

## Hospice

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Had he grown up in my era, he would have been a tree planter. That Hydra-haired guy to drag out a battered acoustic, pluck a pick from deep inside his pocket, and sing “American Pie”—all the verses—near the end of the party, when the last of the drugs were gone. He would have slammed his mouth onto mine without warning, minced my heart out with his smoker's teeth, then licked the ends of each of his fingers, a wildcat who'd verily enjoyed the meal. But the road apparently forked, for he became someone quite different. Now he occupies a warm bed in an open-windowed room at the top of a Craftsman his distant nephews will fight over, and I have been hired to sit with him until he dies.

Wind rattles the poplars, as if cheerleading my charge toward the finish line, and a week ago a crow touched down on the window ledge, but it was premature. As quickly as it landed, the twig-legs pushed off. The bird morphed into an inky smear against the white and watery sky. Randolph's ready to go, but the world's not giving him up just yet.

I set my book down and study his hands: soft, spotted toads. He raises one—the right, the other lies helplessly by his side—and I bring cold oolong tea in a tumbler. I hold the glass against his bottom lip, still red as holly berries, and his blue eyes—they've resisted the degradations of age and illness and would fit into a four-year-old's face—send fingers of pleasure across my spine. I wipe his mouth with a linen handkerchief—he's from the time, like my father, when men carried hankies and wore galoshes—and pull the blanket higher up the railway of his chest. I stroke his hand like a real nurse or matron, automatic with my “There, there” that mocks present and past. If he could speak, he would denounce me. And I would not blame him.

Thirty years ago I was a twenty-year-old undergrad and often mysteriously found myself in scholarly stratospheres far beyond my intellectual league. I was a good student, yes, but a student, just the same. Or perhaps mystery played no part in it. I knew how to make the right noises, as they say. How to query and animate when professors engaged me beside elevators, or at Faculty Club socials arranged for visiting writers and scholars. I knew just enough about migrating songbirds, Zone Three perennials, the Boer Wars (they loved when I said Voortrekkers), and Jung to titillate the academy. They approved of my slim-hipped athleticism—swimming and tennis—and I made sure they knew I was studying French cooking.

In my second year, invitations were extended to faculty dinner parties. I could pin my hair up and put on a little black dress, inauspicious cubic zircons in my earlobes, and assimilate with the best of them. The secret is to say little, lead a lot. Most people only want to talk about themselves.

The Dean of the English Department was precisely what I think of when I hear the word rakish. At fifty-five, Randolph Krist still seemed to be getting used to his long legs and duckish feet, sheathed in calf-leather—brown with small black flecking, and thick soles underfoot. The shoes gave him an effeminate little bounce, which I believe he quite enjoyed. Randolph's wife was Danish, and short. An engineer who designed urban sewage systems, Ilse was reputed to be some kind of genius: there was an intimation that Canada was lucky to have her. Seated, Ilse swung her legs as she spoke; her miniature feet dangled like a child's. "I am a strictly technical person," she would say, snapping her Ts in that endearing Danish way. They did not have children, and I'm not sure they even believed in them.

A dinner party in the spring of my final year, my name in black cursive on a name-plate next to the Dean's. A mistake, I thought. A dozen dinner guests, and two invited students. The other, Geoffrey, a brown-nosing classmate from a hard right family—he quoted Blake and Keats, and had recently taken to wearing spats and bowties, each oddity rendering him ever more metaphorically

kickable. The host—a Shakespeare professor fond of making her students work in groups—was showing off with salmon en crouete. When I reached for the new potatoes, my right thigh ever so slightly bumped against the Dean's left. Against Randolph. My fingers may have grazed his when I passed the salad: frisée, avocado, and blue cheese. He kept turning to me, conspicuously including me as topics of discussion—mayoral candidates, Joni Mitchell albums, the host's new Tibetan terrier—blew back and forth across the crystal wine goblets and heirloom silver.

Randolph was a Nabokov scholar—oh, irony—and flavoured his social discourse with Nabokovian trivia, whilst simultaneously, I felt, probing my intellect. Was I aware that Nabokov's process included expanding ideas into paragraphs on hundreds of index cards, and shuffling these to determine his novels' structure? Yes. Had I any interest in lepidoptery? Not particularly, though as a teen I'd been part of a moth club. And which of Nabokov's titles was my favourite? Cigarette smoke and port made an enticing cocktail of Randolph's breath. His eyes were an eclipse: dangerous to view directly. “The film-novel, *Laughter in the Dark*,” I said to the safe space between his ear and chin. “His use of colour in that text was extended far beyond clichéd symbolism.” Randolph might have pressed his leg momentarily to mine. “You know,” I continued, voice low and tempered to register an appropriate mix of internship and acumen, “wherein a writer might, for example, use the colour black to represent sin, death, or despair, or red to signify passion. In fact, I believe Nabokov spoke of symbolism with vitriol.” A distinct pressure against my knee. I caught my breath, and my brain flared with gold sparkles. Suddenly snow-globe; I was turned upside down.

