

PRAISE FOR PHASE SHIFT

...fast-paced, entertaining science fiction...

–Publisher’s Weekly

In Phase Shift, Elise Abram explores a fascinating premise...

–Dora McAlpin, Amazon Reviewer

Elise Abram has written an entertaining...sci fi/mystery combo. The pacing is comfortably fast, the dialog is convincing, and the developing plot is interesting...very entertaining and well-written.

–C. McCallum, Amazon Reviewer

The story was so skilfully written, that I forgot I was reading and found myself becoming lost in the story. The characters have depth and are very “real”.

–“Zabri”, Amazon Reviewer

...An intriguing cast of characters and vivid descriptions that suck you into the story. I loved Molly McBride...

–Leah Hodge, Amazon Reviewer

The words pretty much flew off the page. Elise Abram’s writing style is very natural and easy to digest.

–Heather C. Pritchett, Amazon Reviewer

Sharp, smart and intriguing—what more could you want?

–Otis, Amazon Reviewer

Elise Abram has managed to make me feel like writing again, after many years. I felt the first glimmer even before I finished the prologue. I think it was the masterful writing, plus this fantastic story!

–The Reb, Amazon Reviewer

ALSO BY ELISE ABRAM

Phase Shift

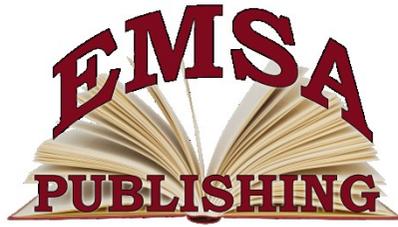
The Mummy Wore Combat Boots

Throwaway Child

The Revenant

PHASE SHIFT

ELISE ABRAM



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PHASE SHIFT

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Phase Shift is printed in Times New Roman with titles in Breamcatcher by Typodermic Fonts.

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PRELUDE

I am lying in the dark listening to my husband's raspy almost-snore, unable to sleep. To keep myself occupied, I try to remember when I first knew I wanted to be an archaeologist.

After seeing the first Indiana Jones movie as a teenager, perhaps?

No, Indy merely served to bolster my interest in the field.

The real turning point came while watching a documentary called "In Search of Noah's Ark" when I was no more than twelve, back in the time before the super cinemas. It was then I knew--wood decomposed to nothing but dark shadows in the soil, aerial photographs of well-fed vegetation, and measurements approximating those in The Bible—I still shudder in awe at the thought of it.

My first real taste of archaeology was in the middle of a conservation area almost an hour's drive north of the city: dark soil dampening trouser knees and buttocks, dirt rammed under fingernails, blowing out a peppering of dust mixed with snot on the Kleenex—man! I was hooked.

A few years later I was near graduation and looking toward grad school. Dr. Richardson, the head of the Archaeology department, offered to be my faculty advisor and I accepted without hesitation. He assigned me a site, the remains of a carriage house behind a restored clapboard house, built nearly two centuries ago. The planning, supervision, excavation and analysis of the site over two years' time would earn me my Master's degree.

My assistants and I arrived at the house, to find Dr. Richardson sitting on the stoop reading *Scientific American*, an issue featuring an article about a cache of Peruvian mummies. Dr. Richardson is a forensic anthropologist. That means he gets off on dead people and figuring out how they died. He works extensively with the police, to give them clues as to what decomposed bodies and skeletons might have looked like while they were still living and breathing.

We approached the stoop and he stood to greet us. I had to crane my neck and shield my eyes from the sun in order to meet his gaze. He smiled at me, said hello, and squeezed my shoulder. My stomach lurched. Dr. Richardson is what we used to call "a hunk". The first time my mother met him she called him "a dreamboat" and said she wouldn't throw him out of her bed for eating crackers. The way things turned out, that comment was so many different levels of wrong.

