle between the three girls continued in the living room over control of the iPod.

Uncle Sidney said to his sister, "It looks as if you have a full plate, with all of those papers on the kitchen table. I won't stay for dinner."

"That's right – you won't be staying for dinner," Barbara confirmed.

Sidney hadn't taken off his winter jacket. It was too hot in the house, he complained, and used the excuse to politely end his visit. The girls continued with the *Abracadabra*. They were distracted and took little notice of his departure. Barbara stood at the window, watching her brother start his engine with a cord around a fly wheel pulley. Everything he did was *unconventional* and yet allowed him to emerge unscathed from most situations. Barbara wondered about the DNA of people like that, the few who were enigmatic and gifted while so many of her students were generic. Aria had perhaps inherited the same genetic disorder,

passed down through generations from an eccentric relative in the Hebrides. Barbara imagined such a torch being handed off to the spirits of her children, like a choice before birth. The two youngest would have dropped the baton in an instant. Even Lucia, for all of her gluttony, was timid by nature. Kia shunned responsibility but embraced danger. Aria was the one who showed no hesitation, born with diamond hard determination and stamina. Given the choice, she would have leapt forward and seized the torch as if it would lead her out of the darkness of her mother's womb in to a brave new world. Barbara stood at the window, watching her brother careen his dune buggy down the street. She shook her head, wondering if he'd ever grow up. Behind her, the girls were squabbling over her iPod.

“Give your sister a turn,” she arbitrated, before returning to her duties as a teacher. Building a pyramid in Egypt couldn't be any more demanding than what she was expected to have completed by Monday morning.

*Petén is slowly improving. He is reminded not to make comments and/or drawings on the outside margins. Written comments are difficult when the space has been taken away by his doodling C-.*

With that one issue over, she had 27 more plausible comments to invent. Sidney's visit could have been much worse but at least the

girls were fully preoccupied. The *leopard* was spouting off one text message after another, the inventiveness of her children never wavering for a moment. Bursts of laughter would erupt with each pronouncement. Barbara settled down to the drudgery of her paperwork, hoping she might have a few hours on Sunday to spend with her girls. Philip came home later than usual and said little, except to complain he had had an exhausting day at the office.

On Sunday, Philip took his daughters for a car ride along the upper levels. The respite allowed Barbara to finish her papers and get the table set and supper prepared for her family. While she was cleaning up the kitchen, and filing away her lesson plans for the next week, she noticed that the *leopard* had gravitated from his throne on the coffee table to a shelf in the kitchen. She paused for a moment, wondering how the stuffed toy had found a new place in the house without her permission.

“Who brought you in here?” she asked. But with no response, she hurried to complete her other tasks before the girls and her husband returned from their car trip. They were back earlier than anticipated and the girls went off to their rooms to finish their homework. Daylight Savings Time was no longer in effect. Little was said at the supper table. Philip seemed preoccupied with his work load. He shared so little, it was impossible for Barbara to anticipate his decisions when they did arrive. Then the weekend was over for the family and the tight schedules of the week ahead took over their lives. The alarm rang at 06:30 am. They took turns using the bathroom with a 7 minute limit imposed on any one person using the facilities while the other family members waited

in the hallway. One by one, the girls ate a cold breakfast of Rice Crispies with a little leftover fruit from the fridge. Philip never ate breakfast, preferring to pull in to a fast food window dispensary to get his morning espresso and a bun.

As if by some miracle, the girls were dressed and in her car by 07:15. Barbara was the one who was consistently late, getting to the car only to find she had left the car keys on the ring in the house. Or forgetting to carry along her marked papers; and having to waste time going back in the house to get the forgotten items. Lately, Aria noted, her mother's lapses of memory were getting to be habitual. She needed a little shock therapy to get back to a better frame of mind. Once on the road, the most frustrating times were those spent sitting at traffic lights, waiting for them to turn from red to green. The girls sat in the car, singing the lyrics from popular songs they had heard from any number of media outlets. Barbara was barely listening, thinking through her lesson plan for the rest of the week. First, she dropped off Aria at Uxbridge; then drove Lucia and Kia over to Barsby Elementary. She taught english at Barsby (in the mornings) and history at Kingston Elementary (in the afternoons). It meant driving an extra few miles to the different schools but still she had a job and that was all that mattered. Her morning schedule was identical on Tuesdays and Wednesdays and Thursdays; and again on Fridays for that matter until all of the days seemed carbon copies of each previous day. After school on Tuesdays and Thursdays, Aria walked two blocks from Uxbridge to where she was being given advanced piano lessons from Mrs. Gladstone. Barbara picked her up at 5:50 pm on those days. On Mondays, Lucia was in Brownies until 6 pm; and on Wednesdays, Kia was in Girl Guides. Every first and

