

**Neighbours**      **Andrew James Paterson@2022**

Richard Stottlemayer decided that he'd read enough of his bedtime murder mystery. As far as mysteries went this one was pretty good but hardly a nail-biting page turner. This mystery was titled *Murder In The Prestige Gallery* and the writer's name was Elizabeth Davenport.

Probably a pseudonym, Richard observed as he finished his nightly brandy. Or, rather, a *nom de plum*. Too Anglophile to be believable.

A highly regarded but controversial male artist's body had been found on the premises of the Remington Gallery, which was in London but of course fictitious. Richard's own art career had largely fizzled out two plus decades ago so he could not surmise what high-profile London gallery this Elizabeth Davenport person was referring to.

So far in this not so pulpy murder mystery there had been only one murder. Richard expected others, of course. Didn't murders by definition lead to subsequent murders? There were certainly enough suspects among the main characters, There was the gallerist herself who was in serious financial straits and also a drug user. There was also an abstract painter who was clearly unhinged and not only when drunk.

Richard found this character hard to take. He himself has once been an abstract painter and not all of such painters were raging alcoholics and homophobic pugilists and not all of them were even male. If any category of artists were in dire need of re-examination leading to redemption, it was abstract painters.

His phone rang. The caller was a man named Dennis who was more than probably requesting a nightcap and then something further. Richard decided to return Dennis' call tomorrow morning, although Dennis lived two floors below him in the high-rise. Richard generally did not mix or socialize with his neighbours, although he and Dennis had initially struck up a conversation in the laundromat and he had previously noticed the younger man at the spa which was now of course closed because of the ongoing pandemic.

Tenants were instructed to keep a ten person bubble for themselves. For Richard Stottlemayer, this meant his fifth floor neighbours Charlotte, Luther, and Maureen... plus Dennis, plus Charlotte's presumed girlfriend Ashley and Maureen's occasional two or three visitors. Luther seemed to be even more solitary than he was himself, which was not at all a problem.

Charlotte King saved the We Transfer music file that her best friend and collaborator Christine Pellegrin had mailed to her. Charlotte would appraise it and then decide what to add to the file in the morning.

For some time Charlotte and Christine had been meeting on a weekly basis to make music together..digitally. Christine had once played in a riot girl band but she hated being reminded of that history. Charlotte had done soundtracks for independent films but had never performed in front of audiences.

Now COVID was keeping the two of them apart. Christine's basement which housed her recording equipment was too tiny for two people to share at safe distances. But they continued to collaborate electronically via email. Charlotte couldn't imagine what the pandemic might be like for people without email or I-phones or whatever gadgets.

Her job in a sheet-music retail outlet was also on necessary hiatus and now she was barely managing her rent. Something had to break soon, but how?

She again placed a notice on her various Social Media accounts that she and Christine, who had posted recordings on Band Camp under the name Jane and Tonic, were available for soundtrack work. Big and small films were still being produced under controlled circumstances. Film was good for the economy, unlike theatre or dance or live music. What a load of crap, Charlotte snorted.

She poured herself a gin and tonic. The name Jane and Tonic derived from her endearingly crazy Aunt Jane, who enjoyed her favourite summer drink during all four seasons. Charlotte found herself drinking more than usual during the pandemic but life these days was all about killing time. There were books, movies, Social Media, and then drinks.

Something had to break, but when. And then how?

Maureen Donnell checked the time on her phone and then decided to call it a night. She, or rather her alter ego Brian Gilchrist, had made excellent progress on the novel. She had found a way out of a *cul de sac* in which her lead investigator had literally been jammed in by both the police and local organized crime.

She carefully saved everything and then flicked on her old school television. She selected one of the talk show guys....Colbert. Sometimes Colbert had interesting guests although he himself was very uninteresting.

Alas, tonight was not one of the lucky nights. Maureen decided to kill the television and then not have a bedtime glass of wine. She wanted maximum sleep so that she, or Brian Gilchrist, could get cracking early the next morning.

It had been quite a while since Maureen had lamented not becoming a prestige literary novelist. She had begun to make some serious money. Soon she would be able to move out of this high rise into a house, although she flipped back and forth on whether or not she wished to live in a house by herself. Her apartment was serviceable and required minimal but steady cleaning which she actually enjoyed doing. She did occasionally have work-related visitors but that was hardly her only incentive to keep her apartment meticulous.

She occasionally missed having a feline companion. However her last and final cat had been a monster who had had to be put down. Muggins had been violent on top of being far too noisy. And Maureen did not miss dead birds being deposited on her balcony.

She prepared for sleep. She noted to herself that Jeremy Wentworth of Angular Publishing was scheduled to visit her in her apartment in three days. Maureen had a feeling that Mr. Wentworth's visit would be about something important.

Luther Remington checked his apartment keys before walking up two flights of stairs to make his necessary purchase. Frank was expecting his brief company so all was good. Luther bought from Frank so they conducted their business in Frank's apartment and not Luther's.