The house was converted to a living museum sometime in the late eighties. The side entrance, added on around the same time, smelled of new carpet and fresh paint. Pictures of the house in various stages of disrepair and restoration hung on the walls like windows into the past. Dr. Richardson gave us the grand tour: men's parlor, women's sitting room, dining room, upstairs ballroom, and nurseries. A narrow staircase took us up to the third floor servants' quarters.

Back downstairs, Dr. Richardson showed us the kitchen. The walls were of unfinished wood made dark by soot. At the centre of one wall was the original hearth, complete with bake ovens. A single wooden table stood in the middle of the room, deeply scarred through use and over time, and in the far corner, the kitchen pantry, converted to a small storage-cum-utility closet after the restorations. Near the ceiling Dr. Richardson pointed to a series of wallpaper layers. He recited each occupation and era by rote and I was in awe of him.

He finished his lecture and ushered us out of our cramped quarters. I chanced a glance up at him and he smiled at me. A perfect three-toed crow's foot appeared to frame the outer edge of each of his eyes. The solitary, unshaded light bulb that dimly lit the room shone in his dark eyes—a girl could get lost in those eyes. I blushed, embarrassed at the lust I felt for him at that moment, chastising myself for falling for my faculty advisor. But then I reminded myself that Dr. Richardson was a good sixteen years' my senior, and everyone knew he was seeing Suzanne Pascoe, the Egyptologist. Dr. Richardson was safe, like a movie star. Like a movie star, he was unattainable, and consequently, not entirely real. I told myself the crush would pass, and it eventually did.

Palmer's snoring again. I nudge him, tell him to roll over, then roll over myself, wedging one hand between his rib cage and the mattress and one foot arch-deep between his thighs. He doesn't protest.

Sleep has eluded me this evening. Pretty soon my bedside alarm will begin to shriek at me, signifying the start of yet another day. I need a drink. Tea would go down good right about now. Hot tea with honey and lemon.

In the kitchen, I fill the kettle and plug it in. While I wait for the water to boil, I stroll into the living room and take a peek out the front window. Two black sedans are parked on the road, each facing opposite directions, waiting for me in case I decide to take it on the lam. Inside each car sits a pair of officers—which officers are out there tonight is anybody's guess. The possibilities read like a who's who for law enforcement: CIA, CSIS, OPP...

It's funny how quickly things spiral out of your control: yesterday I was an archaeology professor considering earning my doctoral degree. Today I am the prime suspect in a murder investigation.

The kettle begins to boil. I unplug it. Sometime between eyeing the sedans and thinking about the death I may have expedited, I've lost my appetite for tea.

I return to bed, drawing my body close to Palmer's, more for security than warmth. I find solace in the fact I was right about one thing when I was struggling with that crush on my faculty advisor all those years ago: Palmer Richardson *is* safe.

SAMKIN'S STORY

Little Samkin Tailorson had always known he was different and didn't belong. He was paler than most, and frailer, too. The very air he breathed knew this and refused to agree with him. On most days, the air seemed too thick, and try as he might, poor Samkin couldn't get it down fast enough. On those days, Samkin would gasp and cough until his throat burned and his eyes turned crimson for the burst blood vessels within.

"Asthma," those in the know might say, but there were none who were "in the know," for there was no such ailment as asthma on Samkin's world.

At night, on those particularly bad days, Samkin would lie awake in bed, listening to the voices of Vina Tailorsmate and Gilmore Tailor, his parents, confused at the hushed dialog which ensued:

Vina: I knew it. I was wary from the start.

Gilmore: Now, Vina...

Vina: I mean it, Gil, what good are we doing the boy here?

Gilmore: How can you seriously suggest we should—

Vina: He should be with people who can help him. People who know what to do.

Gilmore: (Samkin imagined his father shaking his head.) I forbid it.

Vina: He has difficulty breathing. *Breathing*, Gil. One of these days he'll expire, I swear.

