

# In Parting

A Story by Janice Kulyk Keefer

Blue clarity of that autumn day, unexpected as her letter: concise, eloquent, final. "Grim, but it would have been a whole lot worse if my kids had not been grownup." "I have lived to do my life's work." In parting, words of encouragement, affection, and as practical gift, a letter of reference worded in such a way that it can be used long after the time they've given her. Glacial transparency of sky: gulls skating, and a trace of moon, like a thumbprint carelessly inked. Not focussing on details: the details focussing that most opaque word, death. Forever happening to others, a fiction until your own turn comes to open that book and find — whatever's left after all the pages have been razored out. Fiction after fiction: I can know the fact of her dying no more than I can experience the scrape of my son's skin against gravel: the needle the doctor administers, telling him to squeeze my hand and look away, look at my face, complicit in this brief, beneficent pain.

I take the children along the river, looking for a bench on which to sit down and reread her letter, a place where I can shake the children free of my hands and stop their questions: 'How far are we going, can we stay for another hour, can we have a treat on the way home?' I remember telling her how hard it was to write, having young children: at the end of a day that felt like sleepless night, summoning energy to continue, not a text but a life. "Six months," she writes — no time at all, and yet a long time taking leave. She still has a book to finish — for how much of those six months will she be able to work? She doesn't ask the question — only states that she has another draft to complete. "We shall see".

Reading her few words again and again — the children have run down to the beach, gathering stones to pitch into the mud flats below. Fitting time and place for such news: autumn, a river — flowing both ways, in truth, since this water is tidal, the basin emptying and filling itself with a regularity that cancels any sense of the miraculous. I put her letter back into the torn envelope, back with all the other

envelopes and flyers, promises of bargains, notices of debt. This is not the sort of letter to which one can compose any fit reply. I am a writer of fiction; practice the art of evasion. It's not a matter of telling truths — truth doesn't speak our language. Sounding its silence is the most we can do: mirror-writing, inking a blank page's shadows. Half magic. Morag never knowing if she'd been a true writer. *In a sense, it did not matter. The necessary doing of the thing — that mattered.*

A schooner leaves the wharf, making for the channel beyond the island. I do not want to think of her dying, I do not want to pin down Death, materialize even one of its letters from the vacancy of abstraction. I look at the water, the schooner white as the fingerprint moon, traced on a sky that should be gauzy, penetrable, but which remains a polished dance floor made of some wood impervious to kicks and scrapes and pounding. Giving directions to her house, she laughed about living on a street with three churches: 'Come after lunch on Sunday,' she'd said — 'I go to church in the morning.' In her hallway, a prayer, framed: no sampler, no mass-produced *Desiderata*, but audible speech to a God I can believe in no more than I can share her dying or think through even the first letter of Death.

I concentrate instead on her letter; what it has made me feel. Incontestable egotism of my first response: she will be dead before I could ever get down to see her again: I will never get to know her. The sum of our acquaintance one afternoon's talk, a few postcards, the short notes enclosed with letters-of-reference ungrudgingly, generously supplied. Discontinuity: rupture. A bulldozer, great, clanking, cumbersome machine ravaging what should have been green and flowering. Raw earth, oozing from the tidal flats below. Shouting at the kids, my voice on their ears like gravel shredding skin — 'Don't throw those rocks, you'll slip, you'll fall into the mud, you'll —' *Imagination of disaster*. Breaking off before the threats and menaces too familiar to be real. No one they know has ever drowned

in this water, suffocated under glistening, umber mud. Not even the death of a familiar animal, cat or dog has blown so much as a seed from a dandelion clock. The neighbour's dog, doddering, its marmalade coat sticky with the sun in which, day after day he continues to loll; our cat not dead, just disappeared, since the neighbours buried the handful of blood and fur after the motorcycle ran it down. So the children wouldn't see.

Retreating a little up the bank, they go on pitching stones into the soft, sleek muck, edging a little further down as they feel my eyes' cold shadow off their backs. Stones rebound off stones, click, then sink into mud. The schooner sailing past, slow in the wind, slow and stately. Comfort me with alliteration: *sad steps, oh moon: sad cypress...* Even refusing to think this death makes a chasm, a waste of waters — we must use the first bridge that comes to hand. This schooner, white sails' journey into dark, or simply — more comforting still — out of our range of vision. Like this beautiful ship rounding the bend in the river, she will die and and go into a world of whatever light her eyes can bear.

They are done, now — tired of the stones, the mud, the blank blue sky which even the raucous gulls can't fill: empty chalkboard to be scribbled over with images, stories I have no heart to tell. *As soon as the schooner passes the island, we'll go.* I promise that if they're patient we will stop for ice-cream at the general store, though it's not the hour or season for such treats. But it will keep their feet and tongues still; I need silence to keep things in this particular configuration; refusal and acceptance, greeting and farewell. Catullus — the one text in my highschool Latin reader for which I needed no translation, for which the disposition of the words alone, the sounds they made, were enough. *Multas per gentes et multa per aequora vectus.../ Atque in perpetuum, frater, ave atque vale.* Wanting to make some offering, perform the same sad rites, if only by waiting here, standing and staying-out the passing of this ship down-river, into open

water.

