

Chapter 15

HSAO KUO

Report to Joshua Byron, CSIS
Cassandra Island

Coming here with Kirin Neemes turned out to be a good idea. She models and has looks to spare, and because we landed here *en couple*, as it were, speculation has been rampant. Everyone's chummed up to me--the men to check if she's off-limits, the women to find out if I'm available. With little effort I've had one-on-one's with nearly everybody here.

So far, I've seen no indication of anything even vaguely cultish. The staff could be employees at any summer lodge, and from the guests I get only varying degrees of harmless self-deception coupled with an eagerness to have the self-deceit confirmed by people of like mind. No one strikes me as an outright fraud. They all believe in what they do, or rather, believe they **can** do what they claim.

I've scouted the grounds, for what I'm not exactly sure. Scary stickmen à la Blair Witch Project? Nothing like that anywhere. The lodge itself seems not to have off-limits rooms. I've stopped short of tapping walls for hidden corridors.

I've taken part in workshops. Two of them. The first was with the woman named Irene. The subject was past lives. Whether she unearths them is, I guess, a question of belief, but one thing's certain--she's a skillful hypnotist. I volunteered to be a subject and very nearly got seduced into a full hypnotic state. She's so damn likable you just want to go along with her. The fictions I invented--no hard facts, just fragments drawn from history and reading--caused a stir.

The second workshop, held in Paxton at the Rainbow Grill, was on Tarot. A guest named Reggie demonstrated ways to tailor readings based on clues picked up from clients. Tarot 101, but Reggie used a few of us as guinea pigs, and three beers on it started to get fun.

I also heard a lecture on *I Ching* (the Chinese *Book of Changes*) by Mr. Shen. The man intrigues me. This morning when I went outside to exercise, he joined me by the lake. We did a Sun Salute together. Later I watched him lead Tai Chi. Last night I heard him play a Chinese fiddle. I'm no expert but it sounded great. Today he got into a discussion about hypnosis with Irene. In short, the man's a polymath. He makes no claims to being psychic. I gathered, from his talk, that his interest in *I Ching* is philosophical, not oracular.

I've scheduled a workshop of my own. The subject will be similar to Reggie's, viz cold reading. Since you want me to stick out, with my laptop's aid and some snooping of the sort you disapprove of (though, as Ms. MacKenzie took delight in demonstrating, you yourselves engage in), I intend to do a little showing off.

I stopped and contemplated wiping out the dig at Subira MacKenzie. *Appease the gods of state*. No—I'd leave it in. I could always edit later. I was doing as they'd asked; no one said I had to

brown nose. And, as far as I could see, my unfunded visit to Cassandra Island was going to be a monumental waste of time.



“Did you see him?” Kirin gushed at breakfast the next morning. Her skin was glowing from an early swim.

“Who?”

“The new guest. He came in last night.”

“How could I? I only just got up.”

“Are you always this grinchy when you get out of bed?”

“Only while I wait for the caffeine to make it from my stomach to my brain.”

“He’s dreamy.”

“I thought past the age of sixteen, girls no longer used that word.”

“Shows how little you know. We don’t stop using it, we just get more selective about who we apply it to.”

“To whom.”

“What?”

“‘To whom’ we apply it.”

“You *are* testy.”

“It’ll pass. Tell me about him.”

“He joined us at the fire. His name’s Roy. I guess he’s been here before. He greeted Mr. Shen like an old friend and said hi to a couple of the others.”

“Let me guess. He’s between five-ten and six feet, has dark hair, blue eyes, stubble, calloused hands and buns to die for.”

“You did see him.”

“No, just put together a working class picture of the kind of guy you go for.”

“You could get annoying, you know that? I suppose you won’t believe me if I say he’s blond and willowy?”

“No, I won’t.”

“Well, you’re wrong about his eyes at least. They’re hazel.”

“Win some, lose some.”

“What makes you think he’s working class?”

“Roy’s a hick name.”

She started to protest, but scanning through her mental list of Roys she clearly wasn’t finding many Ph.D.’s or lawyers.