Gilmore: And what would you have me do? (And then in a voice more hushed than before) I broke the integrity of The Pact, Vina. Do you know what would happen to me, to us, to our family, if they found out?

Samkin had no idea of what "integrity" or "pact" meant, although he'd heard the phrasing before, and with increased frequency of late.

At night, he dreamt about The Integrity of the Pact. It was a huge, orange, scaly lizard with bug-green eyes. It laughed as it fixed its funnel-like proboscis over his lips and nose and sucked. Sucked and sucked until there was no air left. He struggled violently to catch his breath. Yet still it continued to suck. Continued until a strange woman with blue-green eyes, yellow hair and skin as pale as was his own entered the room, turned on the lights, and screamed.

Samkin awoke from these dreams gasping for air, mouth bloody, ringed by the gouges formed as he clawed at the beast in his sleep. Certain he had screamed, he lay in bed waiting for one of his parents to arrive and soothe him with soft, cooing voice—but they never came.

Samkin hated The Integrity of the Pact, viewed it as the only thing standing between breath and expiration for him. He dreamed of the day when he could, at last, find the strength to rise up and smite the mighty beast, stealing the very life from it as it breathed him to within inches of losing his own.

ARTIFACT NIGHT

I have been coerced by Palmer to play Antiques Roadshow at the Royal Ontario Museum tonight in his stead. Artifact night at the ROM is a time-honoured tradition in which otherwise respectable people lug their trash, and occasionally the odd treasure, and go trolling for dough. I hate that I'll have to spend all night fielding questions about the monetary value of their stuff. It's like what happens on archaeological sites—someone always comes around and asks if you've found any gold yet. It's inevitable. Tell me something, I've always been dying to say, when you move house how much gold do *you* leave behind? Instead I smile, and try to educate them on the fact that archaeology is not about the money. What's more valuable is the information artifacts give us about what went on while the site was occupied all those years ago, regardless of their material of manufacture.

One look at the crowd so far and I can tell that won't wash. You don't drag yourself out of the house along with crates of your most valued possessions, downtown on a week night to hear about archaeological altruism. Many have been the nights Palmer entertained me with stories about how someone had gotten angry with him because he'd diagnosed their wanna-be museum pieces as having no monetary value. Can you imagine? They get angry at him! As though it were his fault that dear, departed grandma was cheap and purchased an imitation Tiffany instead of the real thing.

The spartan corridor which leads from the school entrance past the cafeteria and gift shop seems to go on for miles, and the shoulder bag that carries my lap top seems to gain weight with every step.

I check my watch. Artifact night isn't scheduled to begin for at least another twenty minutes or so, but you wouldn't know it, judging by the sheer number of people lining up, single-file, against the painted cinderblock of the corridor.

A row of metal tables has been set up opposite the Lower Rotunda (which is much plainer than the majesty of the gilded, tiled, domed Upper Rotunda on the floor above), and in front of the Ontario Archaeology Gallery. Under a low roof in a dimly lit corridor sit three people, two men and one woman, looking quite bored, indeed. These are my partners in crime for the evening.

On the far left is a man I've never seen before. I read the placard in front of him. I recognize the name as belonging to the current archaeologist on the Ministry of Transportation payroll. I smile and wave at the man sitting beside him, an old archaeologist friend with a residual Czech accent and a quick sense of humor. Beside him, a bookish woman, with dark, brown hair—Palmer's ex-girlfriend, Suzanne Pascoe. She wears a Chanel-style, baby-pink suit which compliments her complexion. And though I hate to admit it, she looks good. Damn good. Her smoky, mascaraed eyes widen slightly when she sees me.

In front of the empty seat beside her the card reads "Professor Richardson". She was expecting Palmer. She thought Palmer was coming and isolated his seat so she could have him all to herself. It's sad, really, when you think about it. Palmer broke it off with her long ago so he could be with me in good conscience, yet she's still hung up on him.

