

# This Unlikely Soil

*stories*

by Andrea Routley

Dagger Editions

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## Appropriate Behaviour

Freddie moved to the Coast not long after the Great Leap, as she called it. She'd jumped from her sixth-floor balcony and miraculously survived the fall with only rib fractures and a head injury, causing relatively minor cognitive impairments.

She'd hit a car first, which absorbed the deadly impact, and then bounced into a second five-foot fall from there. Ironically, it was this second fall to the pavement that caused the head injury. There was even an article in the paper—"Woman survives fall thanks to parked car." But she wasn't aiming for the car. "I guess I just have a magnetic personality," she joked with the psychiatrist later.

Time was weird for the next several weeks in the hospital. Everything took longer for Freddie now—her brain like an old lawnmower that just wouldn't start some days. Can you repeat the question? Was that a question? The people at the brain injury clinic said the fatigue would lessen but it takes a long time. Everyone talked about things taking time but without using actual time words, like six weeks or six months or six years. "It's different for everyone," they sometimes said.

Freddie thought about when she was a kid, how Papa Dave and Belinda would say "time flies" each time they saw her, but to Freddie, it was eons between visits. "Be. Here. Now," her mother, Morning Star, would say, tapping Freddie's forehead with each word, then gently petting the fine hairs of her cheek.

"I don't know what I was thinking," Freddie told the psychiatrist. She remembers the way the curtains caught the sunlight and framed the green tops of oaks in the park beyond. The school bell rang in the distance, calling the children back to their classrooms, and in that

sudden afternoon silence, the wind billowed the curtains inward, as if reaching out to Freddie. No time like the present. She glanced at her watch. Its metal bracelet sometimes pinched her arm hair, but the watch had belonged to Papa Dave. Of course, she'd thought about this leap before. Even those evenings on the balcony spent chatting with the neighbour's cat, who perched on his own railing, she imagined how easy it would be to let go.

But she avoided windows now, as if they had a gravitational pull of their own and she did not want to be pulled over the edge again. "I guess I'm afraid of heights now, Doc. But I'm going to miss those conversations with the cat."

She said she had no intention of taking another "flight of fancy." Laughter is the best medicine, Freddie thought, but the doctor did not agree in this case. "I don't want to jump, I mean. I know it's not the answer." Her brain had changed. Must have. "I want to be alive," she said. "Present."

When the hospital was satisfied enough that she no longer posed an immediate risk to herself, Freddie returned to her apartment to discover her key did not fit. The building manager had moved her things into storage and told her she needed to pay for that—the storage fees, the month's rent, and the labour to move it, minus the damage deposit. Freddie supposed it was fair. He'd evicted the film student last year after she chucked a pumpkin off her balcony. Surely, she couldn't expect to stay after chucking herself!

"Good luck to you," the manager said.



That was two years ago—two years? Yes. Freddie now lives in one of a string of small towns along the coastline, which suits her much better than the city, a place where you could go an entire day without seeing anyone you know. Here, she's part of the community. She likes seeing people in more than one place—running into a neighbour at the mailboxes or an IGA cashier at the library or a librarian at the IGA. She grew up here for a while, on Arbutus Farm, an intentional community of back-to-the-landers, which is now a corporate retreat. Most of the

people from the Farm moved away, and Papa Dave and Belinda, who retired here, are both dead now. But Freddie's mother, Morning Star, is back, and Freddie knows her neighbours, mostly. Like Willow, the basket maker. With her rustic leather fanny pack and feather earrings, Willow usually looks as though she's heading to a comi-con. An Artemisian babe, Freddie commented when she first met her. "Move over, Xena!"

"That is the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me," Willow joked.

This year, Willow is participating in the annual Art Hop, opening her home to strangers to come check out her pine-needle baskets and stiff satchels made of kelp. "You should come by," she tells Freddie. "Sign my guestbook." For two days, Willow discusses her techniques and offers anecdotes about harvesting materials and laughs at potential buyers' jokes about her name. No, she did not weave willow—"Was that ironic?" she asks Freddie later.

