THE
Beautiful West
&
THE
Beloved of God
THE BEAUTIFUL WEST & THE BELOVED OF GOD

MICHAEL SPRINGATE

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“The light wasn't on,” Sharon said, throwing her thin arms about her mother’s neck.

“You're cold. Do you want a bath?”

The child nodded, then leaned forward to rise on her toes as her mother quickly rolled the wet tights down her legs. She helped at the end by kicking vigorously, first hopping on one foot, then the other.

“I stayed outside because I thought nobody was home. Because the light wasn’t on.”

Roused from the growing darkness in which she had been sitting, Elena scooped up the wet tights from the hallway and placed them in the laundry hamper. She ran water in the bath and placed a fresh towel beside it. She returned to the kitchen and broke four eggs into a small mixing bowl before shredding cheese on top and whisking. She sliced bread for the toaster and put the kettle on for tea. There wasn't any milk. She would have liked to give a glass of milk but at least there was cheese. She grated more cheese.

“Are you almost done?” she yelled down the hall.
“Do I have to wash my hair?”
“No.”
“Can I wear your robe?” Sharon swirled the water this way and that, following with her eyes a fleeing bar of soap.
“Why don’t you put on your pajamas?”
“I don’t know where they are!”
“Your bedroom.”
“Your robe is on the hook.”
“If you want.”
Sharon emerged in a terrycloth robe many sizes too big, carrying the towel and shaking her lowered head. Her mother grabbed the towel to dry the dripping hair and then tied it tightly with two effective twists. She moved to the counter to butter the toast and serve the scrambled eggs. Sharon ate eagerly.
“How was your day?” the child asked when almost finished, capturing her mother’s usual inflection.
“I’m supposed to ask that.”
“But you didn’t!” the child squealed.
“Homework?”
“A little.”
“Go get it.” Elena continued to sit, loose hands around a warm cup, looking out the window and noticing that it really did seem to be getting dark later.
Sharon returned with an illustrated book, a blank piece of paper, and a thick pencil gripped with determination. Elena stood to wash the dishes and tidy the kitchen. She found her own small piece of paper, the back of a receipt, to make a quick list of food needed for the rest of the week. She entered her bedroom to separate and bundle clothes for the Laundromat. In the bathroom she went down on her knees to wash the still wet floor.

Sharon looked thoughtfully at the illustrations in her book. She turned the pages slowly. Finally she made a few abrupt marks on the piece of paper, printed her name boldly at the top and dropped her pencil, which rolled unnoticed under the table.

Fifteen minutes later Elena was reading to a restless child squirming this way and that between mismatched sheets. After the second chapter she lost patience. “That’s it, that’s all for tonight.”

She rose to flick off the light and then sat back on the bed, briefly noting how the hallway light spilled onto the bedroom floor. She reclined to share her child’s pillow. Then, softly, as much to herself as to Sharon, Elena recited the nightly prayer.

Jesus tender shepherd hear me
Bless thy little lambs tonight,
In the darkness be thou near me
Keep me safe till morning light.

Sharon tucked herself against her mother’s steady breathing and settled. Her eyes fluttered and shut.

Elena’s eyes also closed. She imagined the yellow canola fields receding on either side of the highway, mile after mile, during the two and a half hour cruise from Brandon to Winnipeg. While she had studied the fields, her father had paid careful attention to the plates of the passing cars.

“Two from Minnesota,” he had said.
“Oh yeah, interesting.”
“Only four cars passed us and two from Minnesota.”

It was the sort of conversation he could sustain for hours, if not weeks and months, maybe years, a litany of small
she hadn’t asked. But she couldn’t help smiling, considering it. She should have asked. It would have been funny.

“It’s not faith either.” He had restarted the conversation in another direction. “At least not the faith you learn early and agree to for all time.” And then he had looked at her as if there was something particular in that insight.

“I’m hoping, in Montreal, that I won’t have to put up with conversations like this.”

“I re-mortgaged the house so that you could study and get ahead. I put money in your account. I’m paying for the tickets.”

