

Project For Can Serrat Residency

The Second Law of Thermodynamics

- **Tag Line:** *Bumps in the Universe: A Family's Fight Against Chaos*
- **Tag Line:** *A Family's Descent Into Chaos: Doomed But Not Down*
- **Tag Line:** *Love, Loathing, Jealousy & Tragedy in a Flat-lining Universe*

A letter from an “aunt” no one knew existed from a tiny about-to-vanish village in southern Italy sparks a cascade of surprises, shocks, life changes, disruptions and tragedies for the Albanese clan from Toronto, a tight-knit family of four running as smoothly as is possible within a “normal” middle-class universe. From stories of unwanted children (female and/or intersex) being left on a mountainside to die to modern-day adventures in eco-terrorism, from lust and passion turned deadly to Dianic Wicca celebrations, from suicidal tendencies to the exquisite heights of true love of all shades and types, *The Second Law of Thermodynamics: Curated Studies in Randomness* embraces, in all its entropic and multi-generational beauty, the brilliance and topsy-turvy nature of the human tragi-comedy.

This novel, which has taken almost three decades to come to fruition and a first draft completed between Nov. 1, 2019 and Jan. 31, 2020 during a three-month writers’ residency at the Historic Joy Kogawa House in Vancouver, Canada, stands at close to 170,000 words. In an effort to neutralize entropy and the relentless arrow of time, the reader is asked to navigate it via a series of 22 randomly-selected-and-ordered “Folders,” weaving their way through more than a century’s worth of the rise and fall of a southern Italian village, the 1960s brothels of Amsterdam and a newly-independent Nigeria, and the present-day streets of Toronto, Canada.

In looking for comparisons, I would say it comes closest to paratactic novels (in terms of ignoring temporality) such as *Hopscotch*, *Ulysses*, and *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and in structure similar to *The Unfortunates* by B.S. Johnson (which takes it a step further by providing separate chapters in a box that can be read in any order one chooses). I also see it as a Mobius strip type of novel which comes back to the beginning at the end.

Excerpt from the novel

**PROLOGUE: [CELESTE DE GRANDPRÉ ALBANESE
TAKES CHARGE OF THE PROJECT]**

[OR DOES SHE BECOME THE PROJECT?]

AUGUST 15, 2016: A TRUE MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

*One fears a number of things—
that one's body could vanish,
that human beings may really be
what they appear to be
at twilight, that one might not
be allowed to walk
without a stick,
that it might be a good idea
to go to church and pray
at the top of one's voice
in order to be looked at
and acquire a body.*

—**Franz Kafka**, *Description of a Struggle*

[To die and be reborn ... timeless time later ... the particles regrouping as the waves wash over them ... Tell me what you see. The future. The past. The Wheel is turning ... Dusk. Dark. Mountains. The light was born ... The bluster of gods and goddesses going in and out of their magic caves in the sky. Proud. Chests swelling. Breasts uplifting. Thick thighs pulsing with barely restrained power. Raring for a split-second flame-trailing zoom around the Earth's circumference. Cheeks puffed up ... rosy cheeks ... blowing ... blowing ... winds caressing stone ... wearing away ... scrubbing ... relentless. And the light has died ... Images of a cabin ... cottage ... rural villa ... take your pick ... angled on a shoreline where gentle waves, silver-tipped, dip back and forth in the moonlight ... Diana's moonlight ... Lovely Goddess of the bow! ... lapping a forlorn boardwalk ... rocking a loosened jetty ... unstable ... warped ... weaving ...

