

## Travels With a Patient Lady

The first thing I notice about Anne is how she makes fifty-five look like forty. The second thing is that she's not in a good mood.

"Can't we have just one whole day without fog or rain?" she says as she gets in.

"There's no 'I'm happy to see you'?"

"That's obvious, isn't it? I called you as soon as I arrived."

She comes back often now and she takes it for granted I'll be free. There's no contact between us other than her visits and they're always the same; she'll call, we'll spend time together; then, suddenly, it's, like, I'm out of here, and she's gone. Her work takes her wherever and whenever she wants to go.

She likes little runs around the city, like out the Waterford valley, over the hill to Cape Spear or around Quidi Vidi Lake. We'll have coffee somewhere or pick something up and I drop her back at the hotel. I don't go in.

"I need quiet for a while," she says. "Let's just drive along."

"There's something to be said for silence."

"A lot," she said.

We drive towards the east end in light traffic. I interrupt the silence.

"What's upsetting you besides the weather?"

"You! You talk too much! When I say something trivial, about whatever, you make a major issue of it. That's one thing I find annoying about you. You're not a good listener. I can often guess what you're going to say."

"That's the way I am. I knew a fellow once who never spoke- nothing wrong with him, just..."

“That’s exactly what I mean. You’re ready to begin a story about someone you knew years ago and I never heard of ‘til now. And, if that’s the way you are, you can change.”

“You wanted to go! You called me! And, besides, you told me more than once that you loved my stories.”

“I know,” she says. “Where are we going?”

Recently Anne likes longer trips, out the Marine Drive, past Middle Cove, into Torbay, and on to Portugal Cove; sometimes we go on over to St. Phillips and then back to town. I turn now towards the waterfront to watch a cruise ship leave. I have no desire to do a cruise, and I remember Anne saying that she’d had her fill of them. But I do like to watch ships move around the harbor.

She takes my notebook from between the seats, flips through it.

“What are you writing these days?”

“Bits and pieces. I haven’t anything finished.” On recent visits she’s helped me some with my writing but I still haven’t finished anything. My notebooks are full of ideas, short paragraphs, images.

“You never finish! You’re never driven. You’ve got no stress....No, you just tell your simple stories to anyone who’ll listen; you write, but it’s just a collection of notes; you don’t care if you ever publish. You need motivation!” She pauses. “And guidance. Who’s Gabrielle?”

“You’ve been writing for years! I’m still learning. A bit late, I know. Gabrielle was a hurricane. Not the worst we’ve had, but bad enough. A few years ago she came, flooded everything, knocked down trees, did damage here and there. I always thought the name appropriate. Sensual, vengeful. How does one put a hurricane into verse?”

“Metaphor, personification, whatever. She’s French, after Gabriel, the angel. The guy with the horn. What have you so far?”

“Hurricane is wind; it gets together with the ocean. I made some notes there.”

“What are the signs, the portents. Other than the forecast, what tells us it’s coming? How does it

appeal to our senses?" She turns some pages slowly, then looks around to see where we are.

"Stop at Moo-Moo's!" she says.

Moo-Moo's is a convenience store in the center of the city. A white building with amorphous black patches, it's a holstein cow; that's why the Moo-Moo's; they sell ice cream. Anne picks some coins from the ashtray.

"Not for me," I say.

"You go see your old friend while I'm gone."

My 'old friend' is a monument nearby, the Spencer girl, a less than life size bronze statue within the concrete pages of a concrete book. Spencer, a private girls' school, Anne's school, once flourished nearby. Someone has placed wild flowers in the girl's outstretched hands. She looks innocent, vulnerable. I have different memories of a Spencer girl. We walked in Bannerman Park through a late winter, through a glorious four day glitter after an ice storm closed all schools; we bought Cheesies at the Colonial Store on Military Road and shared them with each other and the pigeons from ice covered park benches. Schools reopened and we were back to our old routines, seeing each other as often as possible. In June her family moved away. 'We'll see each other again,' she said. 'The world is a small place.' We were fifteen.

I get back to the car as Anne returns with her ice cream. She passes it to me; I take a bite and pass it back. I like to watch her with an ice cream cone. She deconstructs it thoughtfully, chewing the cone in little mouse nibbles, then biting the cream, twisting the cone as she does so. Further nibbling until she's down to the damp tip, which she finishes in a triumphal gesture.

"Moo-Moo's has the best ice cream," she says.

