

## Acquiring Mystery

Gail Collins

“With gathering speed, she acquires mystery.”\*

“What was that?” he asks, turning from the window.

“It’s a line from a poem, my father used to quote, years ago, when I was a child, when we lived in Harbour Grace.” she says. “It’s about a train. ‘With gathering speed, she acquires mystery.’ ”

“Hmm,” he muses, moving to sit in a chair beside her bed. “Gathering speed. Couldn’t have been the Newfie Bullet the poet was thinking of.” He looks at her, assessing. “What made you think of that now?”

A nurse bustles into the room. “Time for your meds,” she says, holding out a small, clear plastic cup filled with pastel coloured rounds and oblongs.

The older woman takes the cup, looks at it dubiously.

“If I can get you to take your pills now, lovey,” the nurse says. “I have to sign off on it.”

She rolls her eyes, looks at her husband, then tips the contents of the cup into her mouth.

“That’s right, down the hatch,” says the nurse, already bustling out again.

“Lovey, darling, sweetheart, dear. Do you think the nurses on the mainland call their patients sweetheart,” she asks.

“I don’t know,” he says. “If you’d let me take you there—”

“We’ve been over that,” she says. “I don’t want to prolong things. What would it be? An extra six months, a year?”

“That would have been an extra year with me,” he says.

“A year of misery,” she says. “I don’t want you to see me like that.”

“I don’t know who’s more selfish,” he says. “You or me.”

“Oh, me,” she says. “As usual,” smiling and squeezing his hand.

They are silent for a moment, staring out past the streaming traffic on the parkway—traffic silenced by the sealed, thick windows—to the clock tower counting off the minutes on the university campus beyond.

“Did I ever tell you,” she asks, “about the night I decided not to marry you.”

He looks at her, her face so familiar after fifty years of waking up next to her each morning. A face now sculpted, pared to its essence: those lovely high cheekbones and those knowing eyes. A face—to him—more beautiful now than at twenty.

“No,” he says. “Tell me.”

“I was at the train station on Water Street. I was on the platform, the ticket to Grand Falls in my hand. I’d decided—not lightly—to go back to him.”

“What happened,” he asks, sitting very still. The ticking of the clock on the wall seems slower, louder. In the hallway, an announcement asks an orderly to report to the main desk.

Finally she speaks.

“I watched the train pull in, the passengers got on. One of the conductors called out to me. But I just stood there and watched the train pull away, getting smaller and smaller in the distance.”

He marvels at her ability to astonish him still.

“I never knew,” he says.

“No,” she agrees.

“Why,” he asks. “Why did you choose me?”

“Ah,” she says and looks out the window into the distance—and he knows she’s not seeing the traffic, the campus.

“Why?” he asks again.

She looks at him and smiles and lies back on the pillows piled high on the bed. She closes her eyes.

“Just going to take a little rest,” she says.

He watches her there, her hair silver against the white of the pillow, a faint smile on her face. Leaving, leaving him too quickly.

“Ah,” he thinks, “With gathering speed, she acquires mystery.”

\*NOTE: actual line from “The Express” by Stephen Spender : “where, acquiring speed, she gathers mystery” (changed slightly by memory)