second Friday, Kia put in extra long days doing gymnastics at the YWCA. On the last Friday of the month, Aria stayed late at Uxbridge to help in the science lab. Barbara's responsibility involved picking up the right child at the right time and right place. At times it felt as if she was involved in a guessing game where a pea (a daughter) was placed under a shell, and the shells moved around in circles, leaving her to guess under which shell she would find the appropriate child. More than once she had gotten confused and sat fuming outside Mrs. Gladstone's for an hour on a Wednesday, waiting for Aria to show up when in fact Kia was waiting for her ride at the entrance to the Barsby auditorium. To keep track, Barbara wore a watch on her wrist that told her what day of the week it was, and with a press of a second button it displayed the list of commitments she had to attend to in conjunction with that specific day.

Her week had been hectic but had moved along smoothly. No sooner had she distributed the marked exams to her students than more had piled up in her basket. Friday she returned home early and began sorting through papers on the kitchen table. She really needed a private study in the house but their cramped bungalow had only three bedrooms for five people. Aria needed her own room; Lucia and Kia bickered constantly about having to share the same room.

Barbara was rushing to meet her next appointment. Dinner was to be a combination of a seafood quiche and servings from the slow cooker on the kitchen counter. She had twenty minutes free before getting back in the car and heading to Uxbridge to pick up Aria;

thence to Barsby for the two others. The *leopard* propped up on another counter swiveled his head and looked directly at her. Barbara stopped for a moment, perplexed by what she thought she had seen. That stupid toy was alive and keeping watch on her. No, she told herself it was just her imagination. She was tired after a long week of teaching. She moved over to the farthest counter. The eyes of the *leopard* followed her movements. Okay, this was getting ridiculous. She moved to the outer edge of the kitchen, nearest the doorway to the living room, just to test her assumption. The toy was immobile. She didn't have the time to fool around with this nonsense. Aria would be waiting at the curb with one of her school friends. She couldn't be late. Then the leopard began acting as if he was about to make an announcement. His eyes flashed and his small torso expanded under tension.

Barbara was annoyed. She surmised the battery was low and the toy malfunctioning, reverting to patterns that the girls had entered from her iPod. The thing must have an off switch somewhere behind its head. Before she could approach the toy, the *leopard* starting spewing out nonsense:

*Date colon October 13. Time 09 colon 25 pm. Hey Sugar Plum, what are you up to, tonight? I'm sure missing being in your arms but you'll take care of that tomorrow as we planned. After dinner, I've booked a room in the Sherman, the best suite they had left. They have a pool downstairs so do remember to bring along your blue swimsuit. Here's the schedule: Dinner at 5 pm. Check in at the hotel: swim for an hour and then we can have the rest of the*

*night together. Looking forward to holding you in my arms. Love Philip.*

Barbara was incredulous. She shook her head in disbelief. The *leopard* swiveled his head to one side to get a better look at her and with a flash of his eyes, continued:

*Date colon October 14. Time 08 colon 45 am. Me again, baby. Thanks for the response, just read it. It's mutual. I call you my "mutual reward" lover. You're great – and great in bed. The moment I'm done with my work at the office, I'll be over to The Lounge. If I'm late, order a highball for both of us and put it on the tab. One of these days, we can break this little secret open and stop spending just small amounts of time together. Barbie Doll hasn't got a clue, as usual. My 3 girls worship my every step. Love Philip.*

“*Worship your every step?*” Barbara shouted back. “They never see you!”