"I'm glad you like it."

Anne is right, you know; I am the way she says I am. Always an anecdote, a riddle, some little bit of trivia, a joke, a story about something that happened years ago. And I have an opinion on

everything. I suppose that can be annoying.

She looks through my notes. “Let’s get back to the hurricane? You write about clouds, umbers on the south horizon, and seaweed stirring in a tide pool. And I like this: Varied beach birds, wary on a sandbar, dancing stuttered patterns with the foam, run in games from probing tidal fingers, unaware a southern stranger’s come.”

“The wind from the south,” I say. “Gets together with the ocean. The wind is the visitor, the southern stranger.”

“Male or female, the wind? I’m sure you’ve decided.”

“Not really. Maybe the wind female, the ocean male.”

“They call the wind Maria,” she says.

“An old Marty Robbins song, that. Or was it The Kingston Trio? Or Frankie Laine? I don’t know for sure who sang it. Or who wrote it. It goes: Away out here they got a name, for rain and wind and fire, the rain is Tess, the fire Joe, and they call the wind Maria. A real tear-jerker. About a fellow got separated from his girl.”

“I kind of thought you’d know that. I guess it doesn’t make any difference today. Let’s not sex them at all.”

She’s quiet as we drive past Logy Bay on the Marine Drive and I just think about us and our relationship. I enjoy how she helps with my writing. She takes my notes and goes through them; she sees anything she likes we’ll talk about it. And I do kind of wish she were around more. But I don’t tell her that.

“Do you need me for anything more than as a writing consultant?”

“I take advantage of your experience, every chance I get. Think about it as a charitable act.”

“That’s all?”

“You went out of my life, then came back in years later just long enough to kindle memories and leave again. Now you come back once in a while and call me out of the blue. Who needs who? Or who needs whom?” I smiled to soften the question. “What surprises me is that you know me

so well.”

“Boys don’t change,” she says. “They’re like trees. They just get bigger and older. I may come back to stay.”

“You mean you can better handle now the things you don’t like? The fog, the scraggly spruce- that’s your word, scraggly- and the dandelion? You even think the starlings have too much freedom here. Not to even mention the whiners on the open line shows”

“We’ll have to see.”

At an intersection with Marine Drive a man is standing with a dog on a leash; the dog is sniffing around some trees.

“Tell me what I’d say about him?”

“Something like, if people put as much love and work into relationships with their own species the world would be a much happier place. You’re probably right. But I think there’s a happy medium. I like cats.”

“Whatever the level of intelligence one’s comfortable with,” I say. “Someone once gave me a pet rock. In a tiny wooden cage.”

“Were you comfortable? You still have it?”

“No! I couldn’t watch it suffer. I took it out of the cage and buried it on a beach.”

“With its own kind, I hope.”

We’re driving in a large arc around the city, from east, towards the north and then west. At Middle Cove we stop to watch the interaction between the sea and land. The mist keeps us in the car. Even on calm days there’s an endless erosion. Each wave that strikes up against the cliffs seems to fall back upon itself in failure. But, in time, all those little failures add up to success; the land disappears and becomes sand on a beach somewhere else.

“The next step in the storm?” Anne says as she leafs through the book. “What happens?”

“We see the furies of the sea. They’ve been sung about for ages. From safe places.”

“I’ve never been here for a hurricane. Today is quiet. Let me read. Witness now this lusty tropic upstart, roused amid the doldrums to excess, turn to fury my routine repose, send me without mercy at the coast. A wordy lad, the ocean.”

I don’t say anything. She sits, quietly reading the notes, and I think how strange it is that we’ve been so close to each other but never really together.

“So far there’s foreboding, arousal, foreplay, if you call it that. And it looks like you cleaned out your Roget. Heated, fevered, torrid, wanton, grasping, howling, moaning. I’m beginning to admire them, the wind and sea. You don’t need adjectives, just action.” She lays the book aside. “Let’s drive on to Torbay.”

Along the coast between Middle Cove and Torbay are sculpted caves which I think Anne might enjoy some dry day, but I don’t tell her about them. Up to now I’ve treated her visits and our short times together in a professional way. I let her decide where we go and what we talk about, usually touristy kind of things, and writing. Never anything personal. I’ve never suggested, and she has never encouraged, anything different. Today is the first time I suggest something more.

“There are so many places I’d love for you to see.”

