



# THE FLYING GAME

As a child,  
Stella always won  
the flying game.

Now,  
she is playing  
for her life,  
and only the  
wisdom of Oz  
can save her.

*Jan Deelstra*

## PART ONE

### “THERE’S NO PLACE LIKE HOME”

Reminiscent of rhythmic chants of monks, Stella’s thoughts kept meter as the unsuspecting therapist droned on. *There’s no place like home. There’s no place like home. There’s no place like home*, she mentally repeated the mantra as her body rocked nervously forward and back to her inner rhythm. With each frenetic motion, the mahogany chair groaned in protest, the aged wooden frame squeaking under her stress. Sluggish casters dug cat scratches into the rutted hardwood floor.

Her eyes were fixed, examining the area of the desk surface where the cracked and tattered leather dared raise like a timeworn drape pulled back to divulge veiled secrets. The small peek exposed haphazardly applied curlicue monkey tails, swirls of yellowed expired glue winding like honey trails across the desk’s once hidden raw surface. *They look like petrified glue snakes, like trilobites frozen in history beneath skin*, Stella thought. *It’s unusual that the damage is at the flat front corner of the mammoth oak desk where the doctor’s left elbow mostly resides. It’s not at the backside where I would expect to see the wear. People generally sit safely behind the cordon of their desks, looking out*, she noted. *Not Dr. Marvel. He has to be different and sit near the front side....*

Dr. Henri Marvel sat not behind his, but rather, he sat next to the enormous desk. He said he wanted, “no physical barriers to separate the visitor from the doctor.” He called them visitors because “patient as a label has a tendency to stick long after they leave.” Dr. Marvel wanted his visitors to feel safe, as if he were on their side. And so, he conscientiously sat, “on their side.”

*I see your ‘crazy’ and I raise ya two*, Stella thought as he explained his position. *The psychological distance is enough of a division*, Stella assumed. *He has no sense of décor! Mismatching woods! And they don’t even coordinate. They clash for cripesakes. And stiff flaking leather, and glue that has long ago given up the fight. Dude, buy a new desk and put this one out of its misery. He has no sense at all.*

The doctor’s monotone voice was elevator music, the humming white noise beneath the constant lyrics of Stella’s repetitive private melody: *I want to go home. I want to go home. I want to go home. I want him to stop. I want him to stop. I want him to stop*, she thought.

The creaking became frightening as Stella’s rocking came quicker, the drummer’s beat speeding up to keep pace with her crescendo. Escalating anxiety was now fully orchestrated, and her sweating fingers gripped tighter to the slippery arm spindles of the objecting wooden chair. *Rock. Rock. Rock. Creak. Creak. Creak.* She organized them –counted each sound by threes in her metronome mind.

Stella was preparing for take-off, but she was not the conductor of her craft. *Then who is?* Before long, and time after time, she would ask the question. And then, as a logical next step, she often wondered, *Just who am I anticipating, will answer my query?*

“Stella,” the doctor was saying, “the ‘Bag Lady’ has set up occupancy within your psyche, and although this may initially seem like a ridiculous concept, a terribly grim fairy tale, pardon the pun, or the beginning to a limerick, let me assure you, it is none of these things. Rather, the concept defines the perceived predestined trampling of the seeds of self-worth, and more accurately, the cultivation of your neurotic tendencies of self-doubt. That habituated inner child of yours is running amok, Stella. She is in a tug-of-war, struggling for a return to those old patterns of core subconscious beliefs, tucked safely into the womb of familiar monetary deficiency and personal limitation. She has successfully recruited the archetypal ‘Bag Lady’ to heave too! Pushing or pulling, Stella, it’s you! Do you understand that it is you? That it is your polarity of extremes, of either loving or loathing yourself? Where’s the middle ground, Stella?”

*On either side of the middle ground, the muddy ground, the muddled ground, children at opposite ends tug, tug, tug at the rope that is too large to grasp. Slivers pierce their short fatty fingers. Tugging too at my heart strings. Plink. Plink. Plink. Playing my heart strings. Playing, playing, playing my heart like a harp, a harp, a harp. Both extremes are pulling hard on the fraying line that splits my broken heart into then and now and then and now and then. 'If I only had a heart,' Stella thought, her head rhythmically nodding in agreement to the clandestine inner performance.*

“Stella, your inner governing device, commonly called the ego, has noticed you becoming increasingly successful. It is the ego’s job to protect you from harm, to stop you from going down dangerous, unrecognized paths. Ego is the ‘gate keeper’ of the subconscious mind. Nothing is allowed to enter until it has been thoroughly checked out, has proven itself fully prior to gaining entrance. Ego is the *Secret Service*, *FBI* and the *CIA* all rolled into one extremely effective guardian, working around the clock to protect you from what you aren’t accustomed to. This function of the ego of course, goes back to a prehistoric era when we humans needed to have an innate governor to protect us from all sorts of lurking dangers.”

Stella didn’t respond outwardly, and the doctor continued his fast-fire speech. Stella’s rocking kept stride in threes.