Fun night this was turning out to be. So far, I was to be isolated from the only friend who turned out for the evening, and forced to make small-talk with my husband's ex. Lovely.

The co-coordinator for the evening is some guy named Runkleman. Ian, I think. A man matching Palmer's description of Runkleman is standing close to the totem pole. He is tall and gangly. His neck is so long and thin, it seems almost impossible his skeleton is able to maintain his head in an upright posture. He holds a blue Lucite clip board, and wears a ROM identification card. It hangs from a chain around his neck, and is redundantly clipped to the right chest pocket of his dress shirt.

"Excuse me," I say, "I'm Molly McBride? I'm filling in for Palmer Richardson tonight?"

The man looks down his prominent Romanesque nose at me. "I thought Dr. Richardson was sending his wife."

"I am his wife." I smile and try to look ingenuous.

"Uh huh," Runkleman retorts.

People usually have one of two reactions whenever I'm introduced as Palmer's wife. There's the I'm-Horrified-He's-Robbed-The-Cradle look, usually given by women approaching the half-century-mark and beyond. Then there's the You-Old-Dog-You look, usually to be found on the faces of men around the same age as Palmer. Breaking with tradition, Runkleman's prissy gaze seems to weigh in with the former.

"The panel's over there," he says, shooing me back to the table. For years now, the museum has been organizing semi-annual nights like this, and Palmer's been diligently attending for as long as I can remember. This is the first time in my memory he's ever missed a night, something or other about a valuable donation to the department he has to accept tonight or not at all.

I take a deep breath and glance back toward the panel. At some point during my run-in with Runkleman, Suzanne has played musical chairs. The empty chair is between the two men now. Suzanne sits on the far end beside my archaeology buddy. Thank heaven for small miracles. I turn my attention back to Runkleman, but he's already gone,

shaking hands with another man, equally as peckish yet at least a full foot shorter.

There is a growing buzz coming from the queue building behind the claret velvet crowd control barriers. They are the usual bunch one might see on an occasion such as this, each of them grinning eagerly as they await their turn, passing time trading stories about their respective finds. The only difference between the patrons of the show and these ones tonight is that outside of the odd oil painting in gilded frame, this crowd is devoid of any artifacts larger than those that might fit into a standard, file storage box.

Time to take my place on the panel, I suppose. My old archaeology buddy stands, grabs my hand in his, and shakes it enthusiastically. "Molly," he says, "good to see you again." He lets go of my hand.

"Is this you?" he asks. He points to the placard marking my spot. "I heard ol' Paulie married a professor at the University, but I had no idea it was you."

Paulie? Polly? Pally? The nickname throws me off. Nobody I know has ever called Palmer 'Paulie', not even his mother. "Yeah, this is me."

"How is the old guy anyway?"

"He's..." The pause between words lengthens exponentially as I try to think of something clever to say, but I am so taken aback by the whole Paulie thing I can't think of anything. "...good." Quickly, I snatch up the folded cardboard placard marking my spot and read the name on it. "Professor Richardson," it says. It *was* meant for me. If they'd meant Palmer, they would have used "Dr." I shake my head in disbelief. I hate when people assume you can't be married without taking your husband's last name.

"Hey, listen, Serge: you wouldn't happen to have a thick, black marker hanging around, would you?"

"Thick...black...no, why?"

Inside my purse is a ball point pen, which I use to scribble out "Richardson" on the placard. Above the scribbles, I write "McBride" in thin, blue letters. When I'm

done, I hold the folded cardboard up to eye level at arm's length and examine my handiwork. From a distance, it looks like "Professor Richardson" covered with a bunch of blue scribbles. I sigh, surprised at how good it feels to oxygenate my lungs. The pen threatens to roll off the table, but I catch it before it falls.

Serge points out a set of electrical outlets behind us and I set up my computer before dropping into my seat. My back is jarred by the hard metal of the folding chair. Nevertheless, I settle in for the long-haul.