ground worn away beneath it ... no longer able to support the weight of more than one human at a time ... seaweed slick ... green slime reflecting fluorescence ... encrusted ... barnacles gnawing at its underbelly ... jutting out into an infinite ocean ... fishing boats long gone ... long obsolete ... long pensioned off ... left for beachcombers searching for pirate treasure ... and families frolicking in daytime delight ... in shadowless daytime delight. But these are night visions. I stand on that warped pier ... worm-eaten wharf ... slick green jetty under the moonlight ... teetering ... looking out into the dark froth ... into the fertile foam ... the temptation to open my arms and letting myself fall in ... allowing myself to sink to the sweet bottom ... remembrances of another day ... a sunshine-y day ... another walking out ... another sinking ... another retrieval. But no ... not tonight ... too much still to do ... My body is salt ... Taste the breath of death ... I shout: "Too much to do. Can't stop now. Remind me later. Remind me of the brief light between two vast darknesses." ... the words blown back into my face ... later ... later ... no, the ocean can wait ... best turn away ... turn quickly away ... walk away ... before its watery arms become impossible to resist ... the hypnotic pull into oblivion ... peaceful wonderful oblivion. The glow of a cottage. Definitely a cottage. Not a villa. And not a thatched cottage either packed with generations of family history and memorabilia around the oft-used blackened hearth. No. Just a simple seaside cabin ... for temporary use by temporary guests. A low-hanging crescent moon (slingshot bow strung across its horns) ... Lovely Goddess of the arrows! ... and lights flickering in the windows. Clapboard. Rudimentary. Unadorned. Ragged curtain strips in tilted windows. Rust stains ... spreading ... seeping across the walls. Wind howling through the gaps and cracks. "Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!" [King Lear, III, 2] The purifying wind that sweeps across the world, taking all before it. Cleansing. Using grains of sand to reduce everything to grains of sand. Removing those original sin stains. Even those hiding in the deepest of crevasses. In the ever-denying id. In the fractal shoreline. In the never-ending immeasurable shoreline where all things are possible. Where infinity and all possibilities dwell in ever-diminishing but never-ending self-replications. Allowing even for virgin births. Angels. Universal peace. And direct ascensions. And other such otherwise impossibilities.

[In the tiny yard, the shadow of a tree, an ancient tree—its limbs as if reaching out to embrace all before it, as if eager to hug the shadow of the cottage—swaying and creaking. Groaning in its old age ... like a tree from another place ... high on a shepherd's hill ... an old man grandfather tree dispensing both timeless wisdom and warnings in a timely way ... to both those who listen and those who won't. There may have been a fence once ... white picket it would seem from the bubble flecks on the remnants ... but all that will be left standing—somewhat standing, somewhat leaning—is the gate. I will hesitate for a moment. Take a deep breath. The promise of the family gathered for the first time since ... since ... I leave you to mouth the word: collapse, catastrophe, calamity, cataclysm, carnage. Out of respect, out of some superstition, I will reach in to open the gate rather than simply stepping over the rotted flattened fence. Of course, the gate will fall apart in my hands, red powder rising in puffs from the rusted hinges. What would once good and dear Giulio have called it? That old iron oxide rag, no doubt. A chemical explanation for all and sundry. Is that it? All there is? A running down of the clock tick tock to that final emptiness? That flat-lining into—again what would Giulio have called it—stochasticity. What did Will have to say on the matter? “I were better to be eaten to death with a rust than to be scoured to nothing with perpetual motion.” [Henry IV, Part II, I,2].

[I will hear voices inside. Familiar voices. Even a bit of laughter. Bitter, perhaps? Angry? Ironic? Sardonic? Call it what you want. Just not all that pleasant. Oh well. Might as well get it over with. Take my punishment. I will knock on the front door. Once. Twice. Three times. The mark of betrayal. Taking the rap, ha ha. When no one answers, I will take another breath to calm myself, adjust my blouse, straighten my jeans, polish my shoes, polish my teeth, pinch my cheeks, check that my lipstick runneth not over, slap a smile on my face, push back my shoulders. Thou with moon upon thy forehead. Then turn the handle and step inside. See myself in, as the expression goes. The voices will grow silent. The light will be dim, and flickering, coming from a skewed chandelier that dangles on a frayed cord above an old-fashioned rectangular wood-veneer dining room table. Beneath the light, at the centre of the table, will sit a large lidded clay jar-vase-urn. Dark green. Southern Sylvan Green perhaps. Away from the chandelier light's cone, it will be hard to make out who's there. Shadows really, four of them, sitting around the table: two to each side so

that they face each other. But, even before looking, I will know who they are, having called them there, having asked that they please put in an appearance. For old time's sake. At least, I will know who should be there: my once dear Giulio, gone astray husband and cosmetics lab chemist turned hater of all difference and despiser of anything not deemed normal, yet battling in the end for the opportunity to create controlled catastrophic change before uncontrolled catastrophic change strikes; the beautiful yet tragic children, Raphael and Sara (previously Serafina), for whom my heart still aches to bursting and may yet explode: Raphael wrapped inside himself and unable to escape as if face vacuum-sealed in suffocating plastic; Sara the studious scholarship student academic turned fierce eco-warrior turned explosive in her unconfined rage at the betrayers and non-listeners (listen to the old man tree, wisdom and warning, I beg of you); and Virgilio, the man-servant-lover-guide-amanuensis-catalyst who appeared out of the blue carrying messages, papers and manuscripts from an improbable past and an even more improbable man-woman-either-neither-both who settled on Mircea as a final name. Appeared and then disappeared in sad short order. The four around the table in that sequence.

