

SUNNY NOW & THEN

by Sandra Gulland

@ 2014 (but written in 1989)

For my grandmother May,
who also loved hot dogs.

"Ghosts aren't people who have died,
but unlived parts of ourselves ... "

—Loren Vanderpost, *The Seed and the Sower*

Chapter One

People who met Sunny for the first time were struck by her resemblance to a cow. She lumbered, but with purpose, her stout body an impressive demonstration of mass in motion.

Sunny, however, felt otherwise. She felt her body growing up around her like a curse. It was the anchor that secured her to old age. It was the reminder that she was no longer young. Lately she'd even begun to begrudge the girls who came into her shop (a converted garage by the side of highway 512). They stood before the cracked mirror in vintage rags indifferent to their firm buttocks, lean legs and tiny waists, assuming it would always be so.

"So what else is new?" Sunny said to herself, pouring out the last cup of coffee she sold at the makeshift counter she'd set up in the back of the garage. It was mid-day on a Tuesday and there was no one in the shop. A woman with a crabby toddler had been in earlier and messed up all the hats. She'd left beaming in a sweeping feather number. Then two young men had come by for a Tarot card reading, a lucrative little sideline. She'd told them she saw a future of good sex and good drugs and sent them happily on their way. Everyone was having a good time except her. "Big deal," she said.

Another characteristic of Sunny's old age was this, her inclination to talk out loud. The habit began when her daughter Ann—originally Moon-Shadow—had finally moved out and Sunny had taken to muttering. But lately she engaged in full-scale debates in front of her mirror and elsewhere.

"I don't know what you mean," she'd said to the mirror this morning, on waking. "No blame," she added, apologetically. And, later in the day, "I see your point," followed by, "Maybe we can talk about it later."

Since the only witnesses were Jim, Joe and John, her three Calico cats, there was little harm done. Who could begrudge a woman—an old woman living by herself in a small town in northern Ontario—this one eccentricity?

Long Swamp was full of eccentrics and nobody noticed one way or another. Several decades before an influx of American hippies (Sunny included) had settled there—in the beginning because the land was cheap and in the end because the parties were good.

"No matter," Sunny said and sat down with a soft thud, the musty chair exhaling a flurry of down from a hole in the arm.

But this time something unusual happened. A female voice (from her elbow, she thought, strangely enough—how could that be?) spoke back. It said: *Voyons donc!*

The words were faint, but clear nonetheless.

Had she *thought* those words? She didn't think so. She didn't even know what voy on donk meant. Wasn't that French? It sounded French.

"Who is speaking?" she demanded.

"Talking to yourself again, Sunny?"

It was a male voice, coming from behind her.

"Elroy! Don't do that to me!" Sunny pulled herself out of the chair and brushed imaginary crumbs from her bosom—another characteristic of old age, for there were no

crumbs, no need to brush, and when, indeed, had that part of her body become bosom and not breasts?

Elroy stood before her, holding a cake with one candle sunken into its gooey center. "I made you a cake."

Elroy was shorter than Sunny, and, at fifty-seven, quite a bit younger—although Sunny observed with some satisfaction a telltale sign of age on him, as well: a budding beer belly. Elroy still fancied himself a ladies' man and went to great efforts to suck in his stomach, with the result that he sometimes found it difficult to speak around members of the opposite sex, especially those of the younger variety with whom he claimed great affinity. But around Sunny he could relax. "I made it myself—well, from a mix," he said. "Duncan Hines." He put the plate down on the lop-sided card table.

"Not there," Sunny said, catching the cake before it slid onto the dusty Oriental. She'd meant to get her daughter Ann to fix the one bent leg. Her daughter could fix anything and was handy to have around, but since she'd moved to Ottawa she was too busy fixing the government to bother with her mother's furniture.

"Well, aren't you going to say anything?" Elroy objected. Unlike Sunny and many of the other inhabitants of Long Swamp, Elroy had actually grown up there and spoke with that lilting twang characteristic of the area.

"I'm to feel cheerful, I suppose, turning eighty?" Sunny put the cake down on a slab of plywood supported by a blue plastic pop bottle crate that served as a coffee table. She stood and surveyed Elroy's offering. The cake was drowning in pink icing, worth a two-pound gain on the scales no doubt. "Thanks," she said gruffly. "How did you find out?"

"Boy, you're in a mood," he said. "Pardon moi for intruding." In spite of his Ottawa Valley education, Elroy often spoke in a slightly studied manner, formed from a habit of watching late-night movies and listening to the CBC on long hauls across Canada.

"Cripes, I'm sorry. Want a beer?" Sunny pulled utensils out of an ancient cupboard, going out of her way to search for plates without a chip or a crack. It was the least she could do. "Also, I've a bag of Drum. Interested?"