“Although the human species has been evolving for about four-hundred-million years, the human brain was relatively undeveloped up until the last two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand years, give or take. Our logical frontal cortex was not developed enough to allow it to rationally contemplate the possibilities of exactly what dangers or benefits may, or may not be, positioned ahead. With that innate warning system, the ego in place, it’s a true miracle that fire was ever discovered!

“Fire! Stella, think about that! How fire was ever allowed into the great knowledge center is a conundrum, indeed! Most certainly you can imagine that prehistoric ego function constantly warning early man, sounding a ‘fight or flee’ warning, putting the kibosh on any new behavior that was unrecognizable. And fire?! Well, fire is such a conundrum...” his words waned into a glassy stare, and his imagined scene caused him to shake his balding head in wonder.

In addition to these newly introduced thoughts of the *Secret Service*, *FBI* and *CIA*, Stella’s thoughts of danger included flying monkeys of the *IRS*. Shivering involuntarily at the doctor’s words, or more truthfully, at her own inner demons, Stella’s rocking was now breakneck. The chair let out a snap, as glued spindles began breaking free of the seat, threatened to surrender to the pressure of her momentum. Wincing in embarrassment of the squealing and popping, Stella slightly slowed her reckless pace and tried to melt into the background.

Regardless of the potential of sitting in splinters, Stella liked the word *conundrum*. *Co-nun-drum*. *It has a nice beat*, she decided. *Doc Marvel could have said ‘puzzle’ or even ‘mystery.’ They too have nice meter. But conundrum, now there’s a great lyric. Co...nun...drum... It even has the word ‘drum’ in it! Co. Nun. Drum.* Inner images of American natives in traditional full headdress danced excitedly to the beat of her colorful conundrum show. Stella wondered, *what had they called themselves before being pigeonholed, “Native Americans?” Surely they didn’t know they were either “Native” or “American” until someone stuck on the label. Who decides such stuff?* Stella didn’t care much for labels.

“Don’t get me wrong, Stella. Of course, ego most certainly has its place, has multiple critical purposes. But our lower reptilian brain functions have not kept up with our expanding frontal lobe expansion, so between the two regions there is quite a wide gap in evolutionary processes. It’s all actually quite fascinating to consider,” Dr. Marvel’s thoughts trailed off as was so often the case.

Stella was expressionless, but behind the mask her mind now imagined dinosaurs around the corner on 52<sup>nd</sup> Street. *How the homeless would keep warm without fire?* She considered the crisis of coldness as the doctor continued his natter. *How Murky Marbles, the bag lady on 47<sup>th</sup> Street would stay warm?* Her forehead creased at the conundrum.

“Stella, the more successful, or to be more precise, even unsuccessful for that matter, that you are becoming, the more diligently your ego fights to protect you from the possibility of harmful exposures.

“You see, your stoic ego sees its job as being one of governing that which it knows to be true. Its primary job description is to retain the status quo of the previously internalized subconscious belief patterns. So when you’re sailing along in a smooth flowing stream, doing what you have always done, regardless of what it is that you’re doing, your ego is relaxed and calm. In fact, even in cases where one’s life is a chaotic mess, as long as that chaos is the normative set of behaviors, then there are no red flags, per say. The ego doesn’t stand at full attention. The ego, you understand, knows exactly where the comfort level is set. It’s like an internal thermostat, a gage set throughout childhood by learned, patterned behaviors.”

Stella hated chaos. Where others seem to relish living life in a tornado, Stella found comfort in composed repetition, in unruffled patterns she could count on. *All of life is a pattern of artistic expression*, she thought. Patterns were the entertainment of Stella’s imaginative mind. *Patterns are everywhere*. Patterns were the calm in the storms.

“It’s only when your ego senses the winds shift, when a change in possibilities is on the horizon that the innate governor, the ego, hurriedly awakens. In your example, your fear-driven old *bag lady* mentality is shaken awake by the on-coming storm. This begins the repetitions of negative inner dialog and self-abusive behaviors, which of course lead you immediately to that familiar feeling, to the erroneous sense of comfort that you seek in the psychological region of poverty and fear. Your habitual sense of poor self-worth is an ego function that is working overtime to keep you stuck in the history of your past repetitions of ‘lack’ *because it’s what you’re used to.*”

Dr. Marvel stated it with enough enunciation that Stella’s body recoiled at the shot. Her forehead cringed, and her neck retreated into her shoulders; a coward’s attempt to hide within a defensive shell at the last five or six armor piercing words. Doctor Marvel had struck an exposed nerve. Simultaneously Stella’s body, mind, and spirit felt the chilling concussion, and she shivered violently.

*Geez, doc! When all else fails, send in the flying monkeys! I had no idea that I would need protection. I should have worn Kevlar*, she thought warily in her trademark cynical manner. *He’s being terribly out of line, not to mention being oblivious to my fragility, for cripesakes.*

“Stella, as is the case with that run on sentence I just spoke, you seem to view the idea of reaching some degree of stability or self-worth as a seemingly endless, if not improbable process! Thus, that improbability is the message you are sending to your subconscious mind, and is the outcome you are affirming to the universe,” said Dr. Marvel. “Your mind is your servant Stella, and not your master.”

Stella didn’t respond.