Why they had come to this arrangement was something he had by now forgotten. If Frank's place was being watched then Luther would be identified as a habitual visitor just as his place would be recognized as belonging to one of Frank's customers. But Luther and Frank made their transition the same way they had been doing for nearly a year now.

The pandemic was cutting into Luther's disposable income. The sheet music store only did its business on line so store clerks were no longer necessary. The bars where he could exhibit and sell his paintings were all closed down. An almost lucrative underground economy was now in suspension.

And now Luther had transitioned from being an occasional to a regular user. He would have to go cold turkey and he wasn't looking forward to this at all.

Luther returned to his apartment and stashed his package in the medicine cabinet. He then listened to some comfortable enough music. Seventies hits were now fifty years old but strangely comfortable. He played a compilation stream.....The Carpenters' cover of *Superstar*...Carly Simon's *You're So Vain*. So vain so vein.....no. This had to change, but not now.

Luther's phone rang. The caller was his mother, who still called him Martin. Luther ignored the call. At least it was his mother and not Caroline, who had broken off with him but who now wanted to get back together. That was never going to happen and Caroline should just give up.

What had his parents been thinking when they named their son Martin Luther Hendricks. He supposed with their Calvinism they had been attempting to mold their son...make him an illustrious Puritan but that was a long-lost cause. In tandem with his art career, he had begun using his second name along with the surname Remington.

Remington's Men Of Steel, Luther groaned. He was anything but a man of steel. But he would have to become stronger..strong enough to find a way to make money and also kick his habit.

He laughed. He was not the only tenant who had special friends on different floors of the building. One had to look no further than his neighbour Richard and his Puerto Rican boy two floors down. Luther wondered if Richard paid the boy.....Desmond...was that his name?

Well, there were bubbles, and then there were sub-bubbles. Luther decided he'd had enough of seventies pop songs and killed the sound. He would have a nap until his body commanded him to wake up.

Richard felt please with himself. If he had any nagging duties or obligations he was completely unaware of them.

So he poured himself a glass of Argentinian red wine and began changing his clothes. Tonight he would wear a simple blouse and tapered black slacks.

Cross-dressing had been a favourite past time for years but never in public. Richard considered cross-dressing not unlike eating edibles, which he also enjoyed. Both practices allowed him to spend time in a pleasantly altered state.

Now he selected some favourite music. Steve Reich's *Different Trains* was on his mind,,with its skillful deployment of repeated phrases which would begin and not repeat exactly and would thus create shifting poly rhythms.

There was no sound leaking into his apartment on this night. No nearby arrests or fires. The units in his building were quite effectively soundproofed.

On occasions when he had to walk past his neighbouring units he could hear sounds that irritated him. The strange young man named Luther was always playing singer songwriters who simply could not sing. And his lesbian neighbour Charlotte would play what Richard believed was her own music, and it was terrible. Again, the poor singing ruined whatever otherwise orchestration behind it. It was all electronic, Richard realized, except for the voices.

Some people had voices and some did not. His father had been an opera aficionado so obviously that had affected his own tastes. He could not tolerate people with weak voices delivering confessional lyrics.

He decided to smoke a cigarette and savour his glass of wine. Richard did not smoke, but his alter ego did. She was probably a librarian who was also a secret smoker and drinker. He had always enjoyed espionage novels, and why not.

Charlotte emailed Christine and informed her collaborator that she had nothing further to add to the musical track they had been working on.

“Go ahead and post it”, Charlotte posted.

But it needed a title, Christine reminded her. Yes, a title. Charlotte had a eureka. She texted Christine.

“Let’s call it Harry Newman.”

“Why?” Who the fuck is Harry Newman?”

Charlotte wondered if Christine was still half-asleep.

“Because the track has nothing whatever to do with *Gary* Numan.”

“Right”. Charlotte could almost hear Christine laughing. So their latest collaboration was indeed now titled ‘Harry Newman’ and would be added to Jane & Tonic’s Band Camp portfolio.

Charlotte returned to her morning emails. A no specific topic email from the electronic band called Derwatt was awaiting a non specific reply. Derwatt were three gentlemen who had shared billing with Jane & Tonic on the electronic club circuit. Derwatt were strange and older.....their music wasn’t very danceable. At least one of them had been a former prog-rocker. Another Derwatt member was an ex-performance artist who should have taken up stand-up comedy.

Geeks in their basement, Charlotte laughed. But they were sweet geeks. Charlotte knew a few too many alternative musicians who were not housebound because of the pandemic. She felt sorry for their economic situations but did not at all miss their music. Jane & Tonic avoided guitars...she had once talked Christine out of adding a guitar to one of their posted tracks.

She could hear Luther next door playing what might have been vinyl. Luther was very old-fashioned in all of his habits. He only seemed to have three or four records....Nick Cave, Leonard Cohen, and Joy Division.....there was somebody else Charlotte couldn't remember....somebody very forgettable.

