

RAY

In the beginning there was only darkness and heavy rain. Sudden black waters that ruffled and swarmed like a plague over the roads and fields, poured like Guinness into abandoned stairwells. Downtown, at the intersection of King Street and Spadina Avenue, a young man in hitched-up plus-fours tried fording one of the deepest sections of road on his bicycle. The wheels slid out from under him and he disappeared, then rose again sputtering and indignant. Cop or not, I laughed along with the sodden crowd. Two unshaven men carrying a spineless mattress from one building to its neighbour had it ripped from their arms by the current. One of them, a showy and well-muscled lad, dove in theatrically and performed three or four impressive freestyle strokes before standing again, suddenly waist deep. He flopped aboard the ruined springs and feigned exhaustion. Bravo! I thought. Bravo!

No one took any of this splashy weather very seriously, even though there were reports of similar scenes all over the city. The CBC's meteorologist reported matter-of-factly on the radio that a

hurricane was blowing itself out over the Appalachians. His confident forecast was for a little more rain that evening, then drying out after midnight. But the sky was fierce with fat, scudding armies of cloud. And at the lake, a debris-laden surf was beginning to wash in. There were logs and curled roofing shingles, wretched baby toys with broken or missing limbs, dislocated umbrellas and battered hub-caps; a buckled American stop sign.

Commuters were clutching at lampposts and hats, yanking overcoats tight and yelling to each other quite cheerfully, almost proudly, that they couldn't remember the last time they'd seen a rain like this. The buses were packed and glowed like lanterns. Their drivers honked at the more timid drivers to give way. If it stopped soon, I thought, then there wouldn't be much of a problem (though I had seen a few refugees evacuating basements already, clutching their record albums and a favourite pair of shoes, or a squirming, terrified cat), but another hour or two and it would lose its comic edge.

Worst was the traffic. Motorcycle cops were attempting to guide drivers towards the shallowest sections of road. A couple of detours had been established. A drunken crowd that had gathered on the roof of the Gladstone Hotel on Queen Street had taken to lobbing beer bottles into the rising sea. The fact that instead of smashing they simply bobbed west seemed to strike them as miraculous. One idiot was scrawling messages on paper napkins and stuffing these inside the Molson's bottles, as if he had been stranded in this overrun cattle town long ago and had finally sensed the possibility of rescue.

When I found a moment I telephoned home to tell Mary that I wouldn't arrive until later, when things calmed down. She was disappointed – she had wanted us to spend the evening together, packing. We'd planned a trip to Niagara Falls. She whispered (as if she might be overheard) that she pictured us in bed together tonight, riding out the storm, if I got her drift, and so I told her about the boy on the mattress.

“Do you think we'll still be able to go away?” she asked me. “You said the Queensway was flooding.”

“We'll drive around it,” I said. “Or we'll rent a boat.” I was feeling

strong, cocky even. But I was a respected policeman with a pregnant wife, and that struck me right then as the epitome of good citizenship. Everything about my predicament felt crystalline and pure. It was just the adrenalin kicking in, I suppose.

I told Mary I loved her and her throttled little gasp excited me. I would have to do that more often. But then, feeling suddenly delinquent in my duty, somehow adrift, I said only, "Mare, I have to go."

"Go! Go!" she commanded, and I felt oddly as if I was being ordered once more out of an Italian trench and across exposed muddy fields towards tangles of barbed wire. And I also felt, with an unsettling certainty, and with the wet telephone still in my hand, that I was about to die.

The reporter – a lovely young Chinese woman, Katie something – was bored, I think. She had talked herself into our home but now she wanted none of this florid indulgence; it was unusable. At best she would reduce it to a dozen melodramatic words: *Fifty years ago today, Detective Ray Ignacius Townes spoke briefly to his wife before the full force of the hurricane struck Toronto. He had time only to tell her that he loved her. . . .* What she really wanted from me were the so-called heroics. She had a deadline (and perhaps a dinner date), and her appetite for the story's peripheral details was limited. The day after tomorrow something else would demand her attention. A killing at the Eaton Centre. A police strike. Tuberculosis in the shelters. Any of the sordid thrills Toronto routinely offers. Quite reasonably she might have been thinking that I should understand those things, that I should help her.

And it really was a dreary retelling. I've done it much better elsewhere. At cocktail parties and at the occasional speaking engagement arranged by the public library. Every few years a relative of one of the deceased will track me down with questions and I'll try to tell them what they want to hear.