“Stella, you are projecting a self-image of undeserving, and the all-giving universe, and your conditioned ego, are each supporting and reinforcing that call to action. This means ensuring delivery to you of the affirmed elements of endless ‘undeserving.’ Do you realize this?”

As if he knew better, the doctor didn’t pause for Stella’s response that wouldn’t come.

“Despite the ego function,” he continued, “change is not impossible, Stella. Since your childhood was one in which you experienced ‘lack’ as a rule, rather than having the experience of the universe as being loving and infinitely abundant, your core belief is that there is never enough: There is never enough money or love, in your estimation. Things, including your emotions, must be hoarded and hidden. The future must be feared, because, you surmise, surely the day will come when you will be alone, pushing your broom in a shopping cart. Or worse, you may not even have need of the cart! You may have nothing to cart! You may not even have the broom with which to sweep the walks!” Dr. Marvel said.

*“If I only had a” broom, I could sweep out all this garbage*, Stella’s thoughts sang silently to an Oz tune. *“If I only had a broom....”*

“Stella, your fear of becoming a homeless ‘bag lady’ becomes the fertilizer to the experience. The fear creates a self-fulfilling prophecy of you being the bag lady persona. That archetype you most fear becoming then comes into being because you are being her in your very creative imagination. You plant her with your thoughts, and you fertilizer her into being with your fears, Stella. You,” he said, pointing at Stella, “are negatively affirming her into being.”

Stella thought, and then closed her eyes as tightly as if red pepper sauce were trying to get in. It was the game of children trying not to be seen. Gnarly witch's fingers had pointed before. Stella didn't like fingers that pointed at her.

"Remember Stella, whatever anyone thinks about consistently, must come to fruition. It is quite an important law of the universe; no less than gravity, really. What you focus on, where you place your focus and your emotion, will always expand," said Dr. Marvel.

Stella looked intently at the doctor. And at that moment, thought about how drearily gloomy and depressed her thoughts had been since as long as she could recall. She closed her eyes again, and saw the storm clouds gathering. *Where is the rainbow?* she thought. *Why don't I see the rainbow instead of the clouds? Could it be as simple as changing what I think about? It can't be that easy, can it? If it was a simple matter of thought, there would be no need for shrinks like Dr. Marvel. What's he saying? Doesn't he know he's talking himself right out of a job? Downheartedness is the lifeblood of his career, for cripesakes!*

"It has been proven that thought is the source from which our experiences here on Earth are created. It is in harmony with that old adage that says to 'be careful what you wish for, because you just may get it.' Thought, intent, outcome...it is all the same thing, Stella," he said, shaking his head as if saying "no" would stop the actions of others.

"One may wrongly lean toward the assumption that upon realization of this phenomenon folks would learn to focus clearly and strictly on what they do want," he continued, "and that they would express appreciations for what they already have instead of placing so darn much of their finite energy supply on wasted causes such as doubting and dreading things. Humans are not always so quick on the uptake though, and generally end up creating the outcomes they do not want. They often borrow trouble from the future, troubles that would otherwise not exist."

Stella considered the doctor's last statement. *Could it be that all my worry is really just "borrowed trouble" that I invented with my fears? Dr. Marvel has suggested that I live too much in my head. He has also said, on more than one occasion, that I worry too much about the things I have little or no control over. Maybe it is all an illusion. She had read that somewhere: "Life is an illusion." What does that even mean?* She said nothing.

"Stella, I know that you are bright enough to figure out that just because your life has been a certain way for a certain length of time does not mandate that it never be enriched. Your future can, in fact, be different, but only if you consciously choose it. Identify four or five folks you admire, and determine what it is that's attractive to you about these folks. Then proceed to emulate those characteristics. Actively cultivate the successful, consciously created version of you, according to you."

Stella couldn't think of one inspiring role model right off the cuff. It wasn't as if her relatives were all that evolved. She had however, as Dr. Marvel pointed out a few sessions ago, "identified somewhat with the mythical Dorothy," and especially with those magical ruby shoes. Stella loved red shoes. And yet she hated red. *The real shoes were silver, and I don't hate silver,* she thought. Stella believed that red shoes were empowering on women in the same way that red ties are empowering on politicians. Ruby shoes and red ties embolden nerve when otherwise there is none. With the exception of silver coins, Stella thought that silver, even the most exquisite silver shoes, lacked the power to truly embolden courage to the degree that red does. She frequently wondered about this near-magical power of color to enrich personal power.

"Stella, it may help you to know that we are all just actors acting, chosen archetypes from a rather shallow well of possibilities playing a part, yet how few folks ever consciously choose who they are *being*? Who do you know that has reinvented his or her self with conscious effort? My guess is not one. Most never stray far from the old tree's seed that impregnated the egg..."

*His mixed-metaphors are exasperating. I wonder if he took a grammar class in his ivy-league life,* Stella pondered.

Stella straightened up and arched her back in an attempt to lift some of the weight off her stiffening spine, and maybe in the process send the doctor a not-so-subtle clue. *I've been sitting here long enough. Surely it's time to go, go, go!* The wheels beneath her let out an embarrassing squeal at the shift, and she blushed. The doctor talked right over the embarrassment.