Much of Luther's life was of course about killing time. But most people's lives these days were about killing time, except for the doctors and nurses and front-line workers who were beyond absolutely necessary.

An email arrived from Band Camp informing her and Christine that 'Harry Newman' had been successfully loaded and that there was a small amount of cash for Jane & Tonic. A small amount indeed.

Maureen concluded revisions on her ten pages for the day. The new Brian Gilchrist murder mystery was coming along just fine. Her or his characters were now coming to life....they were all quite charming but also sinister.

She chortled. Sinister was a personal favourite word. Left-handed people had always been suspected of being not quite right, or also 'queer'. Here she was, Maureen Donnell of stock Irish descent writing traditional English murder mysteries. Well, Oscar Wilde wrote comedies of manners with upper-class English twits, so perhaps she was following in an honourable succession.

Maureen had become satisfactorily self-sufficient during the pandemic. She had no desire to see other people and she had even improved her cooking. Occasionally she did find herself wishing to eat at a quality restaurant but that wasn't going to be possible for a long time, if indeed ever.

She poured herself a glass of port and thought of her friend Laura, who was also housebound and who eked out a living ghostwriting rock music autobiographies. Poor Laura had to approximate the voices of stupid men who could barely string together a sentence let alone write a succession of them. Poor Laura...she had broken off with her artist girlfriend and was confined to a building full of stupid 'alternative musicians.

She thought that she should invent another writer or writing persona. She thought it was approaching a time to concoct a gay male writer..older and maybe even a bit tweedy. Not unlike

her neighbour Richard, who had been an art history professor but who also seemed rather literary.

She had only exchanged brief pleasantries with Richard, but Maureen could tell that he was fastidious. She knew that Richard had a friend on one of the building's other floors but this also seemed like a tidy arrangement.

She needed groceries so she donned her primary mask and took the elevator to the tuck shop. She found herself sharing the elevator with her neighbour Luther, who got out two floors down. Maureen knew that Luther was a drug user who purchased his medicine from some person two floors down.

Each to her own, she noted. Luther did not interest her as there was no mystery about him. Perhaps he might fall behind on his rent and have to relocate? Maureen didn't wish for anything unpleasant to happen to her neighbour but some fresh air would be nice indeed, even during a pandemic in which people lived within restricted bubbles.

Luther placed an order with Frank and then called up a movie from MUBI. He had found a cheap subscription to this streaming service which was ideal for the ongoing pandemic. He didn't have to go to the movies he could stare at his laptop for the duration...an easy way of at least killing time.

Tonight he could watch another South Korean melodrama. He wasn't up for anything too difficult so this movie would suffice. It had a plot but was not what a friend of his called 'plot-oriented', which meant that Luther's attention could wander and not jeopardize his comprehension.

He appreciated the soundproofing in his building. He occasionally heard snippets of the music coming from his neighbour Charlotte, who seemed too friendly and thus rubbed him the wrong way. . He knew that Charlotte name digital electronic music with another female friend and they had some sort of moniker they used on Band Camp.

Luther did not like the snippets he occasionally heard when he walked past Charlotte's apartment. He disliked digital music and electronics in general. He had had a friend who considered Kraftwerk to be the bible. Luther thought Kraftwerk were an odiously pervasive influence on contemporary pop music and then not to mention hip-hop. Tuneless rappers shouting over tuneless rhythm tracks. Not for him at all.

The movie was okay but nothing special. A family that seemed ordinary on the surface but who made their living from an illegal underground economy. Drugs of course entered the picture. One family member was a user and one did not use but dealt. Another movie about the bottoms and tops of the eternal pyramid.

He was to visit Frank after the movie. He could barely hold out.

Richard scanned through the book he had ordered from a small publisher in New Brunswick. The book was titled *Moments in Perception* and it was a volume concerned with Canadian experimental film. Film, not video... although those distinctions had long become muddled.

He had ordered the book out of mild curiosity and also because his nephew Andrew was one of the many artists granted half-page portraits. There indeed was his nephew but the blurb was of course about the editor more than the artist. Richard noticed a brief portrait of an artist whose name he recognized as being that of Andrew's former partner. He read the portrait and disagreed with it.

This book had four editors who all contributed their own sections. So the book wasn't too messy, although Richard detected some instances of the different editors not being on the same page. With regards to a notorious collective, the portrait stated that one founding member left the collective in 1985 while in the large essay about film distribution facilities and networks the same founding member was properly noted as leaving the collective in 1991. And he noticed at least one other similar mistake involving the history of a seminal projectionist.

But such relatively minor klinkers are part of the course, Richard sighed. Unfortunately these klinkers come at the expense of the artists portrayed or itemized.

He decided not to pour a drink. He had had enough of the big film book but he wasn't sure what to do now. Well, there were always movie options, so he called up a Dardenne Brothers film that had controversially won a Palme D'or at Cannes the other year.