“Okay, if you’re so smart, tell me this: Is he single?”

“Now who’s being testy?”

She made to swat me across the table.

“Whoa! That’s liquid gold you almost made me spill.”

“Addict.”

“Look who’s talking, Miss Matinée Milds.”

“Are you going to tell me?”

“If he’s single? Let me ask you something. Was Irene there at the fire last night?”

“Yes.”

“Then he is.”

“How do you figure?”

“Because if she was there, you already cornered her, and if she’d answered no, you wouldn’t be doing your Thumper imitation over breakfast.”

“Jeez. You’re fast.”

“How I make my living.”

“You? A living? That’s a laugh.”

“Figure of speech. I’m going back for seconds. You coming?”

Kirin twirled a spoon over a bowl of yoghurt. “This is fine.”

Breakfasts, I’d already noticed, were quieter than dinners. But if noise was lacking, homey smells were not: eggs, bacon, toast, pancakes, porridge, coffee. I’d already had a plate of waffles but my tummy was still rumbling.

I helped myself to scrambled eggs and beans, and had Axel cut some ham. He took more time than necessary laying two thick slices on my plate.

Returning to the table, I dug in while Kirin dipped her spoon in yoghurt and did soft-core porn things to lick it clean.

“There’s something you’re not asking me,” I said between

mouthfuls of delicious pig.

“Most people say, ‘There’s something you’re not *telling* me.’”

“In your case it’s ‘not asking.’”

“Oh? And that would be?”

A few days at Cassandra Island had already done her good. An unexpected coy and playful side of her was coming out.

“Do I stand a chance with him?”

She laid her spoon down. “Well? Do I?”

“Damned if I know. Futures aren’t my strong point. Maybe you should talk to Reggie. Ask him what the cards say.”

She winced. “I’d look like such an idiot if word got around.”

“True that. But if you’re really wondering, maybe I can help. Last night, did this guy sit near you, or you near him?”

“How do you know we sat together?”

“It’s hard to tell the colour of a person’s eyes by firelight unless they’re practically in your lap.”

“Not yours.”

“Don’t get sidetracked. Which was it?”

She made a show of thinking. “He sat next to me.”

“Then why are you wondering?”



Kirin’s dreamy guy turned up at the tail end of my workshop that afternoon.

The weather being early northern summer glorious, all glittering greens and platinum light, I held it out of doors. The group that gathered crammed the benches circling the firepit. Word of my past lives “recovered” by Irene the day before had gotten around. Even Don put in an appearance. I guess oil diviners want the edge cold reading gives as much as anyone.

At my request, Kirin wasn’t there—I’d claimed shyness—but when Roy, whom I recognized immediately, made his way toward the firepit, I suspected he’d come looking for her. He stood a ways back from the group, arms folded, while I finished up.

“In short, study Gail Sheeney’s *Passages*. Memorize it. Knowing where they are on life’s journey is the best place to begin when sizing up new clients. Establish age first. Check the hair, the throat, the neck, the hands. Unlike faces, these don’t lie.

“Age is like a frame around the picture—the story—you develop from things like dress, body language, mannerisms, speech. Once you’ve got it pegged, move from the general to the specific. Let each step provide you with a context for the next part of the story.

“Lastly, be completely honest with yourself. If you accept yourself for who you are, both your foibles and your strengths, the easier it becomes to make the leap from your own experience to your client’s particular variations on the common human themes.”

Most of it was nonsense. I’d gotten the idea for Gail Sheeney’s book from an article on the Web. From there I’d fleshed out directions for doing what, if you couldn’t do it already, you’d never learn. Since most of the people at the workshop knew each other, I demonstrated the principles myself on marks I’d picked the night before at my computer. A few red faces and lots of laughs in, I’d convinced everyone that, tips and tricks aside, I had a rare and special gift for seeing into people’s hearts and minds.