“Due to your youthful mind’s interpretation of your childhood experience as being something over which you had no control,” he continued, “as an adult, you count, you find patterns, you sort, and you organize to keep control of the things that you can, and to simultaneously keep your overactive mind in line. Your mind is kept busy working overtime to keep organization of whatever it can possibly regulate. And your ever- protective gatekeeper is consistently barricading the fort!”

Stella heard him, and now she was fascinated. Her organized mind however, kept a straight face. She inhaled, and then exhaled slowly three times before shifting in her chair and sending a message to the doctor: *Uninterested*, her body language said. But it was a lie.

“In professional circles, it’s called *apophenia*,” said Dr. Marvel. “Apophenia is the word used to define the human condition of finding patterns in seemingly random events. We pinpoint formations in clouds, identify images in our toast, find omens in the activities of birds, and track migration patterns as such.

“Stella, since before you were old enough to enter the public school system, you’ve learned to localize patterns. Initially it was nursery rhymes and juvenile songs. In fact, prior to that, it was nonverbal responses to environmental queues. If something in your environment was not right, you may have been cold or wet or hungry for instance, you got your message of discomfort across by crying. When your needs were met, you learned that if you cried, you’d get your way. This was your first awareness of patterns. Of course, you didn’t have the vocabulary to categorize such events as patterns or apophenia. That came much later. But with repetition, you learned the cause and effect cycle. And soon you learned to recognize patterns in symbols that evolved as sequential numbers, and so you began to count. And of course, you were simultaneously learning to identify letters that then turned into words that were then linked into sentences and then evolved into clichés, and ultimately became the stories of your life. And you learned to distinguish the identity of other symbols too. You recognize flags, directional signs, and other configurations. Our mind must connect events, sensations, experiences, thoughts, results, faces, and various phyla. We must contain them, retain the patterns as data,” said Dr. Marvel. “All of life is patterned. We are all victims or heroes of habit and cognizance, Stella. Repetition, identifying the arrays is a phenomenon of survival. We localize things to organize the wisdoms of life.

“When you think about it, it’s necessary that there be a catalog system for sorting and filing our experiences. Imagine if you will, a world where there are no arrangements for making sense of things. Where would the human race be then? If we humans did not recognize the signs and symbols and repetitions how could we remember when to yield and when to cross the road? Without the ability to see patterns how could we identify a rat from a rhinoceros? Existence would be deadly dangerous, and probably cut short.”

“Lots of rats, but not many rhinos in the Emerald City doc,” Stella quipped, uncharacteristically looking him in the eyes.

Dr. Marvel chuckled. “Well, that’s a good point. And I believe you meant to say, ‘Empire City,’ but certainly you get my meaning. At any rate, it is when the brain gets stuck in the process, only when the processes get out of hand, when thoughts or behaviors become obsessions, that there is cause for alarm, and is then cause for altering the dysfunctional repetitive behavior.”

*Cause for altering? That sounds like something akin to circumcision.* Momentarily, Stella’s mind went outside of the conversation to inner images of city dwelling rats and rhinos being circumcised. *Hmm...circumcision would cut down on the reproduction problem,* she thought. *Call your congressman! Alert your representative! The solution to the problem is circumcision. Those good-old boys will never go for it, though. It would be too much like castrating themselves.*

“Stella,” Dr. Marvel interrupted her daydream, “it is because you feel out of control that your mind fights back by organizing. It attempts to categorize, and to control whatever it can organize, because in other arenas you feel so out of control. You can regulate your thoughts and yourself, Stella. In fact, I’m betting on the horse that says your home is immaculate; your clothing certainly is. I have noticed that you have at least half-a-dozen pairs of red shoes in varying shades to exactly match or complement your outfits. This tells me there’s a high probability that you are intentionally controlling every aspect of your physical

life and of your environment that can possibly be controlled. You do this because you frequently feel so out of control both mentally and emotionally. Does this resonate as true?"

She sighed deeply. *Oh for cripesakes, are we really back to this?* Stella thought, glancing at her watch. *Ten minutes to go? Argh!* Her head shook "no" as she observed the seemingly stopped watch hands. Flicking the crystal three times with her thumb and middle finger, as if doing so would magically move the lazy hands of the *Flying Monkeys* watch of course, it did not, Stella sighed again, resigning herself to the stoppage. She'd had the watch since childhood. It was a cherished gift from her father, given when she was too young to know that it wasn't merely a character from her favorite movie; it actually had a practical function. *It's probably worn out*, she thought, sighing again and closing her eyes. She wished to be home. *I want to go home. I want to go home. I want to go home. There's no place like home. There's no place like home. There's no place like home*, she thought.

The doctor thought her gestures were of denial, and that her negative head shake was directed at his psychological concepts.

"Stella, the entire cosmos is built upon mathematical equations and symbols. Your creative mind simply sees those universal angles and patterns more crisply than do the majority of others. It's a very real talent and one you share with Leonardo da Vinci, and other great geometric geniuses. Don't ever be afraid of your ability to see things in a unique way. Indeed it is a special ability of which you can be proud. It is in behaviors of hiding and denial and stifling the truth that neurosis sprouts. And the lie or pretense can never become nor mask the truth. Remember, that the mind is your servant, not the other way around," said Dr. Marvel.