During the movie his mind did wander. By mutual agreement, Richard and Dennis had decided not to see each other any more as their 'relationship' had run its course. Both were primarily bottoms, Dennis wanted Richard to be his daddy and Richard was not much of a daddy. The last time he had gone to a bathhouse prior to the COVID lockdown Richard had been picked up by a relatively younger man who wanted a daddy. This man was about fifty and Richard couldn't deal with the situation. Dennis wasn't even thirty.

He stayed with the movie even though he could see that it was yet another example of Western directors in over their heads with regards to jihads and imams and Islam in general. The movie wasn't that long a feature... it was just short of ninety minutes. But Richard watched until the weird ending and then read various Rotten Tomatoes reviews before calling it a night.

Charlotte removed her headphones as she had finished playing around on her mini-synthesizer, hooked up to her laptop for strictly personal recording services. Sometimes she would save files and send them to Christine, but none today.

No luck today, she observed without any strong feelings about the subject.

She resumed reading her Lauren Berlant compilation. She was able to concentrate on reading despite hearing what sounded like Steve Reich's *Different Trains* emanating from her older neighbour's apartment. She liked the particular Reich composition but she could also tune it out easily, due to its use of repetition.

Charlotte and Christine were a pair of odd ducks who nevertheless meshed well together. Christine seriously appreciated repetition....she was actually suspicious of any music without it. She did permit accidents, or even chance elements, as long as there was a strong foundation and structure.

Freedom was meaningless unless there was something to be free from. Charlotte had heard Christine actually make this pronouncement. Didn't Jean Genet once proclaim that one could not credibly talk about freedom unless one had been in the French penal system for four decades? Charlotte groaned .....the limitations of transgressive philosophy indeed.

She knew that this would never fly with Jane & Tonic, but Charlotte was becoming more and more attracted to improvisation. Not necessarily jazz, although recently she had begun to appreciate later period John Coltrane and Pharaoh Sanders...spiritual jazz. She opened a beer and smiled. Perhaps she was a closeted mystic after all these years.

Hardly, she snorted as she sipped on her beer. She took stock of the musical tastes of her neighbours, none of whom she knew other than cursory hellos. The older gay man liked minimalism, which Charlotte found strange. Wasn't queerness about embracing the excessive and wasn't minimalism purist as in puritan? Whatever. The neighbouring junkie liked Nick Cave and Leonard Cohen but today it was Neil Young. Well, Young kind of fit the pattern as he was whiny and always out of tune. She could take Neil Young in very small doses as the singer songwriter and grunge guitarist was just too California for her.

And then the mysterious female writer...everything about Maureen seemed so sensible and predictable. When she wasn't writing she was listening to Joni Mitchell and Laura Nyro and also Kate Bush. The latter was as recent as Maureen seemed to go. She knew nothing about Maureen and she was curious. Charlotte had looked up Maureen Donnelly on the Wiki and only found an Irish actress. What had Maureen published. Had she even published? Was she one of those sensitive types who wrote at home all day courtesy of a trust fund?

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Charlotte decided to watch a movie. She was tired so hopefully she wouldn't get trapped into watching anything too demanding. A French murder mystery would suffice, so she pressed start and then leaned her chair back.

Maureen felt that she had arrived at a point where she could do more writing for this day. She, or Brian Gilchrist had traversed yet another cul-de-sac situation. Plot plot plot....Gilchrist's mysteries were all about the plot. Although characters were important, they couldn't be one-dimensional cartoons.

Cartoons, Maureen snorted as she poured herself a glass of port. She had once considered writing graphic novels but now rejected that idea. Her own drawing skills were rudimentary and she didn't know any possible collaborator.

She did know two friends who collaborated on graphic novels and also generic paintings. Her former friends Mary and Alison made a lot of money under the moniker of 'Olivia Fenton'. Some time ago Maureen, Mary and Alison had also shared the same accountant, but that was some time ago.

As she sipped on her port, Maureen sighed about missing two previous pleasures...smoking and having a cat. She knew all too well that if she indulged in even one cigarette that she would then buy a pack of cancer sticks and become a smoker again. And smoking was a smelly messy habit that she was glad to have kicked. Except that right now she wanted to smoke. The junkie next door smoked all the time but Maureen certainly didn't want to be mooching from him.

And she wanted a cat, even though pets were simply verboten in the building. She had seen the manager or superintendent threaten to evict a tenant on the above floor whose cat made noise and nearly had a fatal accident on the balcony. The cat had tried to kill a bird and failed.

Maureen was even missing dead birds and mice. She was of course glad that there were no mice in the building. But if she had a cat her pet could play with mouse and bird catching...all domestic cat play did of course involve hunting. House cats were little tigers..that was their appeal.

She logged onto Facebook, which she had resisted for a long time. But now it was all about killing time, so she was becoming a benign addict. And there were her friends that she no longer saw and didn't wish to see. There was the mysterious Olivia Fenton whose profile picture was that of a generic painting and most certainly not of a face.