When it was over, Irene beamed as if I were her protégé, gushing *Marvellous!* so often it wore a groove in my ears. Don clapped me on the shoulder and pronounced *Impressive*. Jocelyn, a Kirilian photographer and friend of Margie’s, enthused about the emanations of twin she claimed was trying to break free of my body. Ruggerio, from South America but living in Québec—some sort of healer—felt I must be “blessed.” Reggie, more mundanely, invited me to Paxton for a beer. I declined.

Roy hung back till everyone dispersed.

“Sorry I missed that,” he said. “Sounds like you were hot.” He offered me his hand. “Roy Calhoun.”

“David Ase.”

His grip was several pounds-per-square-inch overfirm.

“Is this your first visit?” he asked. His eyes—bronze, not hazel—said he really didn’t care.

I flexed my fingers. "Yes."

"I didn't see you at the fire last night. An early sleeper?"

"Catching up on quiet time. And getting ready for today."

"Your name came up a few times."

A challenge... a teaser to see how I'll respond...

He occupied space the way a resting cannon occupies a battle-ment: poised and solid, with mass and density far greater than its volume indicates. I had the feeling if I picked him up he'd easily weigh twice he appeared. We locked eyes. Alpha arrogance informed his clear, wide-open gaze. I broke off first, not caring for the staring match.

"What's your specialty?" he asked.

"Psychic counsellor."

"Really?"

A statement, not a question, conveying total lack of interest. Dismissal, even, as if he'd met psychic counsellors before and didn't much care for them. I had half a mind to get him to define the term since I myself was never sure exactly what it meant.

"You?" I asked.

"Mechanic. Outboards, float planes."

"A rare gift."

He stayed silent long enough for the irony to sour.

"It's not the sort of answer I expect up here," I apologized.

"I have gifts. I just don't use them."

"Kind of an odd place for you to take a holiday, then, isn't it?"

"Some people understand."

"Like Mr. Shen?"

His eyes widened fractionally.

"My friend, Kirin, said you seemed to know him," I explained.

"John and I go back a ways. Kirin—the girl with the long hair and nice tits?"

"I can think of more appropriate ways to describe her."

Either he didn't catch the chill in my voice or was impervious to it.

"She's with you?"

“We came up together.”

“Known her long?”

“Not very.”

Roy looked past me to the lake.

Self-contained... too much assurance... no grey fuzziness of doubt... the inside and the outside match... a perfect fit... too perfect... The man could lie to me and I, for once, wouldn't have a clue.

“Where are you from?” he asked. As before, I got the feeling he already knew.

“Toronto. You?”

“Brantford. I work from a marina on the Grand River.”

“Near Caledonia?”

“Just outside Six Nations Territory.”

“I may have seen it, then.”

“You travel down that way?”

“Sometimes.”

“Family?”

“Nostalgia.”

No curiosity. He continued looking at the lake. His thought, if it extended past his ego, was unconcerned with me.

“You're interested in Kirin,” I said.

His eyes travelled slowly back to mine. “Is that a problem?”

I knew Kirin's story. Roy Calhoun would make another chapter she could do without. But I could hardly say that.

“No.”

He nodded. Seconds passed. Finally, he offered me his hand again.

“Nice meeting you, David. Hope to see you around. Enjoy your stay.”

He walked off, the scent of male trouble wafting after him.



The remainder of the afternoon and evening went as they had the

day before, the only difference being that, after typing up another non-report for Josh Byron, I joined the campfire.

Kirin was there. Roy was there. The unfulfilled erotic tension was so evident I wished they'd leave and get it over with. Which, in time, they did, to everyone's ribald relief.

I felt adrift once they were gone. The fire licking cedar logs, the sparks careening upward into blackness, the flickering orange glow on faces laughing-talking-singing didn't move me as they should. I'd enjoyed playing *The Amazing David Ase*, but now the act prevented me from truly joining in. I couldn't be both star and audience concurrently. With Kirin gone—in more ways than one—loneliness began to settle in.

