

## Long Ago Nostalgia Was a Poison

At six in the evening, Dora sends me out for whisky. It's a casual request, as if she had only just thought of it. We've been talking in a convivial way, reminiscing about our families. I never met her family, and she never met mine, but family life is one of our preferred topics of conversation. We are in the front room; little breaths of air enter from the window by the street. The tea is cold in the pot, and hunger is stirring. She is telling me about Aunt Marie who drove the car in her sleep, but out of the blue she stops suddenly and asks me:

"Do you think the sun is over the yard arm yet?"

A flame of anxiety explodes in my stomach and for a moment I'm no longer hungry.

"Not yet dear," I say; then, playing for time, "...finish the story first."

"You're only humouring me," she says.

"Not at all."

Although I have heard Dora's stories many times over the years, the Aunt Marie yarn is an undoubted evergreen.

Her eyes mist over in fond recollection as she resumes.

"Marie started working at the Mill just after the War," she says, "then she got the car and drove to work every day..."

"What kind of car was it?"

"You know what kind of car. It was a 1954 canary-yellow Pontiac."

I love this detail. Could there be a more sublime fulfilment of the Canadian Dream than a fifty-four canary-yellow Pontiac?

"She left early, maybe around five, the streets were empty. Sometimes she'd stop by the river and have a cigarette before she went on into town. She'd get out of the car and sit beneath the sumacs that grow there. She never married, Marie. She lived in her parents' home after they died..."

I enter a psychic slumber as Dora wraps me in the poisoned blanket of the past.

She grew to maturity in a mythical country. Tranquil breezes whispered among the maples and sycamores. Antique sunlight poured like honey over fragrant lawns, into porches and doorways. The year ended in the Fall when the leaves turned. Instead of bare branches in the winter the trees miraculously resumed their spring bloom, except for a week or two at

Christmas when everything was swathed beneath a layer of flawless snow. On Jessica Street a sure welcome awaited all strangers. Cries of greeting met her in the evening as she turned the corner on her way home from school and climbed the hill to her home.

“Then they found her one day, sitting unconscious in the car, outside the Mill. She had driven there from the river. People had actually seen her on the road, slumped over the steering wheel. She drove twenty miles in her sleep, that’s what they said. Just force of habit I guess. She’d never missed a day in twenty years...”

There are times when I glimpse Dora as she once was, when she had no angles or hidden agendas, when all her desires were obvious and plain. Sometimes when she’s asleep, I take a photograph of her out my wallet and sit for a while in the kitchen, rubbing my thumb over the surface as if trying to recover her from the past, to raise the genie of her beauty. She doesn’t know I have this photograph, and it’s the only one in my possession. For as long as I can remember if ever I have taken a picture of her she fetches the scissors and cuts herself out, leaving only the background or the marooned image of whoever she was with.

In this picture she’s leaning against a fence that ran around the airport huts in Goose Bay, Labrador. It was taken years ago when the transatlantic planes stopped there for fuel. I was working as a ground engineer and she typed letters in the office. There’s snow on the ground and a light wind stirs her hair. I really can feel that breeze, and I know by the direction she’s facing that it’s coming from the sea. She’s laughing and looks weightless, as transparent as light. She’s smoking a cigarette and makes it look some kind of miraculous fetish. Knowing her then and knowing her now has made me a schizophrenic. Love and Hate go at it in my head, round after round, like the Heavyweight Championship of the World.

Anyway, every night, after all the usual preliminaries we arrive at our preordained destination, and she says,

“Isn’t it time for whisky?” or some other euphemistic equivalent. When this happens I’m always disappointed, and isn’t that foolish? It’s the folly of a man disappointed in the absence of miracles.

The request is always casual, as if the answer doesn’t matter and I could say no. A stronger man would say no, but I have been crippled by love and can deny her nothing.

She follows me into the hall and knots the scarf at my neck as I reach for my hat.

“I’ll make the supper,” she says.

“Well,” I say, “I won’t be long.”

I go down the stairs at the front and turn west towards King Street. I walk past the liquor store, planning to go through the park and pay a quick visit to the library. Yet suddenly I feel faint, and there’s a queasy feeling in my chest as if my heart valves are firing in the wrong order. I sit down on a bench by the main road. I can’t imagine what perverse impulse drove the City to locate the bench beside the wellspring of exhaust fumes that this corner proves to be. It takes only a few seconds of accelerating traffic and I have succumbed to emphysema. I cough into my handkerchief and instinctively survey the contents for blood. Nothing. There is a twinge of self-pity. More and more often these days I feel the time has come for me to be removed from the action, taken somewhere by the pretty nurses and kindly agents of departure who stand at the door of death and prepare you for the journey.