And even now, hours later, lying here in my own bedroom with my notebook pressed against my knees, my heart isn't in it. I've given

up on my plan of repeating everything I said to Miss Katie Whatshername. Mary crept away up the stairs an hour ago. I heard her pull a bottle of Chardonnay from the refrigerator and take it with her. I have driven her to drink. Saying goodbye, Katie kissed my cheek (a social nicety, that's all it was, but a flyaway strand of her hair was for an instant, I swear, *inside* my mouth). Once she was gone, Mary began to shake. At our age such a rage is alarming, seems freighted with risk. I can imagine all too readily an aneurysm, blood flooding her brain, or her heart clenching too tightly around her disappointment. Her eyes did pool with tears but words were beyond her. She kicked lightly at my oxygen tank to make sure it was full and that its hoses were attached properly to the valves, and then she sniffed away. She has shrunk in recent years, become shorter, and in a long-ago moment of levity I even suggested we scratch a set of lines into the wall, begin an ironic measure of our annual decline. And as she passed into the kitchen tonight (though it might have been an illusion, I suppose, some trick of perspective) I don't think she reached much above the halfway point.

Dinner arrived late and stone cold. She had eaten alone presumably, wondering whether to starve me altogether. I think it entirely possible I will die before we are civil with each other again.

And I do understand her anger. That hurricane changed everything. It put our house under a cloud and caused a permanent turbulence to clatter through its rooms. Mary only knows half of it and that's apparently more than enough for her to never forgive me. She should have, but she didn't. And as a result we have wasted much of the rest of our lives. Why in God's name did she stay with me? Was it the memory of love? The faint hope it can be rekindled?

I remember one night (it must have been around the same time as the hurricane – just a few days or weeks before it hit) I found her hunkered down in bed, the covers hiked around her neck. I sat at her feet and rested my chin on the cotton-covered mound of her drawn-up knees. “You okay?” I asked her.

“Sure I am,” she said.

“It's just you seem, I don't know, more tender today.”

“I’m always tender, Ray.” She stuck out her bottom lip. “Why don’t you get yourself in here and feel just how tender I am.”

I clambered over legs. “I think maybe delicate is a better word,” I said. “Like the world was having its way with you.”

She feigned indignance. “Now you’re making me sound downright promiscuous. Which is the last thing I am. Now you hold me. Just like that. You dare tell me I’m not the tenderest woman in the world. No don’t let go. You just hold me.”

You see, if we had separated long ago perhaps I would have lost innumerable moments like this. And given the pain they cause us, the pain they cause *me*, the infinite regret, I would choose that. Yes, let us consign the beautiful bits to oblivion, I say, rather than have them cower here, fetid little ghost children, illuminating nothing more than this dank shadowland we have picked as our lot in life.

MARY

I said to Jenny, our daughter, “I’d like to strangle him, Jen, I really, really would.” And she laughed, of course, but the sadist in me, as well as the judge, wants at the very least to pin him down, sit on his chest and force him to speak transparently. To tell the goddamn truth. But one cannot do that, especially, it seems, to a retired policeman. The indignities involved in such a scene are unthinkable. And how do you even argue, how do you berate a man who cannot catch enough breath to argue back? He knows, of course, that his illness protects him, and damned if he doesn’t exploit it. The man, what little is left of him, is totally without shame.

But did he really think I wouldn’t find out? I change his sheets every second day, for crying out loud. You can’t just slip a notebook under the mattress and have it remain a secret. He’s like a dumb teenager with a greasy stash of girlie pictures.

It wasn’t much more than twelve hours after that girl left – that stupid, fawning reporter. I helped him into the shower we’d installed behind the kitchen so he wouldn’t have to negotiate the stairs. Then

I came in here to clear away the dishes. I shouldn't do that for him, I know. It makes him more dependent than he needs to be and besides, I feel diminished by the act. But old habits, just like Ray, die hard.

And when I found it I read it. I don't know why. On another day I might have just handed it to him unopened, asked what it was. But today, perhaps because I was still smoldering, I riffled through its mostly empty pages until I came to his nearly illegible scrawl. Then I sat. I squinted. I slumped and I ached. And when he called for me, when he wanted my arm to lean on again, I dutifully led him from the bathroom's hot mists into this cool, well-stocked room. But then I sat him down and I said, "So what the hell is this, Ray?"