But the schooner will not vanish — it drops anchor at the island, blocking the entrance to the bay. It turns so that all its sails are visible, and the clear lines of the wood below. I think of her books, thin black lines of words holding their own against all the possible false starts, wrong turnings, silences. The finished, stubborn structure of her life, having produced those books as though they were all one child, one body born and then reborn at

different ages, in successive struggles. And the very last, which she might not live to complete: memoirs, in which the practice of life and the habit of fiction would meet in some last embrace: half dance, half wrestling-match.

“Do not worry about me. I am getting on as well as can be expected, and really believe I’ll get this final piece of work done.” She performs the rites for me, disengaging, divesting. My children break free at last, run up the hill toward the

road, knowing I will have to follow them now, fatality of cars and trucks and their careless fragility... Imagination of disaster, and this new knowledge: her belief in herself writing. Even more than her books themselves, this necessary always doing of the thing.

No passing to witness. Only a signal of parting: *In perpetuum, soror, vale atque ave.*

# Sex With a Stranger

(A chapter from the novel-in-progress)

By Janette Turner Hospital

Once upon a time a woman named Katherine ran full tilt at the side of the Royal Bank on Front Street in Toronto. She thought she saw someone she knew, but the image had bounced from a taxi window to the plate glass building, and seemed to be walking toward her when in fact it was half a block away and heading in the opposite direction. A doorman at the Royal York Hotel slammed the taxi door shut, changing the freakish angle of reflection, and *pouff!* the image vanished. Katherine, bewildered, stopped within feet of the mirrored towers, rubbed her eyes, and looked up and down the sidewalk. She wondered if perhaps she was sleepwalking. She wondered if she had just been jolted out of the kind of nightmare where one is about to do something unspecified but excruciatingly embarrassing.

On the sidewalk of Front Street she saw wary eyes and snickers and the pressed-together lips of people trying not to smile. They might as well have projected their thoughts onto billboards. *Loony*, she saw in flashing lights.

She thought with a shiver: It’s true.

There was probably a medical term for it — manic obsessive? Possibly there were books, articles, treatments, summer camps for the kind of senseless and passionate attachment picked up much too early, back in unimmunized childhood. It was one of those diseases like malaria. It hung around. It skulked, dormant, in the

blood, going into remission for years and years, for decades, and then *shazam*, flaring up again like poisoned toadstools after rain.

Something had made her think of Nicholas. (What was it? A headline on a news stand? The trail of association was lost.) But definitely, yes, first she had thought of him and then there he was. Ridiculous. She would have liked to distribute leaflets to the politely smiling bystanders: I’m a married woman, a mother of teenagers, a fulfiller of civic obligations; this derangement is not typical of me.

But it was as though a rip had spread and spread, slick as quicksilver, from the San Andreas fault through the Great Lakes and up the length of Yonge Street. A swift but mercifully brief seizure, she thought, pressing her fingers against the bony rim of her eye sockets. Like an itch, like a rash of poison ivy, the recollection of Nicholas went licking across the surface of her skin, but it would pass. One could read any number of articles about such midlife aberrations, the little kinks and tricky riffs of memory.

And then, at the far end of the block, between the Royal York Hotel and the Whalers’ Wharf tavern, she saw him again. His back. He was just turning the corner, about to seep into the city, water into sand. She sprinted, half sobbing, half laughing, heedless of stares.

This had nothing to do with the making

of a decision, or with any calculation of the pleasures/costs/complications of seeing him again. There was indeed not so much as a second to consider the oddness of boarding the Royal York’s shuttle bus to the airport. She saw Nicholas, in the middle of a fog of soft-sided luggage and suitcase-festooned travelers, climb into the bus. She followed him.

“Sorry, ma’am,” the driver said. “Got to get your ticket from the Gray Coach window first.”

“Oh where? where?” she asked, trying not to seem unduly agitated, but in fact breathless, frantic, scanning the bus seats for Nicholas. The aisles were thick with bodies. There was a waving forest of arms craning to stuff luggage into the overhead racks.

“There,” the driver pointed, and she sprinted to the ticket window and paid her six dollars and rapped on the now closed doors of the bus until they opened with a pneumatic sigh and then she bounded back up the metal steps.

“Yeah, yeah,” the driver grinned. “End of the world if you miss your flight, right? Six times a day, minimum, I’m offered bribes, threats, and prayers. Trip takes the same 30 minutes, fair weather or foul, ma’am. And the world don’t end if you gotta wait for the next flight.”

“Flight?” she said, her brows puckered.

She could see Nicholas — the unruly curls across his forehead — half way back, a window seat.