“Do you want me to thank you again?”

“No. I just want you to study hard and do well. I know how capable you are. Don’t forget that. I know you in a way that no one else does. The bible” — he said as if discovering the point of the discourse — “says seek and you shall find, knock and the door shall open, ask and it shall be given to you. So you do that. Have confidence. Know that even though I’m not on the front lines, I’ll be there for you, whatever happens.”

“Front lines?”

“You know what I mean, I’m ready to help.”

“No. I just want you to study hard and do well. I know how capable you are. Don’t forget that. I know you in a way that no one else does. The bible” — he said as if discovering the point of the discourse — “says seek and you shall find, knock and the door shall open, ask and it shall be given to you. So you do that. Have confidence. Know that even though I’m not on the front lines, I’ll be there for you, whatever happens.”

“Front lines?”

“You know what I mean, I’m ready to help.”

“Front lines?”

“What’s your problem?”

“Why does an ex-Hutterite like you use military terms?”

“That’s the point, Elena, I was never good at it. Never felt I was in the right place. Anyway, all I’m trying to say is that I’m here for the both of you. Is that so difficult to understand?”

Elena, softening, wished she had acknowledged her trust in him, or at least her trust in his intentions. She could have done that.

“I guess you’ll figure it all out in your own good time,” he had concluded.
haps she should tell him that it’s difficult to achieve goals that aren’t defined. What would he say to that?

No, she had nothing to tell him.

She fried an onion, cut in some garlic. The smells pleased her. The sound of sizzling in a quiet world pleased her. Refreshed by her short nap she opened the window and let the cold air chill her face. She closed the window but not all the way. She liked the sharpness of the fresh air mixing with the scent of frying onions and garlic. She opened a can of chickpeas, emptied it into the pan and stirred. She sat and ate.

Finished, she left the kitchen, moved the two piles of sorted dirty clothes off her bed, undressed, put on a large white T-shirt and rolled down her bedcovers but didn’t get in. She unplugged the radio and carried it with her into the kitchen. She measured out rolled oats and put them in a pot with water to soak, placed brown sugar on the table ready for the morning. Still no milk. She plugged in the radio and turned it on oh so lightly. She looked about, trying to remember anything forgotten, then sat and folded her arms on the hard table. She stared out the window as large wet snowflakes, lit by the streetlight, tumbled in the night sky.

Her father, she thought, knew his own beliefs confused yet remained confident that other beliefs, still undefined, would be clear. Why did he believe that? It was wrong, wasn’t it?

She lowered her head onto her arms, her eyes still open.

IN FRONT OF Mahfouz and on his left were the steaming pans: fried eggplant, diced chicken mixed with vegetables,
He moved away from the table and stood very still, his gaze elsewhere. Maybe he didn’t want anything. She turned the page and continued reading.

He retreated noiselessly behind the counter.

The evening continued. A steady stream of people passed on the street, a few entered. Mahfouz served. Elena drank tea. He refilled the pot. She continued reading. She looked at him looking out the window, watched as his lips moved silently in time with the song crackling on the inferior speakers.

In her book, set during the Second World War, the main character, an Italian woman named Ida, part Jewish, has been raped by a German soldier and had a child whom she fiercely protects. What is that supposed to mean, Elena wondered. She closed the book, replaced the tome in her over-shoulder bag and stood to leave, paying Mahfouz no heed.

He was hurt. Did she really think the presence of the teapot a small miracle? Did she not know that human agency was involved in her comfort?

But no, at the door she allowed her eyes to seek his. She smiled and gently nodded good-bye. Mahfouz found her beautiful. Not beautiful in looks, not exactly, but she entered quietly, ate with restraint, read with concentration, didn’t take what was first offered but asked for what she wanted, and then discovered his eyes at the end for a personal thank you. What a wonderful woman. Some people are a delight. They make the world glow.