However, once again I am spared this relief.

After a time I come to my senses and notice that on a bench on the other side of the road another man about my age is looking right at me.

He is wearing a hat with a little green feather on one side, and the brim pulled down slightly, almost perfectly, to the level of his eyebrows. Although his eyes are shaded to an extent, I sense a raptor intensity in his glance. His expression is not unfriendly, but indecently curious.

Normally I would avert my gaze from such an ocular challenge, but I am too tired to be bashful and simply gaze right back at him. Every few seconds a car or a bus or truck intervenes between us, but when the road clears we are still eyeball to eyeball, unwavering in our mutual observance.

Then he speaks. He makes no attempt at audibility, but nevertheless it’s perfectly plain that he’s talking to me. I see his lips move as his eyes maintain their attention on me. I am briefly curious about what he may have said, but remark to myself that the man is clearly demented and whatever he may have said would be no concern of mine. I finally look away, down to my watch, and realise that twenty minutes has passed since I sat down. Dora will be waiting, the food burning, her ire intensifying. If I delay any longer I will return to a cauldron of resentment in which I will be simmered like a boil-in-the-bag dinner for the remainder of the evening.

The man speaks again and this time I hear him.

“Geese,” he says, and he points up.

Sure enough an arrowhead of geese is passing in a north-easterly direction. They are at a sufficient altitude that their colours are not distinguishable, they are simply a kind of classical formation. Looking up I feel my centre of gravity rise, beyond the confines of my body. It is as if my weight has been hurled suddenly up into the sky, along with my attention.

“Yeah,” he says, laughing, shouting almost, but not moving. “Geese!”

At this point he gets to his feet and begins to walk away, back in the direction I have just left. As he goes he flicks his cane irritably to dislodge whatever litter he encounters; an empty cigarette packet, an oily leaf, a piece of Kleenex; he pursues each one all the way to the kerb and as it falls into the storm drain he stands back and smiles. I watch this procedure with interest. His progress is understandably slow, yet I am enthralled by the nonsensical passion he brings to the execution of his task. He reaches the corner and stops for a moment, turning to survey the fruit of his labour, the now spotless sidewalk, free of all unsightly detritus. As the lights change he turns back and crosses the road. His head moves back and forth in time with his footsteps, his avian features silhouetted in streetlight, pecking rhythmically at the darkness.

I decide to forgo my visit to the park and return. I follow a little way behind the old man and stop at the liquor store.

When I arrive home I push through the screen door and find Dora relaxing on the sofa. The old man is in the kitchen, preparing dinner. His coat is folded over a kitchen chair, the hat perched on top. He is wearing the oven mitts Dora bought from a homeless peddler who comes around our street at this time every year. The oven door is open and he is bending over, about to remove a casserole dish from inside.

Without really thinking I put the bottle down on the floor, push my way towards him and grab his hands.

“No!” I say. “These are no good. They’re fake. You’ll burn yourself.”

He straightens up and we stand toe to toe for a moment, his mittened hands still clasped in mine.

“You have to use a towel,” I say, releasing my grip. I go to the cabinet by the sink, open the drawer, remove a blue hand towel, and give it to him.

I watch for a moment as he lifts the heavy iron dish on to a ring of the cooker.

“There,” he says, “I reckon that’s done.”

He turns around and smiles at me. I'm stunned.

"This can't be right," I say.

He removes a mitt and reaches out a hand.

"Leonard," he says, "Leonard McGovern."

We shake hands.

I leave Leonard to continue with the dinner and go back into the living room.

"Dora," I say, "There's a guy in the kitchen who looks just like me."

She keeps one eye on the TV but turns her shoulders in my direction.

"Wasn't that you?"

"No."

"Well," she says after a moment's thought, "Where's the whisky then?"

"The whisky?"

"You went out for whisky, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Well then."

I return to the hallway and hang up my coat on the mahogany stand by the door. I can hear Leonard humming to himself in the kitchen, the rattle of a pot lid, the sound of orchestral music playing quietly on the little radio above the cooker.

I go to the bathroom and look at myself in the mirror. I'm there as usual, and even though I suspect I ought to respond to this invasion of my territory, I don't feel anything. Back out in the hall I retrieve the bottle and return to the kitchen. I set the bottle on the counter, crumple the bag and toss the paper ball into the bin by the sink. I perform all these actions with a kind of unlikely jauntiness. Leonard stands aside as I reach up into the overhead cabinet for glasses. At first I take two, but then I catch him looking at me from the corner of his eye.

"Did you want a drink?" I say.

"You don't have wine, do you?"

"Wine?"

"Well, what kind of whisky is it?"

He turns the bottle around so the label is visible.

"Ah, yes," he says. "Do you have wine?"