One of the jokers is Robert, the neighbour with the dog. Freddie has only met Robert twice, down at the mailboxes, but she's seen him around many more times—he drives a giant black truck that never has anything in the back. She's heard his kids playing on the trampoline and his wife calling after them, though she's never seen them. In the brief interactions with Robert, Freddie has managed to learn that his dog, a collie blend of some kind, is called Beethoven II, perhaps after the film *Beethoven's 2nd*, Freddie thought. But Willow explained that Robert and his family had another dog before Beethoven, who was also called Beethoven. The first dog was an unusual breed—stout and aggressive, bred as a sentry and typically adopted as a sort of trophy pet, in much the same way a python is acquired by a tattooed fan of heavy metal music. (Willow's ex-boyfriend was such a person.) The dog was way too much for them, lunging at passersby, and it nearly broke Robert's wrist, which he'd wrapped the leash around for a better grip. So Beethoven was returned to the breeder. No refund. No matter. They chose a new dog, "a rescue."

Freddie also made the joke about weaving willow. It seemed funnier when Freddie said it, Willow would tell her later, and not simply because Freddie had said it first—something about Robert makes Willow

feel like he's making fun of her name.

Freddie is examining a kelp satchel as stiff as raw hide, wondering if a "purse dog" would enjoy gnawing on its salty flap, when Robert makes the joke. She nudges him with her elbow in a vaudevillian sort of way. "I, uh," she says, smoothing down an imaginary moustache, "like your style."

"What, my shirt?" Robert says, examining the part of him that her elbow had touched.

"No. Your, ah, *witticisms*." She says this last word with a British accent.

Willow sums it up, placing the guestbook down. "She just made the same joke."

"Yeah, but it was funnier when I said it." Freddie mocks an aggressive stance, half pointing and half wagging a finger at Robert, who just raises his eyebrows and turns away.

Freddie shrugs, then mimes a cane hooking her neck to drag her off stage, but less boisterously than she might have done a moment before.

This was the first miscommunication with Robert, Freddie would think later, trying to make sense of how things degraded so swiftly.



Freddie learned about her feelings from Betsy, her counsellor, with whom she is to meet weekly for up to twelve weeks. She learned, for one, that she has a lot of them, and if she has them so do other people, and two, that she needs to say what they are because Betsy is not a mind reader.

"That would be something like Braille—" Freddie reached forward to touch Betsy's head. Betsy leaned back, one hand out. "I get it, I get it," she said.

Freddie did not know what Robert was feeling at the time of this first miscommunication. She knew something had gone wrong there, but she was never one to make assumptions. She would have to ask for clarification.



After a counselling session with Betsy, Freddie decides to stop by the library for some new DVDs. No point in driving such a short distance, especially on a day like today, the uncommon sunshine reflecting off snowy peaks across the water. “Behold!” she says aloud. “I am Mountain!” Take it in, take it in. These glorious present moments, something to remember on the rough days, pain-brain and a blur of hours on the couch.

Cutting across the park, she discovers a Jack pine tree. At Art Hop, Willow explained how long the basket needles need to be, how she has a few secret spots, but the best kind of pines are not common around here, that they’re not indigenous to the area. But tucked behind the library, these minty needles are nearly ten inches long. Freddie spends an hour carefully filling her grocery bag with fallen needles. What bounty!, she thinks, and heads back to her car to deposit them in the trunk. When she sees Willow, she could say, “I have a surprise for you in the trunk of my car—don’t worry, it’s not a body!” Or “My fair lady, how I’ve *ined* for you!” Then she’ll show Willow the needles and Willow will laugh, say it’s not too clever but it is cute. “Just like me,” Freddie could reply, and maybe strike a Mae West come-up-and-see-me-some-time sort of pose, hand on the hip, shoulders going up and down, up down up down up down up down.

“Freddie!” someone calls. Morning Star trudges up the hill toward her, pushing on her thighs, arms like pistons. She’s bigger than last time Freddie saw her, layers of flimsy skirts draped over wide hips. Today she wears a leather fanny pack, too. Maybe those are in style. “I thought that was you,” Morning Star says, huffing.