Stella's head filled with light angles: Prisms took her to thoughts of angels and an afterlife, while digits danced like fairies in the lit slivers. Still she said nothing. Pokerfaced, she stayed inside her mind cave, entertained by free-flowing contemplation of replication and flying monkeys. *The rhythmic cycle is everywhere*, Stella thought. *Hearts beat; blood pumps; night falls; dawn lights the way for yet another day, in and out; up and down*. She rocked harder. *Infinite patterns of planets and stars in the dark transformed into vivid images of astrological charts where flying monkeys circled, and then the malleable image transmuted into Da Vinci's third eye expression of geometric shapes and angles*.

"Well, do with this information what you choose, Stella. Cast it aside if your ego demands it. But please remember this: It is your choice. You can choose to be thankful for all that you have, consequently creating a most magnetic, perpetuating energy of abundance, or, you can continue to focus on whatever you perceive as missing. This energy too is perpetuating. You decide which avenue you entertain. You can focus on health, or you can focus on dis-ease. You can place the majority of your creative thoughts onto wealth building activities, or you can squander your sensibilities and allotment of life on issues of lack and poverty mentality. It is one-hundred percent up to you to determine the final outcome, that which is your life experience. It's completely your choice. I know that you know that at a logical level.

"You can work to activate an attractive character. And I'm not talking about using lipstick and rouge here! I'm not talking about having silicone implants in order to impress some yet-met young man. I am suggesting that you closely consider learning to attract abundance into your life. And it's not about money. It is not about jewelry, or even about career choices. It is all about how you, Stella, are choosing to live your life. It's about how you choose to perceive the universe. What does it look like? How do you picture yourself and your position of empowerment, or not, within the whole of the vast universal painting? Are you there, Stella?"

Stella's eyes remained closed tightly as she fought to stay disassociated from the concepts that Dr. Marvel was trying to submit into her conscious mind. *There is no gatekeeper of the conscious mind*, she noticed. *Oz keeps stuff organized behind the curtain. Does Oz also keep the conscious stuff in order? If the mind is the servant, what does that make me? And what of Oz?* Stella pondered and her forehead creased.

She envisioned the crust of her brain first as a sour dough bread bowl; that frame quickly transformed into a geode. *Inside is a glorious and colorful site. The outer shell is hard and craggily; not exactly appealing, but not exactly ugly. It's durable and inconspicuous. The colorful brilliance within unseen....*

The words penetrated her crust. "I'm here," she said without opening her eyes.

Dr. Marvel chuckled. "No, I meant, are you in the painting? Do you even see yourself in the big cosmic picture, Stella?"

"Oh, sorry. I uh...yes, I guess I do," she stammered. *Busted! Stella he so busted you not listening. How embarrassing is that?* Her thoughts admonished herself harshly.

"In order to be wealthy, for instance, one must be a vibrational match. Likewise, in order to be homeless, one must be a vibrational match. When you are fearing that you may one day be a bag lady, remember that as long as you do not embrace the label, as long as you do not broadcast on that poverty vibrational frequency, even if you did lose everything you now own, it would not be permanent, unless of course you actually choose to be the bag lady. We're humans being, Stella. We're not humans chasing, or humans doing. Remember that, and then choose who you are being. You can always choose who you are being. If you don't like something, rather than enshrining it as a chronic condition, change it. Consciously choose who you are being. It is our early stories that influence the way we see ourselves and others. Redefine your stories Stella. Take the lessons from the events. Accept them as the blessings they are. Your story isn't over. If you don't like it, alter it. You can change it at any time and any way you choose. Simply change your tempo to suit.

"It's easier than pruning a fruit tree. If you don't like the fruits you bear, don't simply prune the branches that cause misshapen form. Instead, dig up the roots and plant the tree of your choice. All those dead limbs are useless rhetoric, seeds that you swallowed before you were old enough to choose. Now, you are past the age of consent. It is time now for you to consciously determine what to keep and what to shed. What to plant, what to sow is up to you, Stella."

Stella shrugged and swallowed hard. Her thoughts turned inward to macabre images: *That peculiar crone who squatted on 47<sup>th</sup> Street, sweeping invisible shadows from the sidewalk of her squatter's home.* Stella shivered at the memory of the industrious woman she saw almost daily. She had smiled at the old woman, once. *Never again. Never again. Never again.* The destitute woman pierced through Stella with a blue-milk gaze that visibly communicated, "Never again make eye contact." *Never again smile at the sweeping crone with the milky stare.* If Stella had been an armadillo she could not have curled into herself more.

After that day, Stella ceased to refer to the homeless woman as "the Bag Lady." Rather, she named her "Murky Marbles." But she never said it out loud. She would never call it to her face. Stella developed a new respect for the down-and-out woman with the clouds in her eyes. But she couldn't say why.

*Did Murky Marbles embrace labels? Had she unintentionally negatively affirmed her home on the street?* Stella wondered in silence about the woman's fate, and the doctor continued to speak.