He began to sing while cleaning. He placed the bills from the cash register into the commercial deposit bag, left the cash register drawer conspicuously open, activated the alarm, closed the lights, locked the door.
Standing on the sidewalk he stared back through the window into the shadows of his workplace. The spits were motionless, the coils behind them a dull black, the pans at the counter cold and empty, and yet he was happy with this space and the role he played within it. I stand there, he thought. That’s who I am, the one who, standing, oversees. And it’s not wrong is it, or demeaning, to serve others to earn a living?

He walked briskly to the bank to drop the night deposit bag down a metallic throat which clanged as it closed. Finally free of obligation he didn’t want to disappear down the stairs and under the streets to ride the Metro home. He decided to walk to the next station. But as he reflected upon his life from the changing perspective of the larger city, the image of himself as he who oversees began to fail. Didn’t he have more ability then an endless servitude to the appetite of others? But how could he become something more if he wasted all his time, day after day, repeating the same actions? And why had he spent all that time and effort getting a business degree if this was the extent of it—an annual lease, old kitchen equipment and a few matching tables and chairs? If he had known he was going to work forever for his father it would have made more sense to take a course in second-hand refrigerators and how to keep them running.

He descended into the station, a stern look on his closed face, and stood on the platform still and subdued. The train arrived, the doors opened. He entered and gripped a pole, eyes lowered to the floor. He looked up. In front of him sat the young woman to whom he had served tea.

He turned away.

Why the hell had he done that? Why had he turned away? He had had a chance to smile and make a comment or ask a question and he had missed it. What a fool! The surprise had confused him. Yes, it had. How, now, could he turn around and pretend he hadn’t done what he’d just done?

The train ground to a rapid halt before fully entering the next station.

“Quelqu’un a sauté devant l’maudite train,” calmly proposed a young man with a baseball cap and earmuffs. “Maintenant on va être retardés de vingt minutes pendant qu’ils ramassent les morceaux.”

The possibility was widely considered, but no one immediately endorsed the premature opinion. The Metro did grind to a halt for other reasons. After the briefest pause the train restarted, moving forward and pulling smoothly into its accustomed place.

Mahfouz turned as several people, including Elena, exited onto the platform. It wasn’t his stop but he, too, left the car. When they reached the escalators she stepped up and moved to the right to let others pass. He stopped one step behind her. People filed by on their left, eager to get to the street.

It surprised him, the tight knot in his stomach, and now the tightness gripping his throat.

At the top of the escalator they funnelled towards an exit, she leading, he following. She turned to glance at him and then faced forward. In her eyes it was clear, he was sure of it, there was no one in front of her to recognize. He didn’t exist. She hesitated, turned again to look at him. He must speak. He must speak now.

“I served you in the restaurant.”

She nodded. “I thought so.”

“You live near this stop?” he asked so easily one would think that he did, too.
“Yes.”
Keep talking. He must keep talking. “Had you ever come in before, to the restaurant? I don’t remember ever seeing you.”

“No, but I liked it.”
“We’re known for being cheap.”
“Don’t knock it. The food was good.”
She was smiling and they were walking side by side. Now he dared not say anything else, any word or question might reverse his great good fortune.
“I go this way,” she indicated a turn.
“I would normally go that way,” he pointed down a street he’s never seen before, “but I can walk this way, too.”
“If you want.”
They continued in silence.
“That’s my building.”
“It’s very nice,” he said, lying. “Do you have time for a cup of coffee, or tea? I know you prefer tea.” He hoped beyond hope that some unlikely seam in the fabric of probability would open.
“I don’t live alone,” she said.
“I didn’t mean ... I mean, of course you live with somebody. I’m sorry ... I wasn’t thinking.” He didn’t know how to continue.
His confusion encouraged her. “I live with my daughter.”
“Your daughter?”
“Yeah. She’s seven.”
“Why don’t you bring your daughter to the restaurant? Why don’t you? I would love to meet her.”
“I liked the restaurant.”
“As my guest.”
“Alright.”