For a moment I want to say to him: "No we don't have fucking wine," and hurl him through the door on to the pavement, but instead my mouth forms a smile.

“No. We never drink wine. It’s not much good for getting drunk on when you’re in a hurry.”

“Oh dear,” he says. “It’s like that is it? I’ve seen a lot of that kind of thing during my travels.”

“Where have you been?” I find myself asking.

He winks at me.

“I’ve been all over,” he says.

I hear a cry from the front room, and the sound of canned laughter. I hurriedly unscrew the cap from the whisky bottle and pour a big shot for Dora. In my haste I spill some on the counter and wipe it away with my hand.

“Can I help?” Leonard enquires. I look at him and am suddenly ashamed of my lack of self-possession. I must look pathetic, I think, hurrying around after an old lush, like she was some sort of Queen with the power of Life and Death over me.

“There’s a thing for smashing ice cubes in the drawer there,” I say. “She likes crushed ice. The cubes are in the freezer and you can use a dishtowel from the other drawer to wrap them in.”

“Well, can you take the baked potatoes out of the oven?”

“Of course,” I say.

Leonard goes to the icebox.

Teamwork.

“Do you have a dining room?”

“A dining room?”

“Yes,” he says.

“I’m afraid not. We began our married life in a beautiful stone house with many rooms, one of which was indeed a dining room, but over the years, our living quarters have been reduced to the two rooms we have now.”

I avoid the temptation to explain. Our decline has been headlong, persistent, inexorable, but also noble in its way. Dora and I have packed up and moved on so many times over the years we are like pilgrims on a holy quest. Nowhere we go is sufficiently miserable. Each time we move of course, something other than whisky is renounced; firstly the trivia: the furniture, the photograph albums, the nice views, the good neighbourhood; but then, eventually, the people, the old friends we no longer call, the relations whose visits we fear;

each other. You start by giving up what you love, and then finally, if you're lucky, you may get to your addiction.

Leonard seems irritated by my reply and his eyes turn towards the casserole.

"So, where do you eat, normally?"

"Normally we just put the pot on the floor and get down on our hands and knees and eat like pigs. It saves washing cutlery and so forth."

"But seriously."

"But seriously, we serve it here and have a plate on our knees in front of the TV."

"Well, that's not very dignified, is it? I don't see that one has to let standards slip just because one's fallen on hard times. I've experienced privation myself but I've always insisted on eating my dinner at a proper table."

"Well, what do you have in mind?"

Our brows furrow as we consider our strategy.

Leonard pushes past me and goes to the living room. I hear the murmur of a conversational exchange, Dora's voice raised, the bass counterpoint of Leonard's reply, the background hubbub of the television show laugh track. Then suddenly there is silence. It is a shock. I am at the stove, holding a tray of baked potatoes in both hands and the abrupt cessation of all noise is as startling as a gunshot. I am frozen to the spot, waiting for the aftermath. Then I hear the tinkling of a piano from the radio. I relax a little. Leonard appears from the hallway. He has a grim smile on his face, as if having accomplished an unpleasant duty.

"I believe you have an ironing board," he says.

I find myself nodding.

He takes the tray of potatoes from me and places it on the stovetop.

"Show me."

I indicate a closet by the entrance in the hallway. He unlatches the door and the ironing board tumbles forward into his arms.

"A tablecloth?"

For a moment I cannot recall where such an item might be. We stopped using these things quite some time ago. Then I remember Dora keeps the linen in her hope chest beside the bed. I go to the bedroom, choose a cotton cloth embroidered with maple leaves, close the trunk and return to the kitchen.

Leonard's voice calls from the living room. "And we'll need chairs."

He has pushed the sofa back against the wall and set up the ironing board in front of the TV. Dora is on her feet, watching him with an expression of bewilderment, or is it fear? Leonard relieves me of the tablecloth and in one elegant movement he unfurls it and lays it over the ironing board.

"There," he says. He smiles paternally at Dora. "Now we can eat our dinner like civilised human beings."

I fetch a chair and a stool from the kitchen, then serve up the food which we eat at the ironing board, Dora and I at each end, Leonard in the middle, sitting on the arm of the sofa.

Leonard compliments himself on the food. Dora nods her agreement.

"I'm sorry about our dishes," she says, laying down her knife and fork. "We used to have a lovely set of Limoges china. We sold it, though."

She stares gloomily at her food, and takes a drink.

"You're not hungry?" Leonard enquires.

"She's not used to solid food," I say.

"I love a nice casserole," Dora says.

"By the way," Leonard says, leaning towards me, "I can't help but notice your necktie. It's very fine."

"I bought him that," Dora says. "It's silk."

"A love token," he suggests.