If the grey-haired biddy sitting across from me rolls her eyes one more time, I swear I'm going to deck her. "I'm pretty sure, ma'am," I tell her once more, "the key (as I've already said) is in the maker's mark. This plate was manufactured at a pottery house in Gloucestershire. According to my source..." I pause to scroll down the document displayed on the screen of my laptop, "this particular pottery house did make flow blue Willow Ware out of Staffordshire, but only until about 1940 or so when there was a fire that burned the plant down. They moved the operation to Gloucestershire and continued to manufacture this plate from there after about 1945.

"If your grandmother had this plate in her possession, she couldn't have purchased it before then."

The woman shakes her wrinkles at me and clucks her tongue. "You must be mistaken, dear. Please, check again."

"I have checked again. And again. I'm sorry. Post 1945."

The woman clucks her tongue once more and continues to shake her head. "I'm sure you're mistaken. Please—"

"Really, there's no mistake. Here." I turn my computer around so she can see the screen. "I've highlighted the portion that confirms the post 1945 date."

The woman recoils in her chair as if I've unleashed a can of pepper spray at her, and commences to fanning the air before her face with her hand. Apologetically, she says: "I've

never had much use for computers." Now I'm the one about to recoil in my seat. It used to be I'd have to schlep my entire reference library with me to every dig I've ever been on. Boxes and boxes of books and binders and folders in order to identify that one piece of elusive Wheat-sheaf patterned Ironstone, or find an approximate date for a collection of Edge-ware, and then I discovered the department's scanner and CD-ROM burner. I spent the better part of reading week last year scanning all of my loose papers, articles, and dog-eared favourite pages from books, saving them to my computer and burning them all to CD-ROM for back-up. As much as I hate to admit it, I'd be lost without my computer.

"Besides," the old lady continues with her excuse, "the print on the screen is much too small for me to see without my reading glasses.

"By the way," she says, "whatever happened to that nice young man, the one with the pretty brown eyes from the University?" She cranes her neck as she surveys the immediate area, looking for someone I can only surmise is Palmer.

"Ma'am? Might I suggest you go home and look at the other plates in your grandmother's collection?" Suddenly, I feel guilty I've been so abrupt with the woman, and I make a conscious effort to soften my tone: "Maybe one of the plates in her set broke and she replaced it with this one, not realizing it wasn't an original."

The woman continues to babble on about something or other having to do with how she's sure I'm mistaken and she absolutely would have to bring the plate again when that handsome, young professor was next in attendance.

"I'm sure he'd like that," I offer. I catch Suzanne staring at us, apparently more interested in our interaction than in the artifact she's examining. She smiles pertly at me, and I smile back, trying to mirror the exact same sentiment.

The grey-haired woman returns her plate to her carpet bag and has (at last) mustered enough energy to rise and leave, without so much as a thank-you.

"I see you've met Old Lady Weatherly," Serge whispers, so close I detect coffee on his breath.

"She's here every time we are. She's quite sweet on your Paulie. Did she mention his pretty brown eyes?"

I smile and breathe a quick laugh. Someone is calling me—or at least, he would be, if I ever cared to change my name legally.

"It's McBride," I tell him, and I point to the placard in front of me. "I go by McBride?"

"Sorry," the man offers. He holds his hand out for me to shake. "Ms. McBride, I'm Stanley Hume."

As I shake his hand, I take a moment to study his features. He is a petite man, with narrow, rounded shoulders, head nearly bald save for the wispy fringe around its circumference. The lenses of his glasses are thick and round, and set in thick, black frames which make him look like a young Mr. Magoo.

"Hello, Mr. Hume. What can I do for you today?"

"Call me Stanley, Ms. McBride. Please." He is carrying a tan overcoat on one bent arm. He slings it over the back of his chair before sitting.

"Okay." I smile ever so slightly. Let's make this quick, I pray; I am beginning to feel sleepy. "Stanley. What can I do for you today?"