Maureen enjoyed facelessness. What did Brian Gilchrist look like? Was he Irish? Maybe, and then Irish did not necessarily mean a rakish red-haired man. There were many black Irish men

and women and non-binary people. And maybe Brian wasn't even Irish. Of course, 'Elizabeth Davenport' was as WASP as one could get. But perhaps she was somebody who had Anglicized their name? Perhaps readers speculated on the appearance and autobiographical details of writers whose back covers or inside sleeves did not contain author's photos.

When Maureen had socialized with academic types they blathered on and on about 'the death of the author'. She snorted and poured another glass of port. The author was dead because she he they had never been alive. Bullshit of course. So why was her mind rambling in such idiotically rambling directions? Because her life was all about *cul de sacs*. And she was not at all unhappy about the one she was living in.

While returning from the ground floor tuck shop, Luther found himself sharing the elevator with a young woman who was moving into the building. Luther held the door for the woman while she unloaded boxes at the second floor.

One of the things he liked about his building was the relative stability of the tenants. Rents were geared to income which he and presumably the other tenants could manage. Luther's income was paltry so his rent followed suit...not that he had a lot of cash left over considering his habit.

Back in his apartment Luther opened his fresh pack of smokes and checked his phone. There was a message from Frank. It was a lengthy message and after a couple of sentences it became clear that Frank would be in transit for an unspecified duration.

This was not good at all, Luther cursed to himself. Frank had been evicted presumably because of his business. This was inconvenient, to put it mildly. Frank had provided Luther and presumably other clients with a temporary source...someone named Keith who lived at a considerable distance across the city.

"Shit!" This was all Luther needed. Having to leave the building...COVID or no COVID.....was bad enough but to be scoring from stranger in another part of the city was going to be a nightmare.

On top of the inconvenience of Frank being evicted, Luther was worried that he might be next. He had been under the impression that the building superintendent looked the other way with regards to his tenants, as long as they were consistent with their rents. Presumably Frank had been evicted for dealing, so had the building been identified as an eyesore by cops or what the fuck was really going on?

Luther had enough of a stash to get him through this day and the next, and then he would be taking the public transit. He'd be on a bus full of people who had nowhere to isolate. He would be wearing a mask for long subway and then street car rides. He decided to buy a package of cheap disposable masks that he would wear for public transit rather than the cloth mask his ex-girlfriend had made for him.

He cooked up his fix and then performed the ritual. With Frank he knew what he was buying. Luther was not looking forward to any substitutes.

Richard opened his email to the E-Transfer cheque from Rideout Publishing. There were actually some royalties from a book he had written years ago, about gay people in both film noir and melodrama. *The Narrow and Wider Frames*, that had been the title.

He had previously struggled with online banking in general. He was old school.... he preferred for there to be paper trails. He liked to cash his cheques with witnesses present, even if those witnesses were idiotic bank tellers. Still, cheques were now on the verge of obsolescence, even prior to the pandemic. Small publishers such as Rideout clearly preferred not to be leaving any paper trails. The original Rideout publisher....George Rideout, was still alive and running the press. Richard wondered if old George declared his micro-business in tandem with his taxes.

Richard dropped the residuals into his tax free savings account and then poured himself a brandy. He then searched for a You Tube file of John Coltrane's album *A Love Supreme*. That album was one of Richard's stand-bys. The fourth movement or psalm was, as far as he was concerned, one of the most beautiful musical performances on record.

Richard was suspicious of religion in general but he had become quite fond of spiritual jazz. He could even tolerate the repetition of 'a love supreme' at the end of the first movement as it was a chant and nothing further. Richard thought jazz was an ideal form for religious musicians because it was predominantly non-verbal. Although some Pharaoh Sanders records taxed his tolerance because of the scat singer's repeated religious cliches.

The problem with repeated cliches was that they degenerated into greeting card slogans. Hallmark's Hall of Shame, he laughed softly.

Coltrane's life had been brief and tumultuous. The musician had lived with addiction issues but he had cleaned himself up during the final decade of his life. Richard had a former friend who insisted that Coltrane had died of an overdose. No, that was not true. Coltrane had died from liver failure, for which heroin and alcohol had been primary causes. But Richard became angry when he encountered drug apologists fetishising Coltrane as being one of the great creative junkies.

The neighbouring addict never played John Coltrane or for that matter any jazz. He would play tuneless male songwriters, many of whom were current or former addicts. No women....never Billie Holliday or Amy Winehouse or other women whose lives were marred by addiction.

Boys and their hobbies, Richard sipped on his brandy. Somebody had been evicted from his second floor apartment. Richard had been worried that the evictee might have been Dennis, but it wasn't. It was Frank Somebody. Richard wondered how Dennis paid his rent...did he or did he not turn tricks? Sex was different during the pandemic, or was it? Richard knew hook-ups still happened but he had never been one to take such chances. He was too old and the appropriate recreational facilities for older men such as himself were necessarily closed down.

He finished his brandy and decided against a second glass. One was quite enough for him.