“Maybe. Stop at that little tea room in Portugal Cove. Okay?”

We cross a bridge in Torbay onto Indian Meal Line which goes to Portugal Cove. I’m just thinking and Anne is curled up on the seat, alert, like a sleeping cat. She laughs.

“I remember the first joke you ever told me. About the man who drove into the river.”

“Tell me! Remind me.”

“A man drove his car into a river. A policeman asked him what happened. The man said: ‘I saw houses go by and trees go by and telephone poles go by and I saw a bridge coming. I pulled over to let it pass’.”

“Were times that simple?” I say, laughing.

“I’ve told it many times. It holds up.”

“My stories annoy you and yet you remember one from a hundred years ago. I’m surprised, and flattered.”

“Don’t let it go to your head.”

As we drive down through the valley in Portugal Cove towards the ocean the sun is breaking through over Conception Bay. Anne’s relaxed, looking through the book.

“Have you done Gros Morne recently? Since us?”

“We didn’t do it together,” I say. “And I haven’t done it recently.”

Gros Morne is our second highest hill, about the closest we come to a mountain south of the Torngats in northern Labrador. I climbed, or should I say hiked, Gros Morne many times, over many years. Halfway to the top is a lush valley, through which a clear, clean river flows; A small wooden bridge brings the trail across the river. I would hike up into the valley, stop there for a lunch, and, depending on any number of things, go on to the top or back down. I liked the rare meetings with other hikers and the quiet purity of the place.

Once, a group of five sat on the mossy bank near the bridge, backpacks and other gear strewn about. They were looking at maps, not sure which way to go.

“Hey, Skipper!” one asked, as I stopped near them on the bridge. “Which is the best way to the top. Around the edge or straight up?”

“I don’t like the Skipper,” I said, smiling. “I’m too young for that. There’s no best way. Straight up is easiest. Come down the back way. That is if you plan on coming down again.”

“Jesus, is everyone in this province a joker?” He laughed as he said it.

We chatted a while and introduced around. Anne’s name stunned me. I had to go back in time for the face; it matched. The others didn’t notice the recognition and she smiled a hello and a handshake. We chatted a while about weather and mountains and whatever. She left the talking to the others. We all agreed to meet later at the coffee shop in the town. We did. A group of travel writers on a day away from a convention in Corner Brook, they had loads of questions but had found the climb very tiring; they headed back early. She held my hand in a long good-bye.

“We’ll see you again soon, I hope,” she said.

“I’m sure,” I laughed. “The world is a small place.”

A few months later I noticed her name on a piece in an airline magazine. She raved about the pleasure of the hike in words no hill short of Everest should inspire. I read it many times.

At the tea room Anne looks at some other pieces. She gives me direction on how to use dialogue, how not to overdo it. She makes helpful comments on content and, even though she laughs at it, I think she likes a verse where I have a walk around the Lake as a metaphor for life. It starts out with crossing a river, which might be like birth, and ending near a cemetery.

“It’s a bit cliched, maybe ” she says. “But the way you’re doing it, it’s funny. I like how you list the people on the journey with you: Uncles, fathers, nieces, brothers, grand ones, teens with babies, mothers. Husbands in a mid-life crisis, chasing dreams, late life mirages, man-kinds endless search for soul-mates.”

“I tried to write with a walking beat.”

“And this part I like: Canine friends of all descriptions, sharing leashes with their owners, showing like genetic make-ups, joggers, walkers, hikers, loners, talkers bending ears to capture secrets thrown across the wind.”

We finish our tea and pay the bill. She puts the book aside when we get into the car. I decide to drive on to St. Phillip’s rather than back to town. She sits looking across at Bell Island which is nearly glowing in a spot of sun breaking through. I’m thinking that’s another trip we might make some day.

“The way you write,” she says. “You have an idea and then you fill in the middle. It’s like our story. There’s a beginning, and an end somewhere. But it needs a lot of filling in; it lacks for content.”

“It might yet be a great story. A movie.”

“The Antiques Road Show!”



She opens the book again as I park on the wharf in St. Phillips to watch a fishing boat enter the protected harbor.

“What’s this one about an old man dying?”

“A chicken soup kind of story.”

“Tell me! Give me the sketch?”