"It's this," he says. He plunks a tin cigar box down on the table in front of me. It lands with a metallic thud. He smiles embarrassingly. "Go ahead," he says as if challenging me, "open it," followed by, *I dare you*, spoken with his eyes.

I smile my thin smile at him once more and then toss Serge a look. You'd think the guy had the Holy Grail itself secreted away inside that box.

The lid sticks and I fumble with it momentarily before working it open, handling it gingerly, lest the rusted iron hinges crumble away in my hands.

"I found it in my backyard," he says proudly. "I was putting in a pond and hit it with my shovel," this apologetically. "The lid sticks because of it."

Gently releasing the lid so it rests on the table, I zoom in on the contents: a bright blue aluminum coin with a five-point star at its centre, the kind you make in machines at places such as Centre Island or Niagara Falls; a faded, sepia photograph; a thin, silvered cigarette case; and something circular in shape which looks like the remote for a garage door opener. My eyes focus first on the weathered photograph. Depicted in the photo are two men. The man on the right is a regular Dapper Dan. He wears a driving cap and dark tweed jacket over knitted vest, circa *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. The guy on the left has a full mane of shocking white hair and an equally shocking long white beard which tapers to a point somewhere below his Adam's apple. Though I recognize where they're standing, I can't quite put my finger on where I've seen it before.

"Where was this taken?" I ask Stanley. "I know this place."

"The Princess Gates," he tells me, "at the Ex."

"Right," I say, mentally correcting Stanley's error: the gates are called "The *Princes'* Gates", not in honour of any princess (some of my students actually believe they were named for Princess Di), but to commemorate Prince Edward and Prince George of England's 1927 visit to the fair grounds. Another look at the photo confirms it—the white stone archway and Roman columns of the gates figure prominently in the photo. "Of course," I say, flashing what feels like an uncomfortable smile, "The Princes' Gates." I've been to the Canadian National Exhibition at least once a year for my entire life. How could I ever have missed that?

"Who are the men in the picture?"

Stanley shrugs his shoulders. "I don't know. The picture was in the box when I found it."

"And you say it was buried in your backyard?"

"Uh huh," he says. He snorts out a laugh. "How cool is that?"

Pretty cool, I have to admit, but only to myself. I force myself to smile and put the picture back into the box. No

doubt about it, this box was buried, and for some time. Though Stanley did a thorough job during its posthumous clean-up, the thing is dull and weather-worn, and still smells of damp earth.

"Who do you think buried it?" I ask, picking up the turquoise, aluminum coin.

Again he shrugs. "Dunno," he says. "A previous owner, maybe?"

The coin reads, *Prescott and Prefect/Canadian National Exhibition 1949*. I read it out loud.

"Sounds like a law firm, you know? Like those personal injury guys on the tube." He releases another unselfconscious, snorting guffaw.

My mouth inadvertently forms another of those thin-lipped smiles. "The previous owners of the property maybe?"

"Dunno," he says, shrugging again.

My hands drop to the table. The coin feels almost weightless in them. "What do you know about the history of your house, Stanley?"

"I know it was the house I was born in," he offers, proudly. "I think my parents bought it when they got married."

"Which was when?"

"Fifty-five? Or was it fifty-four? No...Fifty-five. It was fifty-five...I think."

"And how old is your house?"

"It's a century home, I know that. Built sometime around the turn of the century." He shifts his position in the thinly padded bridge chair beneath him. "The turn of the twentieth century, that is." He snorts again, beaming, as if he has just told the funniest joke in the world.

I try to look amused by his wit, but then remember the coin. Grasping it in both hands, I raise it to eye level. Skin oil often helps to clean away dirt encrusted from long-buried metallic objects. The best source for oil of this kind is stored in the folds of the nose, where the outer edge of the nostril meets the face. I rub the side of my nose with my thumb and

then rub the coin between my oily thumb and forefinger. Not much else is revealed so I try it again. Still nothing. "And so this box might have been buried sometime after the date on the coin, but before when you were born, sometime in the mid-nineteen-hundreds."