“Tomorrow, come tomorrow.”
“I can’t tomorrow. Maybe next week.”
“It would be nice to see you and your daughter.”
“We’ll come at the end of next week,” she said before climbing the three concrete steps and pushing against the heavy outer door.
He waved to her receding back, floated back towards the subway, past St. Cunegonde Church with its twin cupolas — two firm breasts with crosses as nipples — then again descended beneath the streets at Georges Vanier Station, this time to sit contentedly while crossing the city and anticipating his future.

ELENA ALMOST MANAGED to forget her easy words to Mahfouz and when, on Friday evening of the following week, she flopped onto her bed to decide whether she would go as promised, she resented the obligation. Could he really expect her to show up? Did he think she owed him something for a free ... what, hot water and a tea bag? Besides, if she never went, what of it? She had no responsibilities whatever towards the shy, skinny, waiter who had imposed himself upon her.

But she didn’t want to make dinner — the vegetables in the freezer were unappetizing frozen clumps wrapped in plastic — and he had said that if they went she wouldn’t have to pay. Why not get out, eat well, and save money as well?

She dressed Sharon with a sense of occasion, finding red knee socks that matched a blue smock patterned with small crimson flowers. She fussed carefully over the dark, thin
hair, pulling it neatly off the forehead and weaving it into a perfectly balanced French braid before fastening the loose ends with butterfly barrettes. Then she sealed her good work by centring the open and trusting face between two palms and gently kissing both eyelids.

As for herself, she pulled back her unbrushed hair into a tight ponytail and left the apartment in faded jeans and a green nylon winter coat which, opened, exposed a flannel shirt washed and rewashed from a royal purple into an inadvertently most elegant mauve.

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MAHFOUZ, ALL PLACES at once, catered to the Friday night crowd grown tired of burgers and pizza who still want change from a ten dollar bill. He filled the plates, worked the cash, bussed the tables. Even though there was frost at the bottom edge of the large front window, perspiration stains visibly spread beneath his arms.

"You came!"
"This is Sharon."

The child. He looked down at her. "My name is Mahfouz."
"Do you remember my name?"
"You never told me."
"Elena. Do you want me to spell it?"
"Elena. I got it." His heart quickly filled with the importance of the event, an importance evident in the obvious care she had taken dressing the child. Such a well-dressed child, such a selfless and dedicated mother. "She's beautiful."

Elena couldn't help but smile. "You seem busy. Is this a good time?"

"Yes."
"But there's nowhere to sit, I mean, I don't see anywhere to sit."

"By the time you're ready there'll be a place. It's a miracle on busy nights but you'll see, it works."

Elena took charge by letting him be responsible. "Do you want to order for us . . . just, you know, put things you think we'll like on the plate? We're vegetarians."

He turned to Sharon. "Is there anything special you want?"

She shyly pointed to the yellow rice with raisins.
He immediately put two stuffed vine leaves on the plate and covered them with rice, steaming green vegetables, oily eggplant, perfectly fried falafel, pickled turnip and tomato slices. He began on the second plate, working to build a contrast of nourishing colours and ended by carefully spraying sauces on each.

Two men entered. They were laughing in an open, good-hearted way. One had his arm draped over the other's shoulder. Mahfouz launched on the offensive, haranguing in Arabic, but his father, happy to see so many customers rather than being stung by the accusation there weren't enough hands to serve them, simply ignored the complaint.

"Look," said Mahfouz hurriedly to Elena, "there's a small table clearing over there. You sit down and I'll bring these to you." He picked up the over-flowing plates and began to walk around the counter.

"What are you doing?" asked his father. "First you complain you have too much to do and now you act like a waiter?"

"She's my friend. I told her to go ahead and save a table."

His father looked over, noted the attractive young woman with a child, shrugged, then propelled himself and
his friend through the swinging door into the kitchen. He knew he should help his son, but first he needed something to assuage his hunger.

Mahfouz placed the plates in front of Sharon and Elena with a broad smile on his face. “Eat,” he insisted. “Eat!”

