

WHAT'S GOING ON HERE, ANYWAY?

"You say funny things like, 'Look, kid, you can't leave me now, I just lost a button off my shirt,' or, 'I've got a freezer full of chicken soup ...' It's an incredible thing, an interesting experience. Two people sit and talk quietly, calmly, in low voices to each other about death and dying. I'm not too happy, but you wouldn't notice. Well, maybe. It makes quite a story."

It's been raining, crying, for three days, as though the earth has shrunk to a knowable embracing size, as if Leon were enwrapped and enclosed by the ceiling which is the sky, and the dark sky and thick moving swaying drooping wall of trees, and their sighing and the angry final clap of thunder, the startled lightning, are all close and intimate, possessing human feeling so that his grief seems only one small part of the world's sorrow. It's an incredible *thing*.

Everything about his wife's surroundings belied the horror of her state: crisp ironed sheets, lacy pillow-slips, eyelet duvet; the honeyed fruitwood four-poster in which she rested; on the dresser, Venetian-crystal miniature perfume bottles, wine and raspberry, dusty rose and trillium blue; chintz flower-printed easy-chair in which Leon sat watching Shirley. She lay propped against pillows, looking straight ahead, neither to one side or the other, her eyes uncannily deep and dark and brooding, vacuous, except for rare moments when she laughed at something funny.

Friends came and went. From the balcony the sun streamed in and spread across her jaundiced face, sunken and high-cheek-boned, once fleshy; neck-muscles thick, skin surrendered, hair thin, lips and jaw retreated, buck-toothed; it's an incredible thing. She said, "The doctor says all I have to think about is getting better." She lay propped against pillows. On the wall opposite the bed where they've always slept was a large oil landscape -- frozen lake and snow embankment, jagged rock, and Evergreen -- winter-browns and greys and hoary north-country skies, the hard edge of Lauren Harris. Friends came and went, sat and talked quietly, calmly in low voices, ignoring death and dying. "Are you going to serve brisket?" Shirley wanted to know. She lay against lacy pillow-slips, under a flour-white sheet crisply turned back onto flour-white eyelet. Leon thought Shirley would choke on her own body fluids. The nurse wanted to give her something to ease her breathing. A sweet smell, perfume and powder, filled the room; on the dresser, dusty rose and trillium scent-bottles, ivory hand-mirror, brush and comb. Her hand lay gracefully on the eyelet, nails manicured and buffed and polished with clear. "I don't feel well, Rhonda," she said, though her friend's name is Frieda. "Not well. The doctor says I have to concentrate on getting better."

Sweet fragrance, over-powdered and perfumed, the nurse has thought to cover the smell of dying. Lining the dresser, crystal scent bottles, old rose and raspberry. The sun shone in from the balcony and onto Shirley lying against lacy pillow-slips and under crisp linens; she turned back to stare at the landscape on the wall opposite, muted browns and greys and tired white, the dark of her eyes bottomless; her manicured hand, nails buffed and polished in clear, lay gracefully on top of the coverlet. Leon, in the flower-printed bedroom chair watched his wife. They sat and talked quietly, calmly, in low voices to one another, an incredible thing. "Are you going to serve brisket?" Shirley

asked. Leon moved forward to hear Frieda who sat on the closed lid of a portable toilet on the far side of Shirley's bed. He wasn't too happy, but you wouldn't notice. On the dresser, medicine vials and needles primly laid out on a towel; on the wall, the frozen lake. "Cold cuts, potato salad, cole slaw ... on trays from the Deli," Frieda answered. "I'm not well, Rhonda," Shirley said, though her friend's name is Frieda. "Will you make the brisket?" Shirley wanted to know. Leon leaned forward in his chair, "I've got a freezer full of chicken soup." "It was smart of me to order things already made up," Frieda remarked, pleased. "The doctor says all I have to do now is get better," Shirley said. Someone has thought to perfume and powder over the smell of sickness. Her hair, though the scalp showed through, was neatly brushed, her skin ghostly clear and stretched tight across the cheekbones, and her teeth were bucked, too large for her mouth and face which was shrunken. Leon thought she'd choke on her own body fluids. "I have to get better," Shirley said. She lay very still, her trunk and legs under the light covers mere indentations, so frail she hadn't enough bulk, without support, to keep from collapse. The nurse wanted to turn her over on her side. Shirley's eyes, the irises, were black holes, her expression pleasant and unperturbed. "I guess seventy-one is a long time," she said. "I need a button on my shirt," Leon said, leaning in. Laid out on the dresser were rows of medicine bottles and a hypodermic. The nurse wanted to give her something. Opposite the four-poster on which Shirley lay was a frozen lake and hoary skies. "What a smart idea to serve brisket on trays made up at the Deli!" Shirley said, excited. "A smart idea," Leon agreed. He thought to get under the covers with her but her legs might break. He had a way of deeply frowning his brow and flaring his nostrils; his pitch rises with the phrase and he stresses the words at sentence end, punching the last or next-to last as though his meaning should be obvious to any idiot; he shows impatience, a way of talking, *listen-up!* "I just lost a button off my *shirt!*" A way of talking. "My wife's brother Will's late-wife's sister Millie from Szmerna-Herzegovina makes the best brisket," he commented. "I ordered from the Deli," Frieda told him. "I'm not well, Frieda," Shirley whispered, "I have to get better." "How clever to do that," he said and stopped to stare at Frieda seated on the commode. "I'm sorry, I guess seventy-one years is a long time," Shirley said in a whisper.