A splendid moon—gibbous, for the literary—had risen over Dawe's Lake. A swath of lunar tinsel glittered from the shore. Out on the dock, an ember flared. Someone by themselves, smoking. I left the fire and went down. One person I could handle; it was the group that made me feel alone.

The figure on the dock was giant-tall and dressed in white. Axel. As I got close, I caught a whiff of something far more pungent than tobacco.

The dock was planked with squeaky two-by-fours, but Axel, staring at the black dome of Cassandra Island, maybe seeing in his mind the far side of a fjord, didn't turn till I got level with him—if head by shoulder counts as level.

He proffered me his joint, a big cone that looked tiny in his fingers. I took a lungful of the resinous smoke and handed it back.

He gestured across the water. "Is beautiful." His accent was pure Euro-trash.

"Yes," I spluttered, fighting off a coughing fit.

"Like home. How the trees meet the water. I want to reach out and touch them."

"Home. Norway?"

"Lavik. On Sognefjorden. It is the biggest fjord, in the south west. There are many resorts."

"I've never been."

“My village is not near tourists. Some places, the mountains fall nine hundred metres to the water.”

Cassandra Island topped off at around fifteen.

“I use my imagination,” he said. “Out here, the dark . . .”

“Homesick?”

“Only when I smoke.”

He smiled. A Valkyrie’s spear would shatter on those teeth. My knees went weak. The dope must have already kicked in. Axel took another drag and passed the joint.

“What is your name?” he asked.

“David.”

“David . . . ?”

“Ase.”

“The one they have been talking about.”

“They?”

“I do not speak much when I work. I listen.”

The joint went back to him. Our fingers brushed. The contact made a bee-line to my groin.

“I thought it would be you. I see your face, I make the math.”

“Do the math.”

He smiled again, illuminated.

Up on the lawn, a guitar started. Ruggerio, the healer. Tonight instead of Zachary Richard it was a ballade sung in Portuguese or Spanish.

“Do you spell it A-C-E?” Axel asked.

“A-S-E.”

He took a long pull on the joint then two staccato ones and flicked it in the water.

“From the way you say it, I thought maybe so,” he said, his voice pinched from holding in the smoke. “I asked backwards. In case I was mistaken.”

He exhaled slowly, teasing smoke out through pursed lips.

“It is a name from my country. We do not say it as you do. It is not a family name. It is for girls. Peer Gynt’s mother, for example.”

“I know.”

My words came out too sombre, weighty through a haze of dope. The *déjà-vu* of my first night swept over me again, understandable this time because of all the THC. My attention fixed on Axel's hair. Somehow, *blond* was painfully familiar, in a way that firmed up what the Nordic giant's brushing of my fingers had begun.

"It is from an old word," he mused. "It can mean many things. God, for example. Or healer. Or," his eyes swung from the island's pine-swept shore to me, "a tree-covered mountain."

His eyes seemed to have grown into the deep, blue pools poetasters moon about.

"One you can touch?"

He raised his hand and drew the inside of his index up my cheek.

"Yes. Touch."



I didn't see much of Kirin the next day. Or the day after. Or the day after that.

She continued to participate in things but Roy was never far away, a magnet for her quick, approval-seeking glances. I was tempted to ask Margie, whose specialty was auras, if she could see the bubble of possessiveness surrounding her.

When a friend goes gaga over someone new, the range of what you can or cannot say gets narrowed to *I think s/he's great* or *I think s/he's great*. It's either that or silence. I went the silent route.

I also went the absent route, lest Kirin's sensitivity construe the silence for exactly what it was. Which proved not too difficult; new lovers never want the baggage of old friends. Cassandra Island's flexible dining hours, the size of the grounds, and the privacy of my room kept contact to a superficial social minimum.

Evenings, when I might have felt left out, Axel filled the breach.

I'd shot my bolt too early in the week, playing psychic star as soon as I arrived. It had been fun showing off, a sort of retrograde

vacation to an epoch when my bread and butter came from being on display. But when no one sidled up to me with veiled propositions, when no cryptic notes were slipped under my door, when the campfire stayed a campfire, not the locus of some esoteric rite, the glamour dimmed.