[I could have called on others: Max, the husband's younger brother; Serafina Sr., the surrogate mother; the ghost of the "father" Giuseppe. Various and sundry characters who flit in and out: my beautiful Dorothy; the Lakeview Beaches Dianic Witches; even the Cloud Cuckoo Land Committee. And, of course, Mircea herself, a simple return from across the stream. Come on down. But only the first four (five, I guess, if you include me) are essential, necessary, the major actors in the drama, those willing to put their thoughts down for others to see ... to judge ... to piss on ... to corrode. The others are simulacra, placeholders, stand-ins, secondary minor players or representatives for they-who-could-not-be-present. And there's a fifth chair at one end of the table. My chair. At the head or the foot? Does it matter? I clear my throat ... ready to give my well-prepared but seemingly impromptu speech: "Greetings. Once I might have said: 'May the goddess bless you.' But now I think I'll stick to: 'May Rosencrantz and Guildenstern be kind to you.' I asked you all here today, almost a year to the day after the Albanese family's fateful vacation by the sea, to help repair ... if something like that's possible ... the rips in the fabric of our relationships ... of our worlds ... of ..."]

[But as I struggle to explain while drawing closer to the table, rather than clarifying ... rather than materializing into proper human beings that I can speak to face to face, that I can convince through rational argument and passionate belief, the shadows will become vaporous. Floating. See-through. More and more transparent. As if in the midst of being teleported elsewhere. Until they will vanish. Until the chairs will appear empty, prim and proper in their upright positions. Straight-backed wooden chairs with embroidered, multi-coloured seats that are solidly weighted. Like old ladies from the age of Victoria. Worn but firm. Standing their ground. Smooth in their undulation. Nailed to the earth. Not as likely to float away. Unless, of course, we all do. Which, of course, we all will. But there's no one seated in them. Did I expect something else? A miracle, perhaps? A mass reincarnation? Dorothy, Sybil, Virgilio, Raphael, Sara, Giulio, perhaps even Mircea—all popping up, rising up through the floor boards to resume their daily routines? Their earthly sojourn? This time teleported from elsewhere? Not likely. Instead, all that will be left are a series of brown folders, file folders, scattered around the table in a careless manner. Randomly. As if of little importance. If you take the time and trouble to count them, you will see there are 22 in all, each with a number and a label on it perhaps providing a brief description of what's inside, of what it has to offer. But the numbers on the labels are not in order. Nor do they match the position of the folder on the table. Is that important? An explanation is in order. Definitely. Later perhaps.]

[For now, I adjust my glasses, blink my eyes, straighten my bra, purse my lips, taste the not-used-to-applying lipstick—and hard grip the back of one of the chairs. Dust rises, leaving two sets of fingerprints. Oh well, I will say to myself, it was too good to be true. The voices ... the sardonic laughter ... the hissed angry remarks ... just the wind after all ... the embers of something that once glowed passionately before burning itself out. Like everything else, I guess. From the embryonic to the hard bowel tonic. As I circle the table—counter-clockwise, important that I circle counter-clockwise (for the sake of the appearance of keeping time from flowing?), I will gather up the folders, carefully, placing them one on top of the other so that the last I pick up will actually be first in the pile. And, hugging them to my chest, hoping for some remnants of warmth, for some emanation of the spirit that once dwelt within, I will bring them back with me to my chair. Take my place at the head or foot of the table, however you want to label

it. Or not. Feel the solidity of the chair. The worn but steady arm rests. The sturdy legs. The cross-thatched back. The thick, one-piece wood block comprising the seat. Embroidered in browns and deep purples and slashes of blood reds. Hard. The hardness that can lead to numbness if the position is held for too long: My legs, like laden branches, bow to the earth, / Willing to leave their burthen. Reach a chair: / So; now, methinks, I feel a little ease. [Henry VIII, IV, 2] Shift. Sigh. Look about.]