Everything in her surroundings belied her plight, over-perfumed and over-powdered as if to cover a rancid odour. "I lost a button and I have a freezer-full of soup!" Leon protested, angry, his eyes bugged out. He had a way of pulling himself up and sniffing in, nostrils flared, brow furrowed into a deep V, his chin jutted forward, his gaze thrust upward at some non-specific point. "It's clever of you," Shirley said. "To order in," Frieda agreed. "*From now on, that's exactly what I'm going to do!*" Shirley exclaimed, a sudden burst of light in her eyes. Leon, on the chintz bedroom chair leaned in. "*What's going on here, anyway!*" he cried, furrowing his brow, his nostrils flaring. From the commode, Frieda looked at Shirley, at the manicured nails polished in clear. With tiny movement, slow precision, she picked imaginary lint pills from the coverlet. "I'm going to die, you know," Shirley said. "Yep, I know," Leon answered, and looked away at the frozen lake. She didn't die in her sleep. At the end she was comatose. Furrowing his brow into a deep V, Leon looked old, and in a kind of monologue spoke quietly to his wife. "On balance, we had a good fifty years together ... a good marriage. I was less than perfect."

After the end, in a kind of monologue, Leon spoke quietly. "No, she didn't die in her sleep. Well, in her sleep ... what does that mean? Doctors can't relieve the pain of an intelligent person who wants to communicate certain things before they die and needs to, but can't and knows it." Looking old, Leon spoke of his wife, trying to communicate self-evident things any idiot should understand. "She would have *preferred* someone less *negative* ... I was less than a perfect mate in a less than perfect *institution*." Listen-up. "On balance, we had a good fifty years *together* ... a good *marriage*. She had better taste than I did, you know, and she always ended up being *right*. The only thing ended up not

being *right* was the *dinnerware*. I said I liked it because I thought she *did*, and she said OK because she thought I *liked* it ... so," he chuckled, "we got something *neither* of us *wanted*."

She was comatose near the end. The doctor and Leon discussed how to get through the next hours. Leon thought she would choke on her own body fluids. The nurse wanted to give her something but she might die right away. A sweet smell filled the room, the over-ripe smell of the dying. On top of the dresser were vials and needles, scent bottles, dusty rose and trillium. On the wall opposite, a landscape of the frozen north. You could hear the rattle in her lungs, which wasn't an easy thing. Under the covers his wife's body and legs seemed mere indentations. The nurse wanted to turn her over on her side. His brow in a deep V, looking old, Leon leaned in to his wife and spoke in a kind of monologue. "On the whole, we had a good fifty years together ... a good marriage. I should have been less negative," Leon said. A person speaks quietly, calmly, trying to communicate. Doctors can't relieve the pain.

In the next room the doctor and Leon talked over their strategy for the next hours. They call it a death rattle which wasn't an easy thing to hear. The doctor wanted to give her something. "It won't be necessary," the nurse stated evenly. His wife was always right. *You won't be able to deal with this, Leon. I'll just solve this one for you. It's enough, it's time.* "It wasn't an easy thing, there were certain things she wanted to say and knew in her mind, but couldn't ... An intelligent person needs to communicate," Leon cried. "Look, kid, you can't leave me now." *That's exactly what I'm going to do*, he heard.

It's an incredible thing, an interesting experience. "I'm not too happy, but you wouldn't notice. Well, maybe." The room was filled with the sweetness of death, and the sound of rain on the balcony and on the leaves which hang heavy continued as though he'd said nothing more significant than that the weather was dismal. On the dresser was her ivory-handled mirror. "Everything I touch or smell reminds me, even the upholstery on the couch ... She had better taste than I did. The only thing ended up not being right was the dinnerware." He was going to cry and stopped talking. He had a way of punching the last or next-to-last word as though arguing or lecturing, "It's an incredible *thing*," begging you to understand. "Neither of us *wanted* it." "I'm going to die, you know," she said quietly. "Yep, I know." He looked old, speaking softly about death and dying. He had a way of talking. "My late-wife Shirley's sister Bela ..."

The night was heavy with rain, nothing unusual, just another rainy evening, establishing his grief as only one microscopic part of

the world's sorrow. "I guess seventy-one years is a long time," he said. "I'm not too happy, but you wouldn't notice. Well, maybe."

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* *What's Going On Here, Anyway?* was first published in *The Fiddlehead*, Summer, 1996.