Charlotte had been hoping to do an online session with her musical partner Christine this day. Instead, she woke up to an email from Christine explaining that she would be unable to work today and at least for the next few days, because her grandfather had died from COVID-19.

Christine's maternal grandfather had died on the previous day in a long-term facility. Deaths in long-term facilities had been out of control ever since the inception of the pandemic as conditions in those facilities had been known for quite some time to be substandard and hazardous. Not that any levels of government had been doing anything about this ongoing explosive situation.

Christine's other grandparents had died prior to the pandemic. Her parents were still alive and pretty healthy. Charlotte's mother had died four years ago and her father's health was precarious. Her brother Michael was her dad's executor....he had remained much closer to the biological family than she had.

But she did get along with dad...she had vowed to spend more time with him after mom died. Charlotte and her father talked on the phone every Saturday morning...not Sunday morning as Dad had become religious in his golden years and was now a regular churchgoer. Charlotte was fine with individual people who were believers but she couldn't stand being around a congregation of them. And clergymen drove her up the wall.

An odor was emerging from somewhere in proximity. Was it in the hallway by the elevator? Was it in one of the neighbours apartments. Charlotte thought she smelled cigar smoke, or was it a pipe? Or perhaps a Galluoise? Or.....maybe it was Luther chasing the dragon? Charlotte shook her head. Luther had found the dragon a long time ago.

She decided to move away from her computer and resume reading a book she had recently purchased about twentieth century music. The book was called *The Rest is Noise*, written by a man named Alex Ross. This book covered twentieth century composers beginning with Strauss and Mahler and moving past John Cage and the minimalists. Popular music was outside Ross's boundaries, although by including Steve Reich one did also encounter Brian Eno and even David Bowie.

She enjoyed reading about composers like Harry Partch who worked outside of Bach and Western piano scales. She wanted to work outside of Western scales. But how to do this with electronic keyboards? By working strictly with noise and making pitch irrelevant? Easier said than done, Charlotte frowned.

And meanwhile Luther was playing his favourite Leonard Cohen, or was it Lou Reed? Music existing within Western scales sung, or recited, by men who could not carry a tune even if there was one.

Charlotte wanted to make noise .If the noise wasn't music, that was okay. But how, and with whom? And when?

Maureen finished her raspberry tea, performed her necessary ablutions, and then prepared for the scheduled Zoom conference with her publisher at DBV books.

She could barely remember what DBV stood for. Three people who had started the company, but what were their names? Right.....David, Barbara, and Victoria. Maureen had never interacted with any of those three individuals. Her contact was Karen Leonard.

Karen Leonard was only slightly older than Maureen. If Karen was a writer herself, she kept it to herself. She was a combination editor and publicist, admittedly a dangerous combination.

Maureen wondered why Karen needed to talk on Zoom. She understood that everybody at DBV worked from home during the pandemic so therefore face to face conversation could not happen but why not the phone? Did Karen and DBV really need to see what their writers looked like?

After morning greetings on Zoom, the conversation veered toward Karen's suggestion that Maureen should be involved with in-person promotion of 'her' books? Maureen couldn't for the life of herself figure out why Karen and D BV would suddenly become so traditional. They knew perfectly well that Maureen wrote under the names of Elizabeth Davenport and Brian Gilchrist. And they were looking for another writer...this had been discussed previously.

Maureen tried not to snap at Karen. What exactly was she supposed to do.....find an actress to represent 'Elizabeth'?. Become a drag king to represent 'Brian'?. Actually that latter option held a superficial appeal....she could have fun as an irreverent and of course tipsy Irishman. But these writers were intended to be mysterious..no pictures or biographies. What did Karen Leonard not understand?

These hypothetical promotional events would of course have to be online events. Maureen zoned out....recalling that DBV had once published a book by 'Anonymous'...heterosexual not quite porn actually written by a male editor but launched with an actress as 'Anonymous'. And of course she recalled Patricia Highsmith's Ripley series, which contained a subplot involving art forgery in which the mysteriously productive dead painter 'Derwatt' had an art opening so of course an actor had to be hired to represent 'the artist'.

Maureen was relieved when Karen reminded her that sales had actually been pretty good and steady. But DBV was hurting during the pandemic so Karen was wondering if Maureen could increase her productivity. Not with more Elizabeth or Brian mysteries but with another writer....Maureen had thought about creating a new gay male writer. But she did want to make any commitment, at least yet.

Maureen asked Karen if there was anything else to talk about and Karen told her not really so Maureen pretended she had to pee so the conversation could be concluded. Not surprisingly, her lie worked. Now she could make herself a quick breakfast and get back to the latest Brian Gilchrist murder mystery. The Zoom conversation had been relatively painless after all.

Luther found the necessary coins and then found a safe seat on the cross-town street car. At least half the seats on the street car were labeled forbidden, but many passengers were ignoring the signage.

He hated traveling by public transit. It had been bad enough prior to the pandemic, but now it was a nightmare. There was a man sprawled out over two forbidden seats. His breath smelled like vodka and his pants smelled like shit.