Freddie has only seen her mother a few times since she visited Freddie in the hospital. When Freddie was a child, she’d rest her head in Morning Star’s lap, and her mother would pet her, tucking her hair behind her ear, then smoothing it out and tickling her back, and Freddie would purr like a cat and paw at her thigh. “My little kitty!” Morning Star would say. But sometimes she didn’t like her to be this way, like when Freddie meowed and pointed at her bowl, indicating she wanted more milk for her cereal, please. Freddie’s playfulness and affection

became simply a sign of dependency, and Morning Star would unhook her daughter's hand from hers, saying, "You're too old for this," but other times pull her onto the sofa. "I want my baby next to me." It's not that Morning Star didn't love her daughter, but the older Freddie got, the less she knew how. And Morning Star really did become like Venus, here then gone, here then gone, visible only briefly at twilight. "I'm here *now*," she would sometimes say, which perhaps was meant to reassure Freddie, but sounded more like an accusation.

"What were you doing with your shoulders?" Morning Star says as she reaches the car. "You look weird."

"Hey, hey," Freddie shakes her shoulders again. "Come up and see me some time."

"Oh." Morning Star catches her breath, visible in the cool air. "Is this yours? How do you even afford a car?"

Freddie follows her gaze to the driver's door, which is grey although the rest of the car is burgundy. "Printing press."

"Oh, yeah. You worked there a long time, right?"

"A long time," Freddie repeats. "Years?"

"Years in that place? No wonder you were depressed." Morning Star waves her hand, as if fending off a housefly. "I didn't just say that. Come here." She embraces Freddie, much longer than others normally did, Freddie had observed, but this is how Morning Star embraces everyone. It reminds Freddie of mating slugs or uploading something big. When Morning Star finishes hugging her, she looks teary. "My little kitty," she says, squeezing her hand, then walks around to the passenger door. "Can you give me a lift home?"



The following day, Freddie decides to clear up the miscommunication with Robert. His property borders Freddie's, but their homes are separated by several apple trees and then a forested area, all dark and soaking wet with the swamp, ferns, fungi and other soggy life forms; it had been a wet winter. Rather than walking all the way up her long driveway and then all the way down his, Freddie cuts across, hopping from one decaying stump or lump of ferns to another, only muddying



one boot along the way. She wonders where the frogs are hiding—in the evenings, they chirp noisily, perhaps because it’s dark out and they must fumble blindly through the crowd of frogs, searching for their moms or friends or kids. It reminds her of the Perseid parties at Arbutus Farm. Or maybe it’s all just an orgy of horny hoppers and the chirps mean, “Do me! Do me!” Horny as a toad? More like horny as a frog! Sometimes she’d open her own window and shush them. *Knock it off, you horn-dogs!* Of course, there is always more to life than the search for a warm body—or even a cold-blooded one. And she likes talking to animals. They make more sense than people, even with the language barrier.

She can hear the kids playing with the dog in the backyard, its panicked yelping in time with the trampoline springs. “Beethoven, shut up!” one of them scolds. Freddie knocks on the front door and whistles the opening to Beethoven’s Fifth.

Robert opens the door. “Hello, neighbour!” Freddie says.

“Hello.” He holds a cordless phone in one hand and keeps his other on the doorknob. “What is it,” he says. Freddie called them a couple of times recently to ask them to bring the dog in, that it was barking, had been barking for more than twenty minutes. It was Robert’s wife who’d answered. They hadn’t heard it—the TV was on, she said. Then, Thanks for letting me know. But Robert was the kind of man who felt his large property entitled him to all the noise he cared to make. (“They’re from Burnaby,” Willow summed up, as if this explained everything.) It was a long way from the suburb where he was so close to the neighbours that he knew what they were cooking for dinner on any given night. Here, space. But sound does travel, although the frogs did their best to muddy it for Freddie, offering a kind of white noise barrier. *Crek-ek, crek-ek.* Freddie wasn’t angry about the dog; she just couldn’t listen to its yelp any longer—she could not do anything else with her brain while it was happening. That was one of the cognitive impairments, an auditory processing impairment that made it nearly impossible to filter out background noise. Still, she shouldn’t have to endure the barking—it was on her property without her consent. She was just giving them useful information.