“There’s an old apple tree near the track west of Bowring Park. I walk by it often and sometimes I sit on the bank nearby to make notes. A man stopped, an old man, eighties or more, maybe to look at the tree, or just to make conversation. I’d seen him often, walking behind his wife, but now he was alone. ‘Crab apples,’ he said. ‘My wife always made pies, but there are none down low.’ I took that as a challenge. ‘I raided them years ago,’ I said. ‘They were never too high.’ The branches didn’t bend much if I stayed as near the trunk as possible. I knotted my shirt tail to take enough and climbed down. He loaded them into his sweater, shirt and pants pockets, and went on.”

“The apples killed him?”

“No! No. A few days later someone in the park said, ‘Mr. Spurrell is dead.’ I said, ‘Who?’ ‘Mr. Spurrell, older man, eighties. Always walked behind his wife. Heart attack. He’s at Barrett’s.’ That’s the funeral home.”

“And you went?”

“Yes. His wife met me as I entered the room. Just a few people sitting quietly. We stood by the casket . Some pictures near the resting face. And a small trophy. I touched it. ‘It’s his grandson’s,’ she said. ‘For swimming. He wanted his grandfather to have it.’ She spoke to a younger woman nearby, nodding towards me. ‘He walks in the park. He picked apples for your father; we made pies.’ I chatted with them a moment and left.”

“And you’ve seen her since?”

“Not long ago, in the same area; I asked her how she was doing. ‘I’m always looking back. To wait for him, to speed him up.’ ‘He’s there,’ I said. ‘You just can’t see him.’ ‘It’s hard,’ she said.

I couldn't say much, just touch her on the shoulder. 'Thanks,' she said. 'You were good to him.'

I went on, feeling a little bit guilty of something but still not knowing what."

"You're too sentimental, maybe. Let's get back to the hurricane. As the storm rages?"

"When a storm is at its peak life seems to go on hold, uneasy. Change is happening fast. But what kind of change?"

"For example?"

"Seagulls are hunched and facing into the wind. Briefly grounded, they will feast later. But they don't know that; for now it's survival. Beach grass has a death grip on the land; it will be stronger for the challenge. And it's the same for all lookers-on. Storms strengthen us."

"Tropic birds on a free trip north, seduced by the southern stranger, unaware there's no return. I like that," she says. "The words, that is, not the birds' fate."

"I found a purple ibis once. Dead. On the high water mark."

"Why did you feel guilty about the man who died?"

"I really don't know but I think I was shocked at how little it takes to affect another's life."

When we meet Topsail Road from St. Phillip's Anne suggests we go on to Topsail Beach.

"Have you time?" I ask, thinking this will soon be the longest time we've ever been together.

"Yes! The sun is shining. Shining in a Tom Thomson sky."

"It's a big sky! Especially with clouds like that. Tom Thomson often viewed the world from a canoe. When you're down low in a flat land the sky is big. Just about everywhere you look is up."

"I guess," she said. "Get back to Gabrielle. When the storm is over? Smells? Sounds? What?"

"There's always a sea, a rising and falling, even with no wind. It takes days to settle. That's why one gets more seasick after a storm than during one. And there's a smell. Ozone, I think. And blood, the smell of blood. Strange. I believe from the kelp. And salt. You can taste the salt; it's in the air. Read the rest of it."

"Sense anew a rare narcotic, aftertaste a strong perfume, ozone, salt, euphoric heaving, spawned

out now my lover's gone."

Three seagulls are tearing at a pizza box dropped beside a covered garbage container on the parking lot; the sun is drawing water into large cumulus clouds over Kelly's Island; some cars are coming down the hill towards the beach. We sit a moment, watching the gulls.

"When birds fly into the air do their shadows on the ground get smaller, larger or stay the same as height increases?" I ask her.

"I don't know." She watches a moment longer. "I wouldn't have thought that."

Some children are now walking along the beach, near the water. We get out to stretch, and savor the salt air, and feel the sun. We walk towards a bench but it's wet; we don't sit. She opens the book.

"Finally, Gabrielle is history and I'm on the last page, and the sun is shining. And the ocean says: Feel again my soothing pulses, count my meetings with the shore, in diverse waves now hearty, healing, understand which one is more. Ninth, eleventh, no, the seventh, nervous beach birds back to fun, gently follow children's feet, running from me in the sun."

She passes me the book and stops to pick up the garbage around the drum as we move back towards the car. I linger behind, having one last look at the ocean, and fleeting thoughts about what wonders she does to a summer dress.

She looks back, smiling.

"Come on!" she says. "It's getting late."