----- So, *I will say, shifting, sighing, looking about, trying to keep up appearances as I nervously tap the top folder in the pile*, how are we going to do this? You are about to ask or were about to ask if you were here: “Who is going to start things off? Who decides? Yes, yes. It is important to get it right.” But I say: What does it mean to get it right? Is there a right way and a wrong way to tell a story? More specifically: Is there only one right way and the rest are wrong? Chronological? Circular? Psychological? Suspenseful? Reversed? By voice? By character? By genre? By gender? By god omniscient? By superego? By id? By POV? By a combination of authors in alphabetical order? By a combination of authors in no particular order? Unreliable narrator? By layers of narration leading back to the hidden creator? You should know I’ve tried them all. And they all work in their own way. They all have a piece of the rationale on their side. A *raison d’être*. But, for some reason, none of them by themselves satisfied me. None of them felt right for this particular iteration. I wanted something that ... that at least temporarily lifted me with the feeling of not having to follow the laws ... those supposedly inexorable laws ... so beloved by that once-cherished-now-greatly-perished husband of mine: “He is their god: he leads them like a thing / Made by some other deity than nature, / That shapes man better.” [*Coriolanus*, IV, 6] At first, it seemed an impossibility. And then it came to me: I would tell the story randomly. Or more precisely: I would allow the story to be told in a random manner. That would block the universe from gathering up its entropic forces ... prevent it from employing those natural tendencies to wind things down ... to reach an equilibrium that results in nullity ... at least for any foreseeable future we might foresee. Fight randomness with randomness. Entropic fire with entropic fire. Or lack of fire. Of course, real randomness would have meant taking all the words within each of the stories and shaking them up and then letting them fall as they may. And then taking those and mixing them with all the other words ever written. In every single language in the world. But that would have

meant infinite confusion on top of randomness—and the death of the story amid a swirl of impossible misunderstanding(s). Or total understanding in that the story possibilities would be unending. Would tell all the stories of the entire universe. Instead, I allowed the words within the individual folders to remain as they were ... as I originally found them ... stay put you flighty things ... don't force me to nail you down ... and randomized the folders themselves. I wrote the number of each folder on a small piece of paper, folded the paper and placed them inside a metal bowl—twenty-two pieces in all. I then had as random a person as possible, a stranger at a local Timothy's coffee shop, reach in and pull out the folded papers one by one. I marked the order in which they were pulled out on the outside of the paper. And that is the order in which the story will unfold. *I tap the folders*. Groovy, eh? Cool daddy-o, as we used to say in more hip times. Shall I take a bow? Will I get some clapping?

[Silence. Save for the sudden buzz of a fly against a window. Just recently out of the pupal transformation or on its way out? A breeze stirring through the house, just enough to raise the ragged curtains. To flap them gently. To send a ripple across the folders. Like claps, maybe?]

----- No? No clapping. Okay, okay. So maybe it isn't a fool-proof way of escaping that inexorable second law. Is there such a way? Perhaps not, if the laws that supposedly have governed this corner of the universe have the final word. But it's as near as I can come to thumbing my nose at it. "Alack, the night comes on, and the bleak winds / Do sorely ruffle." [*King Lear*, II, 4] So let's get on with it.

[I will remove the top folder from the pile and place it in front of me. I will take a deep breath before opening the folder and flattening out the cover.]

----- Please note: the cute little run-on headings on the covers of the folders are mine ["Wherein, Therein," etc.]. Very Henry Fielding, don't you think? In the when "foundlings used to be funny" vein. Or Eliza Haywood: *Love in Excess; or, The Fatal Enquiry*: "In vain from Fate we fly, / For first or last, as all must die / So 'tis as much decreed above / That first or last, we all must love." [Epigraph] Adds a bit of levity, don't you think? It has been called a comedy, after all, has it not? Even by those who know all too well how it ends. Or begins. Or holds up in the middle. By heavyweight lifters, in other words. Each trying in his/her/their own way to defeat the law. To turn rust back into iron. Maybe someday ...

[*Anyway, let the pain begin:* “To see the salve doth make the wound ache more.”] [*Rape of Lucrece, l. 1165*]