The *leopard* was far from over. His data logger was full of text messages, spanning a full week from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup>. He launched in to the next series of messages from Philip to his concubine. Barbara lost control of her temper with the next message. Seizing an empty glass from the counter, she hurled it at the stuffed toy. But the *leopard* ducked such that the glass shattered above his head. Shards and splinters of glass dispersed across the kitchen floor. The text messages continued:

*Date colon October 16. Time 10 colon 40 am: Hey Sherry. How about we meet for lunch at our favorite bar? I can spare two hours and if we care to, we can slip off for a bite of the forbidden fruit. What do you say? Love Philip.*

“You bastard!” Barbara screamed back. She tried to regain control of her sanity. *Okay, centre, centre. Stay in the Now.*

She fell in to a chair, forcing herself to listen to the rest of her husband’s secret transcripts. There was another six minutes of text messages. It was finally clear why she was always tired, feeling as if she had no support from the father of her three daughters. She didn’t, in fact, have a husband. What she had was a scumbag who was cheating on her and his family. Pretending to be a good father, a workaholic when in fact he was spending his money and time in an illicit affair. Barbara was overcome with resentment, anger, denial and finally tears. *Go look in a mirror, Barbie Doll.*

The kitchen was quiet again after several minutes. Barbara sat staring at the animated toy her brother had brought in to the household, against her explicit instructions. Something was amiss with this nightmare. As if following a thread out of the labyrinth in Crete, she reminded herself she had to drive through several stop lights before picking up her girls at school. But before she left, she took the *leopard* by its throat. Her foot flipped open the lid of the trash can in the kitchen and the toy was sent head first to his final resting place. From the bottom of the trash bin, the

*leopard* belted out his last farewell - *I can't give you anything but love, baby.*

Aria would have to wait, she told herself as she pulled in to the parking lot at Barsby. Several of the teachers leaving the front office waved at her and she returned their salutations as if nothing had changed. First Lucia came out of the main entrance, carrying her lunch kit and valise; and she was followed a few minutes later by her sister. Kia tried to get in the front seat but Barbara kept the lock on the door and motioned to her to take a seat in the back with her sister.

“Where’s Aria?” she asked when she slipped in to the seat next to her little sister.

Barbara was too angry to answer. The atmosphere was uncomfortable for the two girls sitting in the back seat. Something was completely wrong. Lucia asked, “Mommy, where’s Aria?” but got no response either. The air inside the car was stifling. Kia asked for the window on her side of the car to be opened. Barbara ignored the request. Kia asked again and was supported by Lucia who likewise was feeling stifled by the heat in the car. Finally Barbara disarmed the *Childsafe* switch on the dash and the windows in the back seat rolled down by a small amount.

“Is there something wrong, Mum,” Kia asked in a perplexed tone.

No response. The two girls sat looking at each other. Their mother's silence warned them of the approach of a serious change in their lives. Perhaps their parents had lost one or both of their jobs. Perhaps they had lost their money. Perhaps their father had been hurt and they were on the way to the hospital to see him. But Aria was waiting on the curb when the car arrived at Uxbridge. She looked at the sullen expression of her two sisters in the back seat and hesitated to enter the car. Her mother insisted she get in with a flick of her head. Aria slipped in to the passenger's seat next to her mother and buckled herself in tight with the shoulder harness. The sign on the dashboard assured her that the car was equipped with air bags in the event of a collision.

"Nice day," Aria said timidly.

The car sped down a residential street past rows of bare trees, seeking access to the main highway.

"Mum, you should slow down," cautioned Aria. She looked back at her sisters who were just as apprehensive in the back of the car. At the end of the avenue, Barbara wheeled out in to the oncoming traffic, disregarding the laws of the highway. At least they were on the way home. Aria waited for the silent fury in her mother to either subside or find expression in a serious traffic accident. At the last traffic light on their route, the car went through a yellow light at high speed and continued towards Highway 99.

“You missed our turnoff,” Kia complained. Aria looked back at her sisters and then with a profoundly serious expression concentrated on the outline of her mother’s face. If the dial on the speedometer was the face of a clock, the needle was edging up towards the 11 and 12. By the time they were at the entrance to the freeway, it felt as if the tires were flying across the paved road surface.

“Mum, slow down,” Aria insisted.