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The Krists were flying to New York for an extended Easter vacation. I volunteered to house-sit; they insisted on paying me. Palms and philodendrons were watered, the lashing yellow cat fed, and I'd sit in Randolph's bow-windowed office, ringed in floor-to-ceiling books, and vibrate. I slept in his bed, pressing his pillow to my breasts like a head. I poured through old photos—yes,

there, the lanky youth in a black T-shirt, cigarette not so much hanging as falling from his lips, hand raised in the stop position. Another of him reading on a bed. Blurry, black and white, and creased. But still.

Shortly after I'd completed my English degree (with Great Distinction) and published a few introspective poems in respected literary journals—I harboured no delusions; others were much stronger writers—I was offered the position of Secretary to the Dean, College of English. Work was, and is, my religion, and my buoyant disposition was, I believe, a breeze that flounced the dust off the aging department.

My wage afforded the purchase of my own small bungalow at a time when friends were still living with parents or rooming together in basement suites and sterile new apartments, where walls were too thin and one smelled her neighbours' curry or meatloaf in the hallways, or heard headboards rhythmically bang the wall.

Randolph's seasonal gifts included tickets to the good theatre in the crime-plagued west side of town. I acquired culture by association; I often attended productions with the Krists. I'd come to feel a commensurable affinity with them both, though I was aware (and they were not) that I was perhaps too attentive, too ready with the right question, the punctuating pause, or sigh, or two fingers on an age-spotted arm. I expect they sincerely believed they knew me. Ah, the ruses, the ruses: one plays so many games in a lifetime, she risks losing track of the rules.

The thimble of collegial prestige, the healthy income, the shoulder-rubbing with local and visiting literati—these I could have walked away from. Only Randolph kept me trekking across the University Bridge every morning—weather be damned—toward the pretty buildings on the other side. My alma mater was weft from greystone excavated north of campus, and, when that inventory ran dry, from Tyndall stone, quarried at Tyndall, Manitoba. Once my darling had said “Good

morning,” I could begin to breathe again. The cocktail of intellect and peculiarity—it quickened my blood.

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No one can refute that I was always there. I was there when he put his little Ilse in the ground. When he was forced to deal with budget cuts and department in-fighting and personal income tax audits. I helped with his Nabokov research. All those years, five days a week, the door between our adjoining offices left open, I waited. I hung on the wine of his words, his aggregate wisdom.

He never once reached for me.

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Dementia is ruthless. When he could still walk he'd grab the backs of the dining room chairs and push them from room to room, as if this were his job. He sees what's not there, and swats at me sometimes, and repeatedly says “Shut that damn dog up.”

He does not seem to care for movies but I pretend he still appreciates documentaries. I scroll through the possibilities and find one about African children making their insufferably long and parched ways through the savannah's snakes and lions to attend a one-room school. I have arranged his pillows and here we are, watching or not watching, together. My chair's pulled close to his bed, and I'm preternaturally aware of his shallow breath, the leaf's-width of distance between us.

October rain audibly collects in the eavestroughs. A shadow flaps through my peripheral vision. So little time left.

I lie on my side beside him, undo the buttons of his striped pajama top, slide it off his thin arms while supporting the adolescent weight of his back. Those determined African children—three barefoot siblings with bottled water tied to ropes around their waists—are singing their way through

the impossible heat. Randolph's abdomen dips beneath the cage of his ribs. "Like a coulee," I say, following the hollow with my fingers. "Like what the glaciers left behind as surprises."

His face is a roadmap. The hands every second their age. His feet I know to be tragedies. Ah, but the banquet of his skin. I float my palms across the sculpture he's become, press my nose to his neck and smell the honey of him. Rain on the window. Rain, now, on his face.

The children have made a safe journey and sit with red pencils at old-fashioned desks. I hold my love's head, my hands on either side of his face—tucked wings—and look for reason, but see only the unremarkable passing of my own life and the stony truth: I was not careful about what I wished for.

Randolph opens his mouth. Spittle's dried white in the corners. He opens, and closes. Again. Again. "What kind of bird are you?" I ask. But of course, no intelligible answer comes.