"Stella, please notice your posture and the ways in which you try to stop from seeing things," Dr. Harris said. "Notice that you've slammed your eyes shut in hopes of not hearing me. Eyes do not control noise, and still you refuse to see. Just notice. Awareness of the self is a great learning tool. Can you at least open your eyes and look at me as I offer this information to you? Please just notice, Stella. Begin to be a little aware of how you use your body to defend yourself, when in fact, there is nothing to be defending against. This is a safe place. Notice how you use your eyes as deflectors. You are free here, Stella. You are free to just be. Just please *be* here, fully present for the fifty-five minutes that we share each week. Something to think about is that how you do anything is how you do everything."

Stella opened her eyes and glanced quickly and then away, averting her gaze. *What did he say? How I do anything is how I do everything? What is he talking about?*

"Notice how you're attempting to set yourself apart with your body's posture. Notice how you're using your eyes to deflect attention as if my words were criticisms to be protected against. Avoidance is a fear-based behavior, Stella.

"Until our next appointment, take notice of the plethora of techniques you actively employ to avoid interactions with others."

Squirming like a three-year-old in church, Stella let out an exasperated sigh.

“Stella, I’m not saying this is something for which you need to be scolded. It is not an issue of right or wrong. It is about self-awareness. Just notice how you interact with life, with your environment, with others. Notice how you feel under any given circumstances.”

Stella shifted in her seat and the chair let out a piercing screech. *My back is killing me*, she thought. *Oh God no! That was a negative affirmation! No! No! No! I am alive. Nothing is killing me. Can an affirmation really be negative? I’m in trouble now! Oh no, that was negative too! I have got to be more aware!* She began rocking forward and back, forward and back in rapid succession of motion as her thoughts struggled and the overwrought chair took note.

“You may want to start being more aware of your physical reactions to others, and to life, Stella. Do this without judgments. Again, I’m not saying it is right or wrong. I am simply asking you to begin to notice your whole self, body, mind, and spirit: Notice your posture. Notice your breathing: Is it shallow or deep? Are you getting enough oxygen to your brain and organs? Notice your hands: What are you doing with your hands? Are your fists clenched? Are your palms sweaty? Are your fingers relaxed? What are you doing with your face? Are your face muscles tight or relaxed? Is your back relaxed? Do you feel tension anywhere in your body? What are your shoulders doing? How are they feeling? How are you using your eyes? Are you using them as deflectors? What message is your body sending? What can you learn from your physical body, Stella? A dose of self-awareness is the doctor’s order today.” He chuckled slightly at his cleverly concocted directive.

For a brief instant, Stella confused *deflectors* with *reflectors*. She giggled a bit. *Inappropriately for the situation*, she thought. She couldn’t help it. The inner vision of bicycle reflectors as sun glasses covering her eyes made her want to grin. *This “safe place” is only “safe” according to Dr. Marvel. It is not a safe place for smiling. Although undoubtedly he must think I was laughing with him, at his so-called cleverness.*

“Meditate this week on a vision that includes you, Stella. Tune inward, and without judgment, observe the antics of your mind as if those behaviors are of children seeking your attention. Allow the visual to settle, without attachment. This is a balanced state of being where there is no need to force anything. There is no need to seek anything, because there is no desire and no frustration at not having captured some elusive butterfly of desire. Simply allow what is, and observe as if your mind belongs to another. After all, the journey is one of being. It is not a journey of going someplace other than here, now. It is a state of suspending want and hope. It is to turn off the mind’s conditioned habit of chasing frustration through thoughts of limitation and lack and desire. What peace could ever come from entertaining such disastrous illusions, Stella? It makes better sense to find contentment in the space of what is. Certainly there can be no gratification in desire; there is neither contentment nor serenity found in the state of hoping, in wanting, in wishing. Allowing is the optimal state to be in,” he said calmly.

She heard it, and she had no words, no witty repartee to lob back in response to his smooth serve. And so she listened for the next volley from the doctor. Her rocking had slowed to an almost stop.

“See yourself connected and at the center of a greater divine whole system of which you are a valuable, viable part. Look inside of yourself. Insight comes to us by way of inner vision. True insight comes via the way of your third eye. Given as much time as you spend in your head, you are surely aware of your third eye seeing abilities. I’m thinking you know more about the third eye than do most professional practitioners! Your third eye likely has perfect vision! Notice what it is giving to you in terms of wisdom. I like to say to my visitors that insight is on the inside.” Again he chuckled at his wry cleverness.

*I wonder if Murky Marbles has third eye vision or if her third eye is a cloudy as her other two*, Stella thought with concern.

“Try to look at the cosmos as being something inside of you, rather than seeing it as an external force separate of yourself. It may help you to not feel so much fear, to not create such isolation, such separation from the whole natural cycle. It might even help you to cease the hyper-critical, negative internal chattering, to curb that self-denigrating sense of humor of yours; maybe even to clip that low self-esteem dialog that occupies such a large chunk of your mind’s vast potential.

“In the past, we have discussed the many ways in which you live in your head. Meditation can connect your head with your body. If you would work to master the power of meditation...well, aligned,

you would be unstoppable, Stella. And it's healthy. Meditation lowers cortisol levels, and cortisol is proven to be the 'death hormone,' so we like to steer clear of this killer as much as possible.