He took the notebook from me and closed it. Maybe he hoped I hadn't had time to read all of it. He left his mottled, quivering hand on top of the cover, to shield it from my gaze, but the impression was of a man about to swear an oath. Finally he shrugged. "I don't really see that I owe you an explanation." His robe (it is new and black and absorbent; it is so much better than he deserves) parted over the revolting white knob of his knee. There might as well be no skin on him at all.

"Then how about just telling me the half I don't know? Isn't that what you say in there, that I don't know the half of it?"

He stared. He'd forgotten that admission, I think. I saw panic in his face as he scrambled to remember what he'd written. His breathing, shallow and worrying at best, tore around the edges, lost its predictable rhythm. Both of us eyed the tank. "Yes?"

He nodded meekly and so I wheeled it over and pulled the mask over his face. He thinks he looks like a fighter pilot like this – or so he has claimed – but in reality he is simply an old man near death. I remember that during a replay of that awful footage of George Bush on the deck of an aircraft carrier, all dolled up in pilot's uniform and with his breathing apparatus swinging as casually from his shoulder as a camera, Ray's eyes lit up so brightly it was as if new batteries had been installed. Apparently he saw something of himself in that dumb, offensive scene, and I pitied both of them.

I gave him a minute or two. He was fine and just buying time; pretty soon I would screw down the valve.

He lifted away the mask. “I only meant that we have always left the fine details unspoken,” he rasped. “We agreed a long time ago there was no need.”

Rubbish. Absolute rubbish. I could just *scream*. But you know, I have never been able to believe him. Even when we met, the first day, the first date, it was clear that he was a deceiver. He was an hour late, and his excuses were pitiful. But back then, so long ago, I found it obscurely charming. He was a raconteur, I told myself, a handsome spinner of fabulous yarns. I was young and I was impressionable and I was also utterly naïve. I thought somehow that an exemption would soon be granted to me. That because love was involved I would be treated more often than not to the truth. I didn’t know that I was wrong, not categorically, until October of 1954. But by then we were married, we had a house, it was just about inconceivable that we might part ways. Do I wish I had been smarter and recognized him for exactly what he was? Of course. And would I, as he asks, have left him then? I don’t know. I like to think so, but those answers are so patently unknowable that the questions become ridiculous, merely a form of torture. We endure and we go on.

And that’s how it was for me this morning: I endured and then I went on with my day. He sputtered and blustered mightily. He denied everything – the malicious intent, the negligent cruelty I accused him of; he even denied the relevant facts of history. And as he regained his footing he began also to mock my outrage. But we have fought this fight so often that much of it is conducted on some sort of autopilot, so I eventually found myself in a daze and vaguely disinterested.

I told him firmly, though, that he had to stop. “I have no interest in your rewriting our history,” I said. He duly pocketed his notebook and struggled upward. He paced breathlessly before me. Now that the stairs prove such a trial this parlor has become also his bedroom and he feels it is a space he can dominate. “A lion’s den” is how he has described it.

And so I stood up, too, which forced him to make a detour around me, and then we regarded each other warily through the dust-specked gloom. “You gave that girl completely the wrong idea,” I said.

“I gave her what she wanted.”

“I’d wager that what she wanted was the truth.”

“Nothing I could say to her would have made you happy.”

I told him I would be happy to list a dozen things he could have said. A hundred things. “But once again you succumbed to your ego, Ray.” He opened his eyes very wide. “No, I’m serious,” I said. “You need to know that’s how I feel. Your problem here, the fatal flaw, is that you can’t change the truth.” I poked him in the chest, where his heart should have been. “So when you read in the newspaper in the next few days that you’re a hero, just remember that I’m in the next room reading it too, Ray. And with every lie –”

“I didn’t lie.”

– with every *omission*, you shrink in my eyes. And already you’re about this big.” I held my thumb and finger an inch apart.

I left him grumbling and muttering. On my way out I drew back the curtains so he couldn’t hide all day in the dark. I kicked a rubber wedge firmly under the door to hold it open. When he looked up to see what that noise meant, I said, “And by the way, dear. She found you pathetic. I’m surprised you didn’t see that.” Then I made a second pot of coffee because he would see me making it and not bringing him any. I didn’t care that it was petty and ineffectual. It was something.

He is eighty-four (I am seventy-nine) and he has end-stage emphysema. In other words, he is dying. No one expects him to make it to the end of the year. Our darling Jenny is with us for a few days, and everyone knows why. We all wonder if father and daughter will see each other again after this visit. There have been half-hearted words about Christmas, but Jenny is on her way to Africa. She does important work there and to return again would take her away from