Byron and MacKenzie had been out to lunch on this one. Something odd was going on—three psychics dead, three missing—but Cassandra Island played no part. I'd done my best and come up empty-handed. I really didn't mind. It gave me fuel to ridicule MacKenzie, whose threats still had me pissed. Payback would be fun.

However part of me was disappointed. Nothing beats a change to miss routine, but sometimes missed routine just hammers home how humdrum life's become.

Years before, I'd needed small but certain pleasures as fixed points to help me through my days. That trick of mind no longer served its purpose but I'd built a life around it anyway. With so much money, nearly everything brought pleasure now, but only of the modest kind. My life, whose former graph looked like an outline of the Rockies, had, quite simply, flatlined.

I'd been hoping, quietly, Cassandra Island would provide excitement. Maybe even intrigue. Now, with Kirin smitten by a man who brooked no competition and my lure-the-bad-guys mandate shot, the remainder of my stay had turned into an exercise in perseverance with the same-old same-old waiting back at home.

Saturday, our final day, the weather turned to rain. Woolly fog descended, hovering on the lake and twisting through the dripping conifers. The island, for all that it was visible, might as well have been a million miles away.

After breakfast I went walking by myself, shrouded in a Gortex windbreaker. Then, because the day called out for nesting, I chose the lodge's library to while away the hours.

Lamps with parchment shades cast warm light on the orange-y cedar walls, cheering up the room the way a fire does when twilight falls. The fog outside looked dark as dusk.

Mr. Shen, alone with books spread out in front of him, looked up as I came in.

“David.” He nudged up wire-frame glasses that had slipped down on his nose. “I thought you might be by. It’s a good day for reading.”

I glanced around the empty room.

“Apparently no one else thinks so.”

“Ah, but no one else here reads like you do. Don’t look so surprised. A scholar can always tell. Come, join me.”

He cleared a space beside him at the table.

“Are you the David Ase I read about? The one who won the lottery?”

“That’s me.”

“Funny. Your name stayed with me from the newspapers. Strange how that is. Were you a practitioner before it happened?”

“For a few years.”

“It must have helped your business.”

“Ironically, yes.”

His face went still. In repose, the corners of his mouth turned up, giving him a gentle, almost beatific smile.

“Ah, yes,” he said after a moment. “I see. When having extra clients didn’t matter any more. Were you surprised to win?”

“Of course. Who wouldn’t be?”

“A psychic, I should think.”

His expression didn’t change, but his black eyes twinkled. Twinkled *knowingly*.

“Did you always have a gift?” he asked, serious again.

“At least since I was seventeen, though I didn’t know it then.”

“Seventeen.”

Apparently the word meant something to him. He savoured it, rocking in his chair like someone nodding with their body. Numerology in Chinese culture has an almost sacred status. I wondered if he’d tell me what was special about seventeen.

Instead he asked: “How does one not know a thing like that?”

“It came to me in bits. I didn’t grasp that all the pieces were

related. Like a blowup from a newspaper where all you see is dots. With time, I gained some distance. The picture coalesced.”

I mentally apologized to Mr. Shen for my deceit, misdirection by omission. The picture that had come to me was not that I was psychic, but that I could pass for one who was.

“Fascinating. Can you tell me more?”

“It wasn’t the easiest period in my life.”

“Ah. Of course. Forgive me.”

Outside, a storm cloud hidden in the fog dislodged a clot of thunder—not a startling clap, more like a pensive rumble.

“Do you know the *I Ching*?” he asked, nodding at the books in front of him.

“Somewhat. I read translations when I was younger.”

“Yes? Which ones?”

“The Wilhelm-Baynes, of course, and James Legge. Plus commentaries by a man named Wing.”

“RL Wing. I know his work. Beautiful interpretations. So the *I Ching* interested you?”

“Because I read more than one translation?” I shook my head. “At one point in my life, I kind of camped out in a library. Anything I didn’t understand, there were always other books nearby to help.”