The car flew up the ramp and switched over to the HOV lane on the extreme left. The needle on the speedometer was pointing between 1 and 2 on a clock face. They were shooting past large trucks with tandem wheels. Lucia confessed, “I’m getting scared.” Their *Rock of Gibraltar* was taking them along on her meltdown. Kia wondered for all of her sisters, *Where are we going and why?*

The two girls in the back seat appealed to Aria. She had to shine a light in to the darkness before they were in a serious accident that would leave them scarred for life. The traffic opened up momentarily on their right side. A sprawling complex of buildings stood near the freeway.

“There’s the hotel where Mum and Dad had their wedding reception,” Aria said to her sisters.

Beyond the embankment, a large scale hotel with a casino and lounge came in to view. Barbara bit her lip and her foot slipped off of the gas pedal. The memory of her wedding fifteen years earlier passed like the film of a fairy tale. She had been beautiful, in a flowing lace gown. Philip was her Prince Charming, pledging his everlasting fidelity with a slice of wedding cake. That first dance as husband and wife had been intoxicating.

“You have some explaining to do, young lady,” Barbara said to Aria, looking over at her while the car hurtled down the 99.

“Someone had to tell you,” Aria said in her own defense.

“That was cruel,” she said, fighting back her tears of disappointment. “Stupid and cruel. I expected more from you.” Barbara took back control of the car’s momentum.

“Well, yeah, but...”

“But nothing. Was your Uncle Sidney in on this little conspiracy?”

“Yes and no,” Aria said. “I mean I can’t be certain. You know how Uncle Insidious can be, somewhat ambivalent at times?”

The car began shifting from one lane to the next as Barbara searched for an off ramp. *Bravo to Aria!*

At least their mother wasn't going to kill them all in some traffic accident.

“How did Sidney find out?” she demanded, glaring at her daughter.

“I told him,” Aria volunteered.

“You told my brother my husband was cheating on me? Who gave you the right to do that?”

Aria had nothing to offer as a defense.

“So then Sidney shows up with that ridiculous predator of a toy! You should both be ashamed of yourselves!”

“Oh no,” confided Aria. “Uncle never suggested using the *leopard* as our messenger boy. I figured out on my own it was the best way to intercept dad's texting to Petén's mother.”

“Petén's mother?” Barbara asked, unable to fathom the inference.

“Petén who?”

“You know, *Petén the Pirate*. Little Petén Gasbarro, the one who has been using his exams as a palimpsest.”

Barbara moved over another lane when a space opened. They were slowly disengaging themselves from the madness of a modern freeway. At first she couldn't believe her daughter was even remotely suggesting that her husband was having an affair with the plump and dull woman who was the mother of Petén Gasbarro, her C- student in Barsby Elementary. Behind her, in the rear view mirror, a trucker pulled his 10 wheeler tight up against their bumper. Barbara moved over another lane when it came open. A sign was posted for an off ramp at 1000 meters. Her children stopped hyperventilating. The insane adult world had slowed down once again. The danger was over for three young women. But Barbara's hard drive was damaged. Posted signs were demanding she follow their directions. At the same instant she wrestled with the distasteful memory of Sherry Gasbarro's eyes during last month's *Parent-Teacher Open House*. As the teacher of Petén, Barbara tried to discuss the boy's delinquent performance in the classroom. Petén was disrupting the classroom with his smart ass remarks and asides, the class clown. Sherry Gasbarro listened to her evaluation with an expression of the utmost contempt. Barbara's assumption had been wholly incorrect about the mother's poor attitude towards her son's education. *Sherry Gasbarro is having sex with my husband!* No, this couldn't be true. Surely, Philip had better taste in women than that douche bag. This was beginning to sound more absurd than some of the science fiction stories she had to read to her students at Barsby. Just to be sure, she repeated:

“Your father is having an affair with...*Sherry Gasbarro*? You can't be serious!”

Their vehicle stopped at a four way intersection. They were back in the tepid eddy of suburbia.

“You heard for yourself,” Aria confirmed with a smirk. Both women laughed simultaneously. Tons of weight tumbled off of Barbara Hemmings’ shoulders. The situation was hardly worth getting upset over when her competition was so shabby.

“How *did* you find out?” Barbara pressed the issue.