Luther hated street people, because he was not very much better than they were. His friend and connection Frank had been evicted from the apartment complex he still lived in. Luther was more than worried that he was next.

The building's policy was that anything went as long as it wasn't at the expense of other tenants. But what the fuck did that really mean? He certainly picked up hostility from all three of his neighbours on his floor. The old queer always regarded Luther contemptuously, the lady writer always cheerfully ignored him, and the girl musician seemed a prime candidate for trouble. Charlotte, that was her name. Charlotte came off like one of those straight edge post-punk types, or one of those rave generation neo-hippies who snottily dismissed hard drugs. Luther wouldn't put it past Charlotte not to complain to the superintendent about him, with his too visible habit.

There were people getting on the street car, not paying a fare, and then getting off again one or two stops later. Luther realized that this was how these people spend their days. Now he smelled vomit. Hopefully the smell would only last for another stop.

He had never met this person he was going to be scoring from for a least the next while. He only had a name and address. Keith, at 96 Bellefair. And Keith did of course have a number. Mercifully Luther hadn't forgotten to bring his phone.

The passing city shifted from a neighbourhood full of art galleries and trendy restaraunts to being one of isolated bars and empty-looking houses. Another area just waiting for developers to move in with their big ugly condos.

And now the street car was in The Beaches. This area was full of hippies who had become yuppies and had matured into whatever the next term was. Lots of people who'd done well in the software industry, Luther supposed. Was the Beaches really the local Silicon Valley? Was this Keith person a software hack needing to augment his income? Probably a big coke-head, Luther groaned.

He wondered where the fuck Frank was now? Was he hiding out with some friend who knows where? Was he on the street? Luther was reasonably sure that Frank hadn't been arrested, but not one hundred percent sure. With his luck, anything was now possible.

The gummy was now kicking in and the Harry Partch composition Richard had selected was becoming more and more bizarre. *The Bewitched* had become downright operatic, with jabbing soprano voice stabs and that omnipresent rhythm-less percussion. Partch had been committed to ignoring Western twelve tone octaves and concert tuning and he had certainly succeeded.

But *The Bewitched* was now concluded and Richard didn't want the documentary that was next up on You Tube, even though the documentary was about Harry Partch. Richard now wanted to hear something less florid so he selected a performance of Morton Feldman's *Rothko Chapel*. This music was, well, very Rothko....all about its sparsity and delicate strokes.

Richard thought about his friend Douglas who was a freelance art writer and who had no time for Rothko. Douglas was a materialist so he was indifferent to the spirituality that so many people including Richard saw and felt in Rothko.

*So I'm a barely closeted mystic*, Richard observed again to himself. In fact, he wasn't closeted...he was proud...to be a mystic. He had earlier laughed about seeing a birthday wish for an aging poet he knew on social media.....the poet's profile highlighting a dreadful takeout called Mystic Muffin. But that was such a great nickname for good old Charlie.....The Mystic Muffin.

The Rothko Chapel concluded with its sudden contrasting flourish and then another Feldman piece followed on the evening playlist. Music for piano and string quartet.....Richard recognized this music from its deployment at a Rauschenberg exhibition he had attended four plus years ago at MOMA in New York. The Feldman piece had seemed to follow Richard and his friend who were taking in the exhibition. *Ambulatory art indeed*, he smiled. It had been all about the walking, and Feldman's music seemed to be following them.

But he zoned in and out of the hour-long Feldman and now found himself thinking about the passing of the Broadway composer Stephen Sondheim. Sondheim had been notable for being both a composer and lyricist. Richard had never been too keen on musical theatre but he appreciated Sondheim's wit and complexity. *Ladies Who Lunch*.....indeed.

He remembered going to a Frank Sinatra concert four and a half decades ago. Richard thought Sinatra's phrasing was shaped by constant smoking but the only song the singer smoked during was Sondheim's *Send In The Clowns*. Sinatra was crooning the lyric about losing his timing so late in his career while lagging dangerously behind the beat due to his need to exhale.

Ah, when he had been younger. Richard sipped his brandy. He had always wanted to hear Lou Reed covering *Send In The Clowns*...hey babe, send in the fucking clowns.

Richard returned to the Feldman. It continued to continue.

Luther returned to his apartment after another crosstown excursion to Keith's place in the Beaches area. The first batch he had bought from Keith had been okay...not as good as the shit he had been getting from Frank but sufficing as well as could probably be expected. It had not been cut with Fentanyl.

Luther took his coat off and put his groceries into the medicine cabinet. Medicine, ha ha, he smirked. Well, the stuff *was* a painkiller.

So where the hell was Frank? Luther had tried phoning his former supplier who was not answering the phone. Frank rarely answered the phone when he lived two floors down but now that he was holed up who knows where he had gone completely incommunicado.

Frank would call if necessary. He wasn't going to be calling all of his clients, of whom there was a considerable number.