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THE BUS COUGHED its way through the night while Sharon sat on her knees facing the window, her head bobbing rhythmically,

“Why are you doing that?”
“I’m not doing anything,” she replied, her head still bobbing.
“Don’t.”
She stopped. Everything moved back into focus. Boring.
“Do you have to go to the bathroom?”
“No. I liked it there. I liked being behind the counter. People talked to me. Mahfouz is nice. Do you like him?”
“I don’t know him. You talked to him more than I did.”
“You could have sat behind the counter, too.”
“Don’t be silly.”
“I got the soft drinks from the fridge if someone wanted one. If you were behind the counter he’d let you get the drinks, too.”
“Right,” said Elena, “and maybe if I behave I can work there as a waitress one day.”
“That’d be good,” said Sharon.
“We’re getting off at the next stop. I want to get milk.”
Elena moved quickly beneath the buzzing, flickering, fluorescent tubes casting a greenish light in the all-night convenience store. Sharon followed her closely. Then they were on the street.
The wet snow, again falling, covered the sidewalk with a thin layer of slush. Elena slipped and fell on her back. Winded, unable to get up quickly, she lay on the cement gasping for breath.
“Are you okay, Mommy?”
“I will be.”
“Why don’t you stand up?”
But even when breathing more easily Elena preferred to lie there, feeling the refreshing moisture of the melting flakes on her face.
“Mommy, you have to get up.”
Yes, I should get up, she thought, discomforted by the broad wetness seeping through the back of her nylon coat.
She rolled to her side and saw the horizontal length of the wet sidewalk. There were so many beautiful colours reflected upon it. Strange, how differently the world presented itself from here. She placed her palms flat on the rough surface of the concrete and pushed against its cold hardness to help her shift to her knees. She hesitantly stood, attempted to brush the slush off her coat, then leaned forward and gingerly picked up her bag.
“Why did you lie there?”
“I was catching my breath.”
“Are you hurt?”
“No.”
They entered their building. The light in the foyer was very dim because someone, once again, had stolen two of the three light bulbs.
“I want you going straight to bed when we get in.”
“Can I sleep in your bed?”
"You miss a lot of classes?"  
"Like now, here we are drinking tea and it's after midnight."
"Tomorrow's Saturday."
"I'm talking about a pattern."
"Are you failing?"
"No, of course not."
"Were you married?"
"You're asking because of Sharon?"
"You don't have to talk about it."
"I don't mind talking about it."
"You don't have to."
"I wanted the baby."
"You didn't want to marry?"
"When I told him I was pregnant he said it was impossible and that the baby wasn't his. He said I must be lying. So I guess marriage was really never a part of it."
"He said that! Why?"
"I don't know."
"We don't have to talk about it."
"You were nice to her tonight. She liked being behind the counter."
"THAT'S GOOD." MAHFOUZ took another small sip of tea.  
"It's very good."
"I used fresh mint."
A pause. "Do you go to school? I mean the book you had, it looked pretty thick."
"That wasn't for school, but yeah, I go to university."
"You like it?"
"I don't know to be honest. Sometimes I feel too bored to go. Then at night I start to worry, stay up late, drink tea, make imaginary plans about how I'll study. The next day, I'm exhausted."

"No."
"Why not? Don't you like it?"
"Yes, sometimes. Not all the time. Not tonight."

In the apartment Elena turned to Sharon. "I invited Mahfouz to our place. I shouldn't have done that but we didn't really talk in the restaurant and I wanted to get you to bed. Since I don't have a baby-sitter I said he could come over."
"You invited him here?"
"I don't know if he'll really come."
"You like him."
"I don't know him."
"Where will he sleep?"
"My god, he's not going to sleep here. If he comes it's just for a tea or something. Then he'll go home. Really, I don't know why I invited him. Now I'll have to stay up and figure out how to get rid of him. But he lives near here so it shouldn't be too hard. Why did I do such a stupid thing?"

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"It's very good."
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A pause. "Do you go to school? I mean the book you had, it looked pretty thick."
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"I don't know to be honest. Sometimes I feel too bored to go. Then at night I start to worry, stay up late, drink tea, make imaginary plans about how I'll study. The next day, I'm exhausted."
It happened on screens, restrained in the cinemas and completely without shame or limits on the computer. Standing like that, peering into a dark room, he saw almost nothing. It wasn't sexual arousal he felt, but a desire to share the darkness. He listened to the soft cadences of her breathing.