"Yeah. He was OK looking in those days. I wouldn't waste the money now."

Leonard considers us in turn and murmurs indistinctly.

"Those potatoes tasted soapy to me," Dora says, taking a long sip from her whisky.

It is beginning to get dark, a vague shadow is creeping across the room from the window, and I notice the curtains are still, the breeze has fallen away.

"It's getting warm," I say.

Dora is elsewhere, Leonard eats. The man has a good appetite.

I cannot fathom why neither Dora nor I have asked him what he is doing here. It is as if we are party to a long-standing agreement that no matter how strange things are, we will accept them unquestioningly.

I reach over the ironing board and touch Dora lightly on the arm.



“What happened to Marie in the end?” I say.

Leonard stops eating and smiles at me. “Marie?”

“Dora’s Aunt. She drove to work unconscious.”

“You never asked about that before,” Dora replies; she seems upset, disconcerted. “How come you want to know what happened to Marie all of a sudden?”

“You were trying to be funny, weren’t you?” Leonard suggests. “You thought that Dora might amuse you with the rest of her anecdote. Either that, or she had made it up once to please you, and now she wouldn’t be able to finish it. She wouldn’t remember how it went. Either way, you stood to gain a few moments’ diversion.”

There is now a steely, confrontational edge to his gaze and I’m thinking that here I am an old man with little to lose, what if I just punch him right on the nose? I’ve never done that to a person. I think about it and smile. *Squish*. Dora and I have lived together for thirty years. He knows nothing about diversion. I have faced her across rooms and watched her die in front of me. For Dora, it must be the same. We are titans of patience who would give our lives for a decent diversion.

“They took her to the hospital in Brantford,” Dora says.

“Did she ever wake up?”

“Nope. Eventually an aunt came from out East and looked after her at home. She got power of attorney and I suppose she was counting on getting the house, but Marie didn’t die.”

“She didn’t die?”

“Not the last time I heard. She just lingered. She lay in bed with her eyes closed. The aunt had to clean her and all that. Turn her over and so on so her skin wouldn’t rot.”

Even Leonard’s smile fades for a moment in deference to this anecdote. Dora drains her whisky glass and shakes it in the air, rattling the remaining ice at me in a tacit instruction.

I get to my feet.

“The wonderful thing about not caring anymore,” Leonard says, taking the glass from Dora’s hand, “Is that your needs become easy to satisfy.”

He winks at her.

“Would you like ice cream?”

She claps her hands together and giggles like a child. “Ice cream!”

“Is the ice cream in the freezer?” he asks me.

"I don't think we have any."

"Well," he says, "let's have a look, shall we."

He stands up and stacks the plates.

We go to the kitchen. The radio has detuned slightly, a piano trio crackles through white noise.

"You'll need to go and get some," Leonard says, once we've checked the freezer.

"What kind do you like?"

"Strawberry," I say. "It reminds me of Spring."

He returns to the living room as I fetch my coat, and assumes an air of bustling efficiency. Through the door I watch him fold the tablecloth, collapse the ironing board, push the chairs aside, pull the sofa around so that it faces the television. Dora watches, mesmerised.

"I like to have everything tidy," he chuckles. "Out in the street Nature has made a mess of everything, but indoors one can always maintain order."

He touches her gently on the shoulder.

"I thought we could watch the TV while we're eating our ice cream."

"What's *he* going to do?" Dora inquires.

"He's going to get the ice cream."

They move a little closer together. Dora throws me a fleeting smile.

"Back soon," I say, from the door.

The lights are out in the liquor store as I pass. I have reached the long stretch that runs beside the park. A hundred feet to my left a civic fountain casts a spray over the lawns. A bunch of kids are sitting on the stone balustrade, smoking cigarettes and flirting. The evening is warm, and my coat is much too heavy. Overhead I hear geese. I can't see them in the glare, but I know it's cold up there, and the sky is clear. A few cars pass, driving slowly, but as far as I can see there is no one on the sidewalk; it converges a hundred yards ahead, where the first lit up stores announce the downtown core. That edge of dazzling amber and red neon has a look of no return about it, a border that only opens for you to enter, then closes behind you. You leave all your memories behind, scattered on the ground outside. I think there ought to be a market there where you could trade in your abandoned recollections.

My pace accelerates. I cannot wait to get there, into town, to get the ice cream, or whatever it was I was sent for, even though I know that once inside I will not remember why I came. I am hurrying to relinquish my attachments. When I get to the lights, I may not become content, but at least I won't have left any grief behind me, and that's an accomplishment in itself, surely. I've had that life, so there's no need to go back. All will be well, I'm convinced of it. Dora can drink a toast to me from time to time, and Leonard can do the cooking for both of them.