Luther attempted to take a nap but there were construction sounds outside. What do cities do during pandemics? Why they hack up their major streets even though public transportation was of course being discouraged.

And now his neighbour was playing either her own electronic noodle music or else somebody else's. Electro-pop or electro-clash or whatever it was called. Electro-clash, what a handle. Definitely electric and nothing to do with The Clash, who were quite good when they were punks. Later on they became globalist hippies....dilettantes stealing from this and that third world. They became everything that punk was against.

Of course Luther had quickly gotten tired of punk. Too illiterate for his taste. Most of the punks weren't even art school dropouts.

He wanted to confront his neighbour....Charlotte....and inform her that he wanted to sleep and that could she please kill the volume. But he resisted the temptation. The less interaction he had with his neighbours, the better. His neighbours would agree here. They all lived in their bubbles, except that Charlotte's was noisier.'

Luther knew he wouldn't be able to sleep. He turned on the television which was predictably offering more statistics on the pandemic. The daily cases were rising again. Luther was not surprised. People had by now internalized the pandemic. They would go to events without their masks. They would go to events that permitted too many participants or customers. The vaccination rate had stalled. The non-vaccinated people were either anti-vaxxers or people completely alienated from any community medical structures.

Maureen sipped her port while transferring all of her files onto a series of USBs, in case of potential computer disasters.

She had managed to fit all of Elizabeth Davenport's novels plus a work in progress onto three 64g memory sticks. Now Brian Gilchrist's works were loading onto a second memory stick. Maureen smiled. Her evening's assignment was almost completed.

She poured herself another glass of port and thought about the new writer she was inventing. This man would be gay and probably over sixty. Maureen thought this man would look like her neighbour Richard, who she actually knew very little about.

But she could tell that Richard was cultivated. Maureen could hear that Richard appreciated minimalist classical music, which she didn't think of as being very gay or queer. But she could imagine Richard mourning the recent death of Stephen Sondheim, who had clearly contributed so much to American musical theatre.

And how would the writer's main character differ from the writer? Would the character be the writer's ideal, as people thought Philip Marlowe was Chandler's ideal? Maureen surmised that the writer slash character would have some sort of serious occupation...he would be an academic whose work would be leading him into criminal investigations.

Well, what sort of investigations? What sort of crimes? Surely something more serious than academic plagiarism, although this trope was now quite in vogue? Murder On Campus? Murder in the Common Room? Murder in the Third Floor Study?

Yes, this was a well-trod sub-genre that Maureen felt she could easily slot herself as this man into. She still remembered details from her own university days...the mysterious wardens, the budding academic superstars, the forbidding deans of this and that.

Now...what would the writer's name be? And what would his character's name be? Nothing too English...not Clive or Nigel or Reginald. Wasn't that Elton John's real name? Maureen shook her head. She would be writing in an English genre but the character couldn't merely be an insufferable WASP.

Her editor Karen Leonard would probably ask 'and why not'? Well, to hell with her.

Maureen finished her port. She would wait until the next day to stock up on more. She wanted to listen to music but couldn't settle on Kate Bush or Joni Mitchell, or how about Bjork?

Charlotte had just finished watching a collage documentary by the renowned British filmmaker Adam Curtis. People Charlotte knew who were interested in mass media, rather than what was 'media art' or 'experimental', swore by Curtis. Charlotte recalled Adam Curtis's montages and collages in tandem with the Massive Attack concert she and Christine had attended over two years ago now...almost a half years prior to the ongoing pandemic.

The mixture of the live band and the cacophonous video clips reminded her of an essay she had read about a performance troupe that her Aunt Linda had once been a part of. *Video Vortex* had been active in the nineteen-seventies...they used live musicians and both live and prerecorded

video. Aunt Linda and three other women sang and held cameras. Charlotte used to be quite friendly with her eccentric aunt but she had misinterpreted some historical writing about *Video Vortex* and her aunt had screamed at her.

*Video Vortex* had morphed or decomposed into *Vortex Theatre*. Aunt Linda had been relegated to a minor role the company's history. Stupid gatekeepers, Charlotte coughed disapprovingly.

Charlotte wondered how Christine was coping in lieu of her grandfather's death. She mused about their 'band'. What if *Jane & Tonic* were to be augmented by a visual and media arts component.....somebody or maybe two bodies weaving streams in and out of the sound. But who would that or those persons be? And then *Jane & Tonic* would have to change their name...to what?

Charlotte opened a beer and decided to watch a shorter Adam Curtis film. She had very mixed opinions about this artist. She had reservations about the prevalence of documentaries and documentary practices in galleries and museums. Charlotte didn't believe in any rigid separation between fine and popular arts but then why were what she had long known as artist videos never on anything but cable television? Television could be in galleries but galleries not on television.

What did Charlotte know? She no longer watched television, except for the occasional stream. What the hell was television in the twenty-first century?

She heard the sound of something hitting the floor.

Then she heard the fire alarm.