“I should infer, then, you had trouble making sense of it?”

His question had a ribbing overtone, as if he knew me all too well. Subira MacKenzie had tried something similar, with her breezy we’re-already-friends approach at my apartment. But where with her the motive was control, with Mr. Shen it came off as indulgence.

“Not really,” I conceded. “Even young, I had a head for context and component parts. How a part is coloured by the whole, and the whole is coloured by its parts.”

“Do you mind?” He took a slender, silver pen. “I’d like to write that down. I could use it in my seminars.”

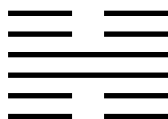
He pulled a Hilroy tablet close. Exquisite letters—drawn, almost, not written—flowed beneath the ballpoint nib.

Capacity for utter concentration... control without rigidity... aware but not self-conscious... impulses in synch with execution

... no grey fuzziness of doubt... the inside and the outside match
... a perfect fit...

... like Roy Calhoun. Except that Roy-inside-my-head was like a piece of jet, smooth and black and somehow ominous, while Mr. Shen was more a wave-worn pebble, a piece of quartz that, picked up on the beach, would prove translucent. With neither could I get beyond the surface, but where one had walls around himself, the other had put frosted windows.

Mr. Shen stopped writing. He thought a moment, then quickly drew six lines, stacked vertically, the middle ones complete, the lower and the upper two divided by a gap: a hexagram from the *I Ching*, one of sixty-four created out of similarly whole and broken lines.



He pushed the tablet over. “Do you know this hexagram?”

“Not by name. The trigrams—,” the three lower and three upper lines, “—are *Kên* and *Chen*, Mountain and Thunder, but I don’t know what the hexagram is called.”

“Would you care to guess its meaning?”

The *I Ching* hexagrams are complex mini-pictures of sixty-four archetypal human situations. A hexagram is read from bottom to top. Each of its six lines occupies a “place”. Each place is like an evolutionary step. The first place represents entering a situation, the sixth place, leaving it. Places two and five are considered “central”, that is, central to the beginning, and central to the end. Places three and four are in transition.

Solid lines are yang—firm, bright, active. The broken ones are yin—yielding, dark, inert. Neither one has moral value by itself. Hypothetically “correct” solid or broken lines are assigned to each place: the first—or lowest—should be solid; the second broken; the third solid; and so on.

The significance of any line depends on five related factors. Is it

solid or broken? Which place does it occupy? Is it “correct”? Which kind of line stands immediately above it or below it? And which kind of line occupies the place three steps away?

For the last two, the rule of thumb is that if one of the lines is solid and the other broken, they have an affinity that influences both, and, as a consequence, the meaning of the hexagram.

Additionally, the hexagram is split into component *trigrams*, called the lower and the upper. Owing to the binary nature of solid and broken lines, eight figures of three lines apiece are possible. Each has a set of characteristics, derived from the arrangement of yin and yang lines, and a descriptive name, like Mountain, Thunder, Wind or Lake. A hexagram’s two trigrams give further indication of its meaning. As do the so-called nuclear trigrams, formed of lines two to four and three to five.

Which is to say that guessing what a hexagram means is like trying to guess an oak tree from an acorn, and vice versa—simultaneously. Five millenia ago, Chinese scholars straightened it all out. The *I Ching* was a compilation of their labours. One doesn’t guess with the *I Ching*; at best, one memorizes.

“Tell me what you see,” Mr. Shen encouraged in a way that told me I’d zoned out for several seconds.

“Two active lines,” I said, “enclosed by four inert ones, like a good idea thwarted by external factors. Mundane factors rule the hexagram. Creative energy would have to work within that limitation. It’s a ‘light under a bushel’ situation. One that can’t be changed. You’d have to work within it.”

“What of the two trigrams?”

“The lower one’s the Mountain, which suggests remaining still, but the upper one is Thunder—explosive upward movement. Thunder wants to pull away from Mountain. The four inert lines keep the tendency in check. That’s both good and bad. Good because they give stability, bad because they hamper action.”