In spite of herself she was cheering up. It had been bugging her that her daughter hadn't phoned, that here she was at the eighty-year mark and no one seemed to care. She knew it was her own fault for having insisted over the years that it was nothing but silliness to make a fuss over birthdays, but still...was a phone call such a big deal?

Elroy grinned. "Christ." He let out a rueful laugh, as if he's just come off a three-day binge, as if there were things he dare not mention...not in polite company anyway.

Sunny held her tongue. This was another of Elroy's postures. He liked to see himself as the rebel, the rogue, the wild and crazy guy. Sunny granted him this, although what she saw, in fact, was a middle-aged bush bachelor still living with his domineering mother. She saw all this and forgave him his fantasies, for over the years of beer and hand-rolled cigarettes (Elroy liked to escape his mother's house at least once a day, and Sunny was conveniently next door), they'd come to know and understand each other well. She'd told him his various fortunes, given him advice on his fantasy love life, and, after he'd come to trust her, he even read her his poems, sentimental constructions he spun to keep from falling asleep at the wheel of The Mac, the eighteen-wheel dinosaur which lurked in the off time behind his mother's ramshackle house.

"Have you ever heard voices, Elroy?" Sunny asked, licking the thin cigarette paper. In spite of years of experience, she still found it difficult to roll.

Elroy cut off two huge pieces of cake—each practically a quarter of the whole—and lifted them clumsily onto the plates. "People talking?" he asked.

"No—just a voice." Sunny inhaled sharply. She was down to one-a-day.

"But nobody there?" He shoved a big clump of the gooey mess into his mouth and rolled his eyes. "Hey, not bad," he said.

Sunny nodded, holding her breath.

"A ghost you mean," Elroy said matter-of-factly, putting down his fork and taking the cigarette from her. "I've heard of such things, but no, can't say I ever heard one myself. ... You know, I should open a bakery. Why haven't I thought of that before?" Elroy had a bad back and trucking was hard on him. He was always considering other vocations.

"I wasn't a ghost," Sunny said. Out of politeness she took a bite of the cake. Elroy was right—it wasn't bad—but she had made the mistake of using the old silver fork with the surface wearing off. It had a bitter taste. She got up to get another fork, rummaging through the cardboard box for one with straight prongs. She knew there was one in there somewhere. "Just a voice," she went on. "A woman's voice." Low and melodic.

"When I'm making a poem, words come into my head," Elroy said. He'd considered making a living publishing his efforts. Sunny had had to inform him of reality. He'd been angry at first but then settled down. This had happened the week before last. Usually they didn't quarrel so they weren't too practiced in making up.

Sunny sat back down. She felt tingly all over and a nice cloudy feeling was drifting in on her brain. Ah, nicotine. Later she would phone Ann, tell her today was her birthday. "This is different," she said. "It's like someone inside you talking, but you're not thinking the words."

"This happened to you?"

"Just before you came."

"And the voice said, 'Behold the handsome prince'?"

Sunny begrudged a smile.

"That's weird. What did it say?"

"Well, that's the thing." She helped herself to a second piece of cake, a virtuous sliver this time. "It said voy on donk. Is that French or something?" Sunny could count to ten in Japanese and ask for a cigarette in Russian but that was the extent of it. In high school in the States she'd taken Spanish and got Fs. Elroy was Canadian and knew at least a little French.

"Voy on donk...voy on donk..." Elroy repeated the words to himself, staring at the ceiling. "Voyons donc," he said finally.

Sunny sat forward. "What does it mean?" Now she understood how her clients felt as she hovered over the tarot cards, that feeling of being right on the edge of something significant.

"It means 'Come on now' or 'Don't be silly', that kind of thing. Yes...that's French," he said, clearly proud.

Sunny felt irritated. The voice had been reprimanding her. She had expected something ... well, poetic, anyway.

"Is that all it said?" Elroy asked, downing the beer.

"I was in a bad mood. I guess it was trying to cheer me up."

"Did it?"

"Hell, no! It scared the daylights out of me."

"It's strange that it talked in French, don't you think? You don't even know French. Where did you hear it?"

"In my elbow."

Elroy stopped, a chunk of cake balanced on his fork. "Your elbow?"

Sunny nodded.

"Which one?"

Sunny touched her left side.

The piece of cake hovering inches in front of Elroy's mouth dropped onto the dusty carpet. "Christ, Sunny—your *elbow*?"

And then they both cracked up, laughing so hard they had to stagger to the back door for air. There they stood weakly, holding onto the splintering door jambs until the spasms subsided, wiping tears from their eyes.

"Well, happy birthday anyway," Elroy said finally, when he dared, his voice high and squeaky. He patted Sunny gingerly on the shoulder.

Sunny looked at him and they collapsed again. Elroy gestured "enough, enough" and staggered home across the lawn, strangled giggles escaping in bursts.