

# “Diving into Waters of the Moon”

by Kenneth Radu

Daniel waited in his father’s hefty SUV while his parents once again tried to persuade the old lady to die. A weekly ritual, this visit to his father’s mother. He had nothing against his grandmother personally, but he hated being involved in his parents’ plans for the future. After a lot of discussion, he refused to enter the nursing home anymore and now sat in the back seat, flipping through the pages of Reptile Digest.

For sixteen of his nineteen years, they had lived in Vancouver and his grandmother lived alone in Fredericton, her husband having died in a car accident shortly after his father Calvin was born. Two or three times the family had spent Christmas at her spacious, red-bricked house, snow piled as high as her window boxes. A wood stove heated a kitchen smelling of apples and cloves. Daniel remembered a steaming, blue enamelled kettle on which he had burned his fingers.

His father’s work in electronic sales and servicing led them to Kingston. Grandmother fell into sickness and decrepitude. Last summer, his father drove to Fredericton, put her house on the market, packed and sorted her personal effects, and transferred her to a chronic care residence within walking distance of the Kingston penitentiary for men. Such an incredibly difficult time, his father said upon returning home, not only having persuaded his mother to leave her old neighbourhood, but also convinced her to relinquish control of a surprisingly large financial portfolio to her son. He managed the accounts and investments, after deducting the cost of her maintenance and his related expenses. The sale of her Fredericton house would bring in a small fortune. His father cried that night and took up smoking to ease his nerves.

“I can’t stand to see her like that,” he wept in Jewel’s arms, “she shouldn’t have to suffer. What’s the point?”

“I know, honey. Life isn’t fair.”

Daniel didn’t know what ailed his grandmother, except she seemed to be suffering a lot, so they said, and his mother talked about the quality of life, human dignity, and how horrible it was for them all to experience her misery. The doctors said nothing more could be done and death was certain in a matter of months, increasing pain and debilitation being inevitable. Her survival until then would soon depend entirely on a life support system.

Hard decisions had to be made. His parents made a lot of hard decisions, reminding Daniel each time in a hushed and emotionally-burdened voice. Moving to Kingston three years ago was another hard decision, reached only after many cups of espresso in their Vancouver bungalow, located just a ten minute bike ride from Stanley Park. Daniel loved his bike and he loved the park and, yes, he did throw a tantrum, swearing he’d run away. Lacking either the courage of his conviction then or the means to act upon it, he perused the magazine, confident in a recent decision of his own. Pretty easy actually, nothing like his parents’ hand-wringing over coffee mugs and biscotti into the small hours of the night.

He first recognized and understood that tone of voice after they decided not to proceed with another operation for his sister Amanda who, they lamented, just couldn’t take it anymore. She was four years older than he, sixteen when her parents made a hard decision regarding extraordinary medical and technological interventions and

life-support systems. He had returned home from cycling in Stanley park, the October sky darkening with rain clouds. Amanda died peacefully, they said, the tragedy almost too much to bear, but it was for the best. She had lived most of her life in a special care facility, the cost of which led to many a kitchen battle over finances. Daniel really hadn't known Amanda very well, his parents thinking it wise he not get too close. They came home that autumn day, Daniel remembered, their faces flushed from exertion and relief, the way they always looked after completing strenuous tasks like house-cleaning or sex on Sunday morning.

When he first visited his grandmother in the nursing home, she appeared more sedated than agonized, attached only to an intravenous bottle. Given what his parents felt and described, Daniel had expected bleeping machinery and monitors, tubes inserted in her mouth and nostrils through which pumped life-sustaining liquids. He once suggested they take grandmother home and put her in the spare bedroom. Jewel looked at him as if she had just witnessed an alien stepping out of its spacecraft which she believed regularly landed on earth. There are more things in heaven and earth, she always said, than are dreamed of in your philosophy, although she had neither read nor seen Hamlet. Daniel, who didn't equate dreams with philosophy, could never follow her logic and sometimes thought Jewel had placed her brains in deep freeze.