“Do you get any feeling out of this? Any emotional response?”

It seemed an odd sort of question.

“Intense frustration. There’s all this energy,” I pointed to the

solid lines, “but it can’t move the way it wants to.”

“And if a person were in such a situation, what does the hexagram advise?”

“Don’t aim too high. Don’t rock the boat. You can’t accomplish much. Work within established norms. Be conscientious. Dot your eyes, cross your tees, then check and double check them. Humility is probably the attitude to cultivate. That, and caution. A lot of caution.”

Mr. Shen tilted his head to one side. The warm light of the room reflected in his glasses. His skin, the colour of old ivory, seemed to drink it in.

“When you look at this hexagram,” he asked, “what do you see? The lines alone or something more?”

“What else is there?”

“A picture. A story. A world. Something self-contained, where what means one thing in one circumstance means something quite different in another. A mental construct that communicates itself to you entire.”

What he was describing sounded like the way I figured out my clients. I hadn’t thought of it before, but the *I Ching* hexagrams were very like the images I built of people from the clues they gave. Lines of force, areas of radiance, none of it exactly visual, all of it contained and self-defining.

“You could say that, I guess. Why do you ask?”

“Your interpretation makes you sound like someone who’s been studying *I Ching*. I know this isn’t so from what you said. Therefore I conclude your intuition is remarkable. I’m fascinated by that quality of mind. Why some have it and others don’t. How does it work? What does it *look* like?”

From the intonation of his final question, I was sure he seldom asked it in the company of others.

“Your reading wasn’t perfect,” he went on, “but it touched on something I’ve been pondering.”

He took the pad and drew three lines: one broken, one solid,

one broken.



“Do you know what this trigram is?”

“Yes. *K’an*. Water.”

“And why does this arrangement have that name?”

“The active principle, the solid yang line, is hemmed in on both sides by yin. Yin, in this case, has the quality of earth. So it’s like a stream, with banks on either side.”

“Are you aware it also sometimes translates as ‘The Abysmal’? In other words, a place of danger, like a chasm?”

“If I knew that once, I’ve forgotten.”

“Do you notice anything particular about this trigram,” he tapped the page, “and the hexagram? It’s called *Hsao Kuo*, by the way. Wilhelm-Baynes translates it as ‘The Preponderance of the Small.’”

I studied the two for a second. The similarity was obvious. The hexagram had the same structure as the trigram except the lines were doubled. I didn’t say it though. Mr. Shen, watching me, read it in my face.

“*K’an*,” he said, “is water, energy contained, and danger. *Hsao Kuo* appears to be the same, but doubled, therefore deep water, great energy mightily contained, and grave danger. It seems self-evident. Yet neither King Wan, who first interpreted the hexagrams, nor his son, the Duke of Chou, address themselves to the similarity,”

“Perhaps they felt they didn’t need to.”

He gave me an approving look, like a teacher who’s confirmed his student’s making progress.

“That is how I see it, too,” he said. “The meaning of *Hsao Kuo*—one might even say its warning—is quite clear. No need to spell it out.

“Now, David, I must get back to work. You’re leaving tomorrow?”

“Yes. First thing.”

“Then perhaps we’ll meet again sometime.”

Dismissed, I went to check the shelves for something thick to curl up with.



Kirin and I checked out early the next day and were on the road by nine.

The rain had not let up, and though the fog was gone, everything looked grey—Oz to Kansas when compared with the trip up. If there’d been at least some mist, the weather might have had a melancholic charm. Instead, we got a lowering sky of shuffling, leaden clouds.

Kirin tried to mitigate the mood with New Age diva, Enya, on repeat. One song sounded like the TV ad for Philadelphia cream cheese, with words that might have been *Sail away, sail away, sail away* or *Save the whales, save the whales, save the whales*. It bugged me every time it came around.

Kirin’s thoughts were ever on her new-found squeeze. Every kilometre was an addict’s hour deeper in withdrawal. With the cynicism of the unattached, I found it hard to muster much compassion.