“I was just checking on Sharon. Let’s go to the other room.” Together they re-emerged into the light of the kitchen. But now, both sensed it, some scent of a desired possibility was disappearing, becoming less definite, more vague.

“Just hold me,” she said, as flat as that.

He held her.

“Follow me.”

They entered Sharon’s room. Elena’s hand rose as if to turn on the light but then fell away. They held each other’s hands in the dark, simply. They moved closer and, perhaps without knowing, began to sway.

Mahfouz moved closer still, believing he was transforming into wax, molten and slow moving, covering with warmth the places of least resistance on the person in front of him. He poured himself into the moment, unconscious of everything except his proximity to this remarkable person who, made up equally of heaven and earth, understood so much.

They were on the bed. Everything was new for him. She opened the condom she had purchased at the store and put it on him.

Elena, too, floated away from the world with its ceaseless burdens, content to let her body guide him, hoping that the waves washing over her would remain gentle, for he was that, gentle. She was surprised, then, when only minutes later her body arched to drive his home. She held tightly onto his slight shoulders as he shuddered uncontrollably.

She got a small bottle of vodka with two shot glasses and set them on the table. “What does it mean to you, being a Muslim?”

“What does it mean to you, being a Christian?”

“I’m not a Christian. My parents are, were, whatever ... especially my father. My mother didn’t think much about it. It’s his religion, not mine.”

“But still, it’s who you are, it’s how you think.”

“I don’t know, is religion genetic? Don’t I have a choice?”

“It’s in the air you breathe, in the alcohol you drink.”

“You say that as if you don’t think very highly of us.”

“See, you said ‘us’. You can’t help it. You’re Christian, even if you don’t believe.” He poured himself a shot. “And even if I drink this, I’m still a Muslim. It’s odd, but true.” He tasted the cold vodka and enjoyed it in measured sips.

Elena went to the washroom, hesitated as she returned past her bedroom, momentarily confused by the form in her bed. She sat on the edge of the mattress and shifted the hair from the sleeping face. When did she get up and crawl in? Was she awakened by Mahfouz’s arrival? Such a young face. Seven and a half years, so, counting the pregnancy, more than eight years without — what would the word be — intimacy? Not exactly. Whatever it was that got her pregnant it wasn’t intimacy. Eight years without it, whatever it’s called. And now this strange man, everything about him unusual, in her kitchen late at night. She didn’t know him. Maybe she didn’t even like him, but everything she was doing was telling him to stay. She recognized that. But as to why she was doing it, she didn’t know.

Footsteps came towards her.

He stopped at the doorway and leaned against it. He was accustomed to think of sex as something primarily visual.

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Mahfouz shifted his weight and let his hand fall lightly onto the small of her back. There was a complete stillness before his fingers began to make small circles on the smooth skin. The delicacy of his touch pleased her.

The small of one’s back, she thought, can be an intimate place.

Now his full palm glided up the long back muscles. She inhaled deeply into her lungs, expanding her torso. Mahfouz, amazed by the living volume beside him, the solidity of her bones, the living flex of her muscles, the way her breath sometimes deepened sometimes quickened, wanted to ask what she really thought of him. He wanted her to list words that would help him to see himself.

He considered saying “I love you”, but he’d never said that to a woman before and besides, the sentiment was large and clumsy. When might be the right moment to say it? Not now, that’s for sure, but maybe when the words came without thinking. Or perhaps one should say them only after long deliberation? No, of course not, love can’t be thought the sum of a list of calculations. The words should only be said in a moment of true spontaneity. He was convinced of that. And therefore now was not the right time.

“I love you,” he said, in spite of himself.

And, in spite of herself, Elena believed him. She began to wonder if she really might love him in return.