It was better not to discuss science and UFOs with his mother, because she insisted that she knew what she knew and no one could convince her otherwise. Jewel flicked off the concept of scientific evidence as if it were a noxious insect on her arm. There are other, equally valid ways of knowing. Science, she told him more than once after watching *The X-files*, her favourite television show, was not the sum total of human knowledge.

He should try using his mother's line of reasoning in his lab reports and science examinations. Sorry for his grandmother, Daniel had more

in common with lizards, as far as he was concerned. He admired their aura of supercilious indifference disguising cunning and sagacity. A lizard, impervious unless directly attacked, shielded its deepest self.

The last time he tried to carry on a conversation with his grandmother, his father had pushed her up to the head of the bed like a pillow with a brown-mottled mask pinned to its centre. She didn't know her grandson. She didn't know anyone for the most part except Calvin to whom she responded in mumbles and spittle when he shook her into consciousness and recognition.

"Go easy, Cal," Jewel said at the time, standing in a navy blue track suit as if she had just stepped out of a sportswear advertisement. Funny thing, his mother never jogged, jumped, threw, hurled, skated, skied, roller-bladed, roller-skated, snow-boarded, biked, hiked, swam, surfed, boated, batted, boxed, bowled, or wrestled. She kept her hair rigorously short like a boy's, hugged him in front of his friends, sang love songs by Bryan Adams or Leonard Cohen, and was too thin and pretty for a middle-aged mother. He heard the comments a couple of his so-called friends made. "Would you do her?" "You bet." "Hey, Daniel, your mom's really hot for her age." "Just kidding, man, no offence." What was he supposed to have done? Challenged them to a duel? It wasn't easy for him to make friends, not many guys or girls shared his interest in astronomy and theoretical mathematics, read books or studied lizards.

Because he loved to swim, he tried out for and was accepted into the swim team, diving being his specialty. If the attitudes of his team mates embarrassed or confused him, that was okay. Although their conversation didn't reach much beyond games or gonads, or the latest music plugged into their ears, Daniel found it relaxing just to get out of theorems and ruminations about cosmic origins.

"Mom, do you remember what we talked about a few days ago?" His father had asked towards the end of Daniel's last visit.

What a question! As if the semi-comatose woman even remembered the names of the days of the week. He didn't want to be in the same room with his parents when they talked to grandma about what they thought was the best thing for her to do. How unhappy and miserable they all were, they felt her pain. Wouldn't she really want to put an end to pointless suffering, if she could? Well, it was possible, things could be arranged, and it was only their love for her, Daniel heard, we love you so much we know what you really want - love love all you gotta do is love what the world needs now is love sweet love.

Calvin had shaved his head, preferring the rosy sheen of a sun-burned scalp in the summer to thin, greying hair. Waiting for his parents to return to the car, Daniel imagined his father holding the old woman's hand, patiently bringing her to the surface of life, and reminding her of what she must really want, of what was best for her, for them, think of your grandson, his needs. At best, lizards were indifferent parents, depositing clutches of eggs in the sand, depending upon the sun for incubation. With few exceptions, they provided neither care nor nurture, yet as a species lizards had survived millions of years without love. His parents got into the car, his mother slipping in behind the wheel.

"How you doing, buddy?" She spoke to the windshield.

Daniel did not answer, cringing over the use of buddy. Both his parents acted as if they were all hanging out together like friends. His father inserted a tape. The Rolling Stones. Daniel preferred Judy Collins, jazz, and anything by Bach. In his room, he listened to Thelonius Monk or Carmen MacRae or bittersweet Collins. His father kept a vinyl satchel stuffed with rock CDs in the car. He had actually bought three tickets to a Rolling Stones concert in Toronto and looked as if Daniel had ripped out his heart by refusing to go. On weekends, Cal wore blue jeans and cowboy

boots. For his fiftieth birthday last month, Jewel gave him a keyboard so he could bang out his favourite music in the basement. She had wanted Daniel's opinion for a really special birthday gift to remind Cal that he was forever young. He suggested a toupee, but she had already decided upon an electronic keyboard, the kind with all the pre-recorded melodies and accompaniment. He'd just love that: "From your loving wife and son," she had written on the card.