"Perhaps meditation will help with those unhealthy mental images and erroneous beliefs in your waning significance. It may possibly help with your unfounded issues of reduced self-esteem. You, Stella, are not helpless in the processes of establishing your place in the universe, of grabbing your piece of the greater pie, of owning your life. All I'm saying here is that you may want to think about things in a little different light. Lighten up, and learn to see the glass, as 'half full' rather than well...you surely know the clichés. Just begin to notice the ways in which perhaps you self-sabotage, and then adjust the wing flaps for a smoother ride," Dr. Marvel said.

Although Stella sat now with her gaze frozen open, her mind took her outside of the window where cherry blossoms fell gently in the breeze. There, she counted each soft landing like a drop from the heavens...two...three.... *He is wrong. Closing my eyes does block out uninvited words. I can't hear you when my eyes don't see your lips moving. Trees are talking in the breeze, petals kissing children's knees. Will you please stop talking? Pleeezzzee....*

The consistent murmur of Dr. Marvel's words soothed her over-active head in the same way that her earphones and dark glasses blocked out the scrutiny of snooping strangers on the subway. Steady white noise and obscured vision kept the monsters away. *Murky Marbles, are your eyes cloudy as Nature's protective shield? What are you diverting?* It was only in the silence that Stella became anxious, fearful of what the truth might incite, *or was it insight?* She dared question only briefly.

"Unless, of course, you're afraid to fly. In that case, we can use another analogy to suit your resistance to change. We can, perhaps, use the luggage instead," he chuckled. "Sit down that worn luggage you've been carrying and pick up a fresher trend."

*I always win the flying game.* Stella shook her head back and forth at the idea that she would be afraid to fly. Stella loved to fly. It was as if she were born with wings. And she had a very nice *Amelia Earhart* set of luggage that would probably outlast Stella. *I always win the flying game. I always win the flying game.*

"Stella," Dr. Marvel was saying when Stella tuned back in, "we now have the technology to trick your subconscious mind into allowing in the flow of positive self-esteem builders. You can sail peacefully along and still find yourself hitting the falls, and when that happens your ego will instantly become a dam against progress, it's true. What is also true is that you can sail along into slumber and your brain's subconscious gates will be open at the time when you are slipping calmly into *theta state*. This is when your brain is most receptive. It is at this state when we can implement the most change."

*Theta for data. Theta for data. Theta for data. Remember. Remember. Remember,* Stella thought. Monkey-skipped canoes navigated rapids in Stella's whitewater.

"We're learning a lot about the brain, Stella. Modern day science has opened up an entirely new arena of information around neuroplasticity; about the ways in which the human brain processes stimuli. Science is not as black and white as it once was. There is a shift among the science community whereas physical scientists are no longer so obstinately opposed to considering things unseen. With Max Planck's birth of quantum physics, and then with the bizarre premise of quantum theory, which in case you aren't up to date on such things, is the fascinating discovery that the mere act of observation affects, physically alters, the outcome of the observed, well, let's just quote an old Dylan title and say, 'The Times They Are A-Changin.'"

*Speaking of "changing," I wish Dr. Marvel would change the subject. He sounds like a broken record. Wow, records.... Now there's a blast from memory lane. But the idea of affecting outcomes with observation, well that's plain silly. I'll research that more at the library. Oh for cripesakes! Those books are over-due. I've gotta start being more on top of things. Oh wait, I renewed them last week. You're okay Stella,* she thought, relieved.

"Discoveries in the physics of the brain mean that we can actually change the ways in which the brain receives messages. It's called *brain entrainment*. It's the newest thing in the psychology field, was at the core of the curriculum in fact, of the seminar from which I just returned. It was held in Chicago."

Immediately, Stella's mind-vision switched channels. *It was a show of brains in training, like military cadets receiving instruction from the drill sergeant, a bigger brain with epaulets.* This sepia visual rapidly changed: *Now it is a variety show starring blue chickens swimming in artificial rivers, as overhead, flying cows did slow summersaults, and a brontosaurus dressed in glittered green rehearsed for the opening night. The star of the show, a splendid chameleon horse transformed like a tin tree caught in the rainbow of a spinning color wheel. Miniature clowns performed dance steps until airborne monkeys attacked like mother blue birds defending the nest.*

With the next switch, *Captain Sparrow shuddered as tornado-force winds rattled against wooden planks that resembled vinyl record albums,* and again the channel changed, now to a contemplative train of conscious thought.

Stella was excellent at changing channels and at exercising her brain. She thought many people are not so excellent at change. *Most fight change even when change would be for the better, and it generally is,* she acknowledged.

"I know you're listening, Stella. Please hear this: We can change your brain. We're going to trick your gate keeper into allowing in new images of who you are, if you agree. If you choose to continue with this line of therapy, limitless potential can be the outcome for you. You can actually change your mind, alter your brain chemistry. Together, we can re-set that success thermostat to a higher setting. Once it is raised, your subconscious mind will adjust to the 'new you' image. We can then raise it a bit more. With time and tools, your life will turn around. Oh it will take some time, but it is entirely possible that in a few short years you'll look back to this time as just a little 'speed bump' in the road."