“Petén told me,” Aria said. Her mother looked across at her, searching for more details, while at the same moment turning in the general direction of Lougheed Highway. Signs along the way warned of zones near hospitals and schools which required slower speeds. Aria volunteered:

“I was on my way to Mrs. Gladstone’s. That little creep and his friends were practicing lacrosse in one of the outdoor arenas. He saw me passing and came up to the fencing and said, “Hey, we are almost brother and sister’. I just pretended to ignore him but I had the worst piano lesson of my whole year with Mrs. Gladstone. By the time it was over, it was plain as day what he had told me.”

“Perhaps, but you’d need more than just a hunch,” she cautioned her daughter. “Lawyers can’t make assumptions.”

“I don’t want to be a lawyer. I did a little snooping on Dad; and when I was certain, I went to talk it over with Uncle Sidney.”

Barbara told her daughter she was disappointed she hadn’t trusted her mother enough to come to her rather than another adult, even her brother for that matter. Aria shrugged.

“I did what I thought was right. It is what it is.”

Their continued passage involved stopping at the countless checks and balances of stop lights. The suburbs of the city were laid out like a vast wheel with spokes intersecting at right angles and radiating off in every disconnected direction. The GPS camcorder on her dash informed Barbara in a pleasant tone she had two miles to drive before taking a right turn. They’d be home in another 38 minutes and 12 seconds. From the back seat of the car, Lucia said:

“I’m hungry.”

“Me too,” said Kia.

Under normal circumstances, Barbara would never have encouraged her daughters to take meals at drive-in restaurants. Food of quality was to be carefully picked through and prepared in their kitchen. It was time to make an exception. There was glass

all over the kitchen floor. She turned off in to the parking lot of a fast food outlet. Food was ordered by shouting in to microphones on pedestals. Four meals wrapped in tin foil were brought out on long trays that were inserted across one car window to the next. For an appetizer, the girls had ordered supersized ice cream shakes filled with chemicals and artificial flavors. They were tantalized by the taste of unrelated kosher additives like strawberries and cherries. Their grilled cheese hamburgers were doused in spices that disguised the taste of slaughterhouse cattle. The girls splattered themselves and the seats with the plastic packets of ketchup and relish that came

along with their meals. Barbara smiled at Aria, watching a circus unfold in the back seat. She was thankful for every moment she could spend with her girls. The prenatal lives of each of those young women had been nourished by the miracle of her body. As for her husband, it was obvious Philip still wasn't satisfied and had to wander off looking for more misadventures. But with *Sherry Gasbarro*? The thought made her choke with levity.

“How’s your hamburger?” Aria asked, relieved her mother was accepting the situation with more aplomb than she thought possible from an older woman.

“Fine. And yours?”

“Garbage in: Garbage out,” Aria replied.

Barbara however wasn't finished with her snooping little nuisance of a daughter just yet. She referred back to the *leopard* as the instigator and messenger of her nightmare:

“How did that toy spy manage to get hold of your father's texts to Sherry Gasbarro, anyway?”

Aria was more than happy to boast about her success as another Sherlock Holmes.

“It didn't take a rocket scientist to punch in Dad's iPod code. I saw him sending text messages in the house and often wondered who he was sending them to. So, we caught him, didn't we?” she said with a flourish of her hands.

“You have mustard on your face.” Barbara passed her daughter a napkin. “But the *leopard* recognized me in the kitchen. How *did* you accomplish that?”

“Oh,” Aria confessed, “that was easy. On page 92 of the instruction manual, it says you can take a picture of a person on their iPod, and from that point onwards, the *leopard* will recognize his target.”

“You said you didn't need the instruction manual,” her mother reminded her.

“Sure,” Aria said with enthusiasm, “but every once in awhile, it pays to do a little research.”

Barbara checked with the girls in the back seat and then called to the pedestal microphone for a carhop to come and get their trays back again. On the way home, Aria wondered aloud what was going to happen. Whatever course of action Barbara took against her husband would have profound implications for the girls and their lives. Barbara looked over at her and said with a bland expression:

“We’ll think of something. Won’t we girls?”

Everyone in the car nodded in agreement. Sisterhood is powerful.

So Philip Hemmings’ days were numbered as a womanizer now that he had four strong willed women against him in the same household. They’d have him scrubbing the floor with a tooth brush if he wanted to stay and enjoy their irrepressible equanimity.

END