Chapter Three

Mahfouz stood in front of the security gates at the Pierre Trudeau International airport. The uncle’s business proposal — on this he and his father had eventually agreed — most likely reflected pressing personal needs which he was not comfortable to disclose, so Mahfouz carried five thousand dollars secure in a money belt. It was the amount his father had thought reasonable for a brother who’d never before requested financial assistance.

But Mahfouz wasn’t thinking about that. He had spent the previous night laughing and drinking at a noisy outdoor terrace. Elena had been there, attractive and witty. His friends had all liked her. So why leave now? What fool would choose to visit an uncle in the unrelenting heat of a Cairene summer while letting his lover wander alone during Montreal’s long summer nights? It would be smarter to simply wire money to the uncle and give up the pretence of a business proposal; or at the very least postpone the visit
until November, when the only swaying limbs in the night
air would be those on the naked trees.

"Don't forget me," he said, embracing first Sharon and
then Elena. Elena called him a fool and kissed him again
softly, lingering on the lips.

"You're coming back on my birthday," Sharon reminded
him.

"How can I forget when you keep telling me? What
would you like?"

She answered immediately. "Sand from the desert. I can
keep it in a jar in my room."

He thought that doable, and offered to bring her some
of the very sand in which the ancient Pharaohs were buried.
He thought that doable, and offered to bring her some
of the very sand in which the ancient Pharaohs were buried.
Would she like that? Sharon nodded, impressed by his access
to special things. With a final, hesitant, self-conscious smile,
passport and boarding pass in hand, he disappeared behind
the opaque security screen.

Elena felt a moment of guilty relief. She imagined herself
having more time, getting more accomplished. But then
again, she had just had a special day, sweet and sad, as
a day of parting should be.

Both Elena and Sharon were dog tired, but Elena refused
to spend the equivalent of four hours' work to go home by
taxi—or that was how she now calculated all her expenses.
She roused slightly, but not enough, as they held
er hands and walked the short distance home from the last
stop. Elena started to hum. She remembered the words so
she sang them softly.

There's a land that is fairer than day,
And by faith we can see it afar;
For the Father waits over the way
To prepare us a dwelling place there.

In the sweet by and by,
We shall meet on that beautiful shore;
In the sweet by and by,
We shall meet on that beautiful shore.

They entered the familiar darkness of the lobby and
climbed the worn stairs. Sharon dissolved into her bed and
Elena sat on hers.

Where was Mahfouz now? Would he be high above
Nova Scotia or would he be farther north, over Labrador
or Newfoundland? It was interesting, how flights arched
over the ocean. Amazing—in the two hours it took them to get
home he was already so far away, hurtling through the dark.
But it wasn't dark, not really. In a plane one soars above the
clouds to join sparkling stars infinite in number and a pol-
ished moon. He may be flying above a darkened world, but
through an incomparable illumination.

She turned off the bedside lamp, slid between her sheets
and rolled onto her back. She stared into the unmoving
shadows of her bedroom, envying him his night flight.

2

IN THE CROWDED fuselage six miles above ground,
rendered silly by lack of sleep and two inane movies watched

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About The Author

Michael Springate’s writing for live performance includes: Historical Bliss (Studio Altaire); Dog and Crow (The Necessary Angel Theatre Company, published by Guernica Editions); The Consolation of Philosophy (composed by Helen Hall, The Toronto Music Gallery); The Geese Sonnets (New Music Festival of the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra); Kareena (Ukrainian translation pub. Вітгуїна); Freeport Texas (Sodium Glow Theatre); Küt: Shock and Awe (Craning Neck Theatre); and the short libretto I should bring them water (composed by Alfredo Santa Ana). He has lectured in the dance and theatre departments of Concordia University, in the School for the Contemporary Arts at Simon Fraser University and, most recently, at the Institute of May 18 at Chonnam National University in Kwangju, South Korea.

Born in Montreal, he currently resides in Vancouver where he is Artistic Associate with Full Circle: First Nations Performance; a member of the Board of Directors of the Vancouver Latin American Cultural Centre; and a founder of Commercial Drive Productions.

The Beautiful West & The Beloved of God is his first novel.