"Nineteen-sixty," he says. I must look puzzled, because he adds, "That's when I was born: nineteen-sixty," as clarification.

"But you don't know the men in the photo?"

He frowns. "Nope."

"And the names Prescott and Prefect don't ring any bells with you?"

He continues to frown and begins shaking his head. "Uh-uh."

"So maybe it was buried between nineteen-forty-nine and sometime in the nineteen-fifties when your parents bought the house?"

Stanley shrugs.

"Interesting," I say, sounding more distracted than interested. I drop the turquoise coin into the box, pick up the silvered cigarette case, and admire the delicate filigreed engravings on its exterior by tracing it with my finger. The workmanship that must have gone into its manufacture...it's a beautiful thing.

Inside the case is a paper liner the size of the interior of the case. On the paper is what looks like a map of the world, although it doesn't jibe with the atlas in my mind. There are fewer land masses on the map for one, and there is a gaping inlet where California should be. Also, some island chains in the Pacific seem to be missing. "Interesting," I say once more, this time with feeling. I raise the open case to my face and breathe deeply, expecting to smell stale tobacco, but sense dust and damp earth instead. "Huh," I say. I close the case, return it to the box, and turn my attention to the garage-door-remote-like thing.

"Strange," I say in spite of myself. The object is actually lighter than I had anticipated and I almost drop it. On

the back of it is a clip, like a belt clip on a cell phone case. The object itself is circular, about two inches in diameter. It's made of a lightweight material like burnished aluminum or chrome. On its face are two concentric circles, the inside one of polished metal, no more than one-quarter of an inch in diameter. My fingers pass over the smaller circle and I realize it is a button. Curious, I depress the button. I'm not sure what I expect to happen when I do, but I feel kind of disappointed when nothing does. No bells. No beeps. No fireworks.

"What's this?" I ask Stanley.

He laughs once, breathy and nasal before he says, "I was hoping you could tell me."

"This was in the box with the other things?"

"Yep," Stanley says, staring at me.

"This seems way more modern than the other artifacts."

"I know," he gushes, "isn't it cool? That's what they call an anachronism, isn't it? Something out of time?"

It's an anachronism, all right. And the fact Stanley knows it's called that makes his collection that much more suspect.

"Stanley, on an archaeological site," I say, trying not to sound too condescending in an effort to avoid another Old Lady Weatherly scenario, "on an archaeological site when we find artifacts together which don't seem to belong to the same time period, we usually concede its because the site's been...disturbed somehow. Was where you found this thing in your backyard at all disturbed?"

"Oh, no!" he blurts, sounding every bit as surprised at the accusation as he looks. "Ms. McBride, I assure you the ground in my backyard is every bit as pristine as the day my parents bought the property." His facial expression seems wounded. "Besides," he offers, "I found it in the same box as the other artifacts. How could a simple disturbance of the soil account for that?"

"What about your friends, Stanley. Could one of them be playing a practical joke on you? Lifting the sod, maybe, in

order to bury the box." I chance a quick glance at my watch. Not quite 8:30 yet. My watch is battery operated and doesn't tick. No use holding it up to my ear to make sure its working.

"Look at me, Ms. McBride," he says, matter-of-factly. "I'm a very lonely man. I get up in the morning, go to work, and come home in the evening. I see no one but strangers all day long. The only familiar face is the one I see in the mirror every morning when I wake up, and every night before I go to sleep." Stanley looks down at his hands which he begins to wring together.

The man looks pitiful. If what he says is true, I feel sorry for him.

"I wish I had people who cared enough about me to play such a joke."

"Look, Stanley," I say, "why don't you leave it with me. Maybe I could find some time over the next little while to do some research about your house, find out who the previous owners were." Immediately after I say this I'm sorry.