Stella liked her brain. The idea of changing her brain was more cold water diluting the colors she was entertaining. The mental portrait faded in a wash of water color impressionism. In its place appeared an often repeated visual: *The trailer trash court with the narrow yellow circular road.* It was an image that in a less intimidating setting would have triggered Stella to burst into song and dance, not because it was a pleasant memory. It was an image from childhood; it was not a happy place, was not that place, that mind cellar where she was instructed to go to save her life when she was fearful, or worse.

The image blended with a picture of colorfully outfitted, little laughing children in a row like lollipops lining the path. Neon rainbows pulsed overhead, beckoning, a sign to be contemplated in meditation. Raised asphalt created speed bumps that kept the would-be speeders from using the neighborhood as a street racing venue. Identical paved roads in her mind held athletic young white people on in-line skates: One foot in front of the other, they skated smoothly down the streets of her mind, jumping speed bumps, laughing and smiling as the wind blew hair from their eyes; neurotransmitters passing notes in a relay race without a scheduled end.

Her body rocked forward and backward, slower now, and the chair scarcely noticed. Barely beneath the racket of consciousness, Stella still counted each rocking sway: *one, two, three.... There were only white folks in the trailer trash park,* she remembered. "*White folks with no money and less sense,*" Darla's voice echoed... echoed...echoed.... *White folks with no money and less [cents],* Stella echoed back.

The race purity of small-town, Montana was too homogenized, was plain milk in a world that offered chocolate and strawberry. It was predictable and far too conventionally dull for Stella's expanding taste. From early on, she sensed that to remain meant to shrink, and to expand mandated leaving. There was no middle ground, no net of safety to either cushion the fall or bounce one over the fence of sameness. In Stella's mind, it was do or die. It was an awkward itch that couldn't be scratched in public. It kept her outside of the norm and caused townsfolk to whisper. Their opinions, although not pretty, took root early and grew inside Stella as she grew. Their biases were as familiar as the yellow lilies and pines that grew around her.

Like a reflection of the town's morality, the lone ice cream shop in town also offered only one flavor with drearily few sprinkle options. It too, mimicked the blandness that wasn't enough for Stella. Montana was vanilla. There was a possibility of chocolate, strawberry, caramel, banana, and lavender lemon beyond the self-imposed gates, and Stella was hungry for 31 flavors of life's smorgasbord.

“The morality of ice cream choked the creativity from the folks,” Stella said. It was only her opinion. That opinion was the way she balanced the scales of her relentless craving for more choices against a neighborhood where hers was the solitary voice of dissent. Standing alone, and often on rooftops, she dreamed of differing beach sands pouring like sugar granules through her toes as she stepped trustingly into that unknown global sweetness.

“Montana’s homogenous quality was no quality of life,” according to Stella’s often expressed opinion. She told everyone within earshot that someday, she would “grow up and go somewhere ‘there’s no trouble’ and lots of opportunity to make ripples without fear.”

Not a soul had believed her. Everyone knew the utopian place was only the land of make-believe, and the philosophy of idealistic Marxists. It existed in imagination, and in movies made of imaginations. It was the substance of children, the imaginative play of the naive, and was the manipulative tool used to brainwash the romantic. Everyone knew it. Everyone that is, except the gullible Stella Rose –The girl who thought she could fly.

Even as she’d said it, –repeated the sentiment that ran like a small river thru childhood, streamed whitewater through adolescence, and almost drown her in adulthood, –said how she felt herself “shrinking into the bog of normalcy along with the sleeping masses,” –even as she repeatedly lamented how, “snows had awakened Dorothy of her stupor, but not so of the paper dolls of sameness in small-town,” –even as she cursed the pale existence, Stella had laughed and played the flying game. She had stood like a weathervane gauging the winds of elsewhere. She had spun like a top until she was giddy with dizziness. She had run in the sticky-tarred, yellow-stained circle roads of summer childhoods, and had shivered in cold whitewashed winters; all the while that river flowed: The swift wishes of finding her way before the red sands ran out and she disappeared completely. Unlike Dorothy, Stella wanted a new home.

Although generally astute, the irreproachable doctor Marvel was somewhat wrong in his evaluation of Stella Rose Harris. Stella had no fear of change. She was just a little rusty. Once she put her heart into it, there was no resistance which could not be employed to lift her wings and thrust Stella to any elevation she wished to go. She always won the flying game. The doctor didn’t know this yet, thus he was blameless. Stella hadn’t yet shown Dr. Marvel her secreted wings. She wasn’t certain she ever would.

Predictably, appreciations for the blandness eventually rose to the top like cream on that milk, but perhaps I am saying too much, or not enough, too soon, because cream and scum both float. But hindsight is a gifted soothsayer, so I’ll share only this teasing clue to the outcome: Ultimately, Stella came to realize that it was a child’s keen perception of flying in order to get the upper hand on mad monkeys that propelled her across the continent to New York and beyond. She had craved diversity, had hungered for cultural experiences that could not be found in the circular yellow-stained streets of Montana’s lowest class trailer park. But regardless, it was a park. It was rich with foliage and spruces and fresh air and birds, and opportunities for flying.

*Oxytropis and yellow Glacier Lilies marking territory in springtime; red and silver shoes headed in the same direction, lined up neatly, and ready to walk....*