"She's much clearer to-day, don't you think, Jewel? So hard for her, funny how time goes by like it all happened in a flash."

Jewel nodded in agreement. She seldom talked when driving. Out of the parking lot, she swerved directly in front of on-coming traffic, oblivious to horns and screeching brakes. One of Daniel's books, *Coming of Age in the Milky Way*, fell off the back seat. From behind, his mother's head looked like a soldier's, and his father's like a pink grapefruit. That style liberated her, she said, scarcely needing to brush it after a shampoo. Teaching full time at a high school, tutoring two nights a week in the literacy program in the women's prison, and active in the local chapter of a human rights organization, Jewel had precious little time to spare.

Twice she ignored STOP signs, causing a red Nissan truck to screech and swerve away from a near-collision at one intersection. When they arrived home, his father went downstairs to his workshop and Jewel upstairs to get ready for her evening class. At least they paid no attention to his mail, so the letters addressed to him this past month with return addresses from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Berkeley, Cornell, or the University of Edinburgh elicited no comment.

In his room Daniel played Glen Gould's rendition of Bach's Goldberg Variations, music which he believed expressed the central paradoxes of the cosmos: from nothing came everything; from silence, sounds; from randomness, pattern; from

beginnings, ends. On the wall above his desk and computer, he had taped magazine photographs of planets and galaxies as seen through the Hubble telescope. They surrounded the face of Judy Collins in whose glittering eyes Daniel could imagine a warmer, loving world. He would take those with him, as well as his books. He would also take his framed copy of the Escher print, Stars, depicting a universe where polyhedrons replaced stars, and two chameleons circled in a cage of three octahedrons. Feeding raw liver to his lizards, Daniel wondered if his parents would really miss him when he left home. They had loved Amanda, they had loved Vancouver, they loved his grandmother, they loved their son.

At night with only the infrared lamp on, the terrarium looked like an exhibition of reptiles in a zoo. The bottom layered with sand and gravel, two clusters of rocks piled adroitly to create crevices, real cacti, one of which had actually flowered last year, a day lamp to imitate the sun, the terrarium covered a chrome kitchen table placed against a wall.

“Do you love me, Jewel?” he asked one of his pets, a Common or Viviparous Lizard. “Isn’t Stephen Hawking lucky he’s not their son, Cal?” he asked the other lizard which had just whipped itself off a rock and slipped into a crevice.

He opened the window to look at the full moon whose light created shadows in the dark. Recent theories suggested the presence of water in the craters. What kind of life forms, if any, would have evolved in and emerged from those frigid depths? Neither heat nor currents would affect water supposedly located and frozen at the poles of the moon. If, for some as yet unknown reason, they weren’t frozen, Daniel wondered if it were possible to swan dive from the edge of a cliff into the still waters and casually swim in the crater? Jewel said science destroyed poetry. She was quite wrong. Was the moon any less beautiful because of technological debris left behind by astronauts and probes? Was it any less beautiful because it was now

accessible and subjected to study, neither a green-cheese fantasy nor the home of telepathic aliens?

His parents didn’t know that he was planning to move to the United States. Berkeley, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Cornell had all offered generous science scholarships. When it came time to leave, Daniel knew that his father’s eyes would fill with tears and his mother would embrace him and call him buddy. He planned to leave the lizards in their care because it was within the realm of scientific probability that he would never return. Besides, crossing the border with reptiles posed a problem. Reaching into the terrarium to stroke Jewel’s head with a forefinger, Daniel remembered how easily he had decided. As easy as diving into waters of the moon.