We stopped at Kaladar for coffees, which, once we were sizzling down the asphalt toward 401 again, thawed the lock on Kirin’s vocal chords.

“What do you think of him?” she asked, eyes straight ahead.

I think s/he’s great...

Why ask for an opinion you don’t want? I took a mental breath and plunged.

“In your place, I’d go screaming in the opposite direction.”

She tittered. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Not a bit.”

“No, really. You can’t mean that.”

“I do.”

“Why?” She sounded genuinely puzzled.

“He’s not a kind of man I get along with.”

“That’s it?”

“What else can I say? I didn’t care for him.”

“But why?”

“He’s too—” I couldn’t find the word for it, “—too *male* for my taste.”

“But I like that in a man.”

“Right. Silly me.”

Her eyes swung over sharply. “You don’t approve.”

“Does it matter? If he makes you happy . . .”

She didn’t rise to the cliché—proof, if it were needed, how deep her hormones had their hooks inside her head.

We passed under a bridge. The drumming of the rain clicked off for half a second. Enya moved into a ballade about marble halls and knights and maidens.

“He’s unbelievable in bed,” Kirin mused. “He got me doing things . . .”

It wasn’t seemliness that left the sentence hanging. For the next ten kilometres, happy thoughts enveloped her, the kind that leave damp spots on the upholstery.

“I think you’re just jealous,” she announced, quitting planet Eros. “If you’d got laid . . .”

“Who says I didn’t?”

Her jaw dropped.

“No way!”

“Way.”

“Who?”

“Who do you think?”

Her hands came off the wheel long enough to mime a fork and carving knife. Her sawing motion looked like someone jerking off.

“Bingo.”

“Bastard. You could have told me. I didn’t have clue.”

“Gee, I wonder why that is?”

I squirmed preemptively against the shoulder punch I knew was coming.

“What was it like?”

“Fun in a grunty sort of way. English wasn’t his strong point.”

“I’ll bet. He looked like the kind of guy who stares into your eyes and makes you think there’s no one in the universe but you.”

“Yeah,” I admitted. “It was kind of like that.”

“Will you be seeing him again?”

“Not planning on it.”

“How come? Drop dead gorgeous, good in bed and likes you?”

“You left out strictly casual. Shipboard fling.”

She shook her head with an exasperated sigh—the disdain of someone new in love, or lust so deep as makes no never mind.

I stared out the passenger-side window. Rivulets of water crept across the glass. Hydro wires dipped and rose like sinus waves. The thunk of wipers on the windshield chased the New Age sounds of Enya from my mind. A rawer voice popped in my head:

*With those windshield wipers slappin’ time
And Bobbi holdin’ hands
We finally sung up every song that driver knew...*

Kirin ejected the CD and rooted through a stack of jewel cases. It came as no surprise to hear the sawdust twang of Janis Joplin next.

“It’s like we share the same brain,” I said.

Her mouth twisted in a half smile. She didn’t even ask what I was talking about. Two songs in she started humming and didn’t speak again until we’d reached the 401.

“He lives in Brantford.”

Roy again.

“I know.”

“He has a trailer on the Grand River. He spends the summer there.”

“Planning on joining him?”

“It would be nice for Carlin once school gets out. What do you think?”

It was as if the former conversation hadn’t taken place.

“Are you asking my professional advice?”

She thought it over. “Nah.”

“How about as a friend?”

“People only say that when they don’t approve of what you’re doing. Or who you’re hanging out with.”

She returned to silence. We fell behind a poky flatbed in the right-hand lane. Impatient SUVs streaked by, showering us with spray. Janis parched her way through two CDs of heartbreak and good times.

Nearing Oshawa, forty minutes from downtown, Kirin found her voice again.

“I don’t think I can fight this, David.”

Knows her patterns... asking me to understand... trying to apologize...

“If you feel you have to fight it, shouldn’t that be saying something?”

“Maybe fight’s not the right word.”

It came out sounding like a question.

“Maybe,” I replied, “it is.”