"Absolutely. Keep the artifacts for as long as you like."

"No, Stanley, I don't mean the artifacts. Why don't you give me your phone number and—"

"But I want you to have them. Couldn't you take another look at them tomorrow, maybe? In the light of day? See if anyone you know can help you with my mystery. When you're done, you could swing by my place to return them and check out where I found them."

While Stanley's discovery certainly sounds promising, my offer to do the research for him was kind of half-hearted, and self-serving. Should he take me up on the offer, he might leave. I could say I did the research on his property and found nothing. Consequently, I would be done with Stanley Hume forever, this night would shortly draw to a close and I could go home. If I accepted the artifacts however, it would mean the evening would not end with the little hand on the eight and the big hand on the six, but rather, would linger on, long into the week, consuming more of my time than I'm willing

to give to the matter. And for what? For nothing more than a practical joke? The more I think about it, the more I'm sure this is the case.

For example, on occasion, the University runs sites for volunteers in order to educate the public on the precariousness of the archaeological record. It happens practically every time. There's always some yahoo who thinks it'd be funny to screw with the archaeologists by tossing a penny into a unit and try to convince the archaeologists he'd dug it up with the rest of the artifacts. The fact of the matter is no archaeologist worth her salt would ever fall for that. For one thing, the "joke" is just as tired as Old Lady Weatherly's support hose. For another, depending on how far the excavations had progressed, the penny would be an anomaly and probably thrown out anyway, because it would be the only thing that didn't fit.

The truth is you don't get collections of artifacts that are this divergent from each other, not without soil disturbance or some kind of monkey business.

"I don't want your artifacts, Stanley."

Stanley looks as though I've just slapped him in the face. "Please, Ms. McBride. I would consider your agreeing to investigate an honour."

"Really, Stanley, I—" My protest is cut short by chimes sounding over the P.A. system indicating the end of the evening. At last.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," says a whiney voice that could only belong to Runkleman, "the museum is now closing. Please exit via the Rotunda doors and have a good evening. Thank you for visiting the Royal Ontario Museum."

"Okay, then," Stanley says. He slaps his thighs, stands and gathers his overcoat from the back of his chair, "it's settled, then." He fumbles in his back pocket for his wallet and then fumbles with his wallet until he withdraws a business card with black, embossed text on it. "My card. Call me when you're done and you can come over and take a look-see at the yard."

Once more the chimes sound. Shortly thereafter, Runkleman resumes his post directing human traffic out of the building.

"Goodnight, Ms. McBride. And thank you." He nods curtly and holds out his hand, grinning like the cat that just ate the canary. We shake hands briefly. He continues to smile as he fastidiously adjusts his overcoat on his arm and then turns to leave. Finally, I think, as I watch Stanley's back disappear into the open elevator doors at the opposite end of the Lower Rotunda. He waves briefly as the doors close.

What a bust this night has been. Palmer promised an evening of intrigue and fun (as if a parade of eccentrics and what essentially amounts to junk could ever pass for fun). And now I'm saddled with the responsibility of caring for a tin box chock full of some stranger's garbage. The one bright light of the evening was being given the opportunity to catch up with Serge during the lulls.

"A bunch of us are going to grab a drink at the pub down the street. Care to join us?" Serge asks. He startles me. I'm still focused on the doors to the elevator that swallowed up Stanley Hume.

"Thanks, but no." As much as I'd like to. "I'm zonked." It's the truth. I have a half-hour's subway ride ahead of me and still have to review tomorrow's lecture notes. "Besides, Palmer's waiting," I tell him. Not that Palmer would mind. He's probably still tied up receiving his mystery delivery. "Rain cheque?"

Serge exaggerates a nod.

"It was great to see you again, Serge. Best wishes to the family."

We shake hands, and I head back toward the employee entrance in an effort to evade the stragglers who will have to go home tonight without having their artifacts identified.