

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.

"I wonder," she found herself saying with appalling brashness to the person beside him, "I wonder if you'd mind...? I'd be most grateful. Oh thank you."

What did she expect?

Not, certainly, the quizzically amused look of someone who was accustomed to mild outlandishness in women, who took fuss as his due, but who nevertheless was perpetually amazed by the assertive ingenuity of total strangers. There was always a dash of titillation about it, a small shock that aroused him. As for Katherine, awareness of the error she had made was not quite instant — after 25 years, one expects some differences — and so it took several seconds for her own incandescence to fade. In those moments something twirled between the two of them, between the man and the woman framed by the vinyl seats and grubby windows of the airport bus: a spindle of misplaced and mistaken sexual excitement.

It cast its own spell.

And then Katherine, beached on the shore of receding euphoria, said faintly: "Oh god." Because he was not Nicholas. Clearly he was not Nicholas. At close range, she could not even call the resemblance striking. (Although, after twenty-five years, would the real Nicholas bear much of a resemblance to the one she remembered?) What she had seen from within the aura of her sudden recollection was a random convergence of details: the general size and shape of his body, the way he walked, the curls. But the curls were not sunbleached wheat-blond Nicholas-colored at all. They were drab, they were the shade of old and yellowing parchment, they were the colorless color of a once fairhaired boy who is now in his graying fifties.

"Oh god," Katherine said, mortified. "I thought you were someone else." She put her hands to her burning forty-five-year-old cheeks. "Oh, this is so embarrassing."

"Not at all," he said archly. "Not at all."

"Oh I don't believe I followed you..." She held the ticket stub out between them, for pondering, as an artefact of madness.

"The least I can do," he said, "is offer myself as a substitute."

"Oh, I'm so embarrassed."

"You do that well."

"Pardon?" She looked at him then, took in the meaning of his smile, considered (at roughly the speed of light) several possible courses of action. She considered saying courteously but icily: "I'm afraid you have misinterpreted my behavior," and then getting off the bus. She considered saying nothing at all, simply walking back down the aisle with dignity and...

The bus, she realized from the peripheral blur of buildings, was now in motion; she therefore considered, but quickly rejected, telling the driver she had made a mistake, asking him to let her off. It could be assumed that the driver, now negotiating traffic at a dizzying pace on the Queensway, lived in the constant expectation of new manifestations of lunacy with which to enliven his off-duty hours. "Lady," he would say, possibly gently, possibly rudely. "Sit down." He would jab his finger toward the sign which said in two languages: *Please do not talk to the driver while bus is in motion.*

She considered saying with polite and level malice: "I'm afraid I find middle-aged lechery rather pathetic." Or, more savage: "It is not always the case, Nicholas..." (*Nicholas?!!* Had she played this scene before? Had she always wanted to play this scene?) "...it is not always the case, sir, that sexual attraction is mutual." And then getting up and moving to another seat.

All these possibilities passed through her mind between one blink and the next. But what she saw in his eyes, what held her, was that spindle of excitement, accidentally, inadvertantly, erroneously set in motion. It was spinning like a top. Without thinking, she put out a hand to ward off giddiness, and he seemed to lurch a little too, ever so slightly, so that their bodies came into marginal contact though their eyes never wavered, both fastened on the thing that buzzed between them. It was mesmerizing, gathering speed, giving off vaporous rings, making *grand jetées* of anticipation. So that it suddenly seemed to her they were in collusion, she and this man (she thought of him as Nicholas II); that they had planned the whole thing from the start: the way he had walked past an open taxi so that his image would bounce onto the Royal Bank, the way he had lured her onto the bus, the way she had so willingly followed. It seemed to her that when she had bought her ticket at the Royal York, she had purchased a brief leave of absence from her life which was, in its broader patterns, eminently, even tediously, respectable, and certainly devoid of improper excitement. It seemed to her now that she had known all this with absolute clarity in those flurried seconds at the ticket window.

Perhaps he said something. *Do you do this often?* Something like that. Something urbane, thick with innuendo, but not quite patronizing; something that proffered equality of intention and responsibility.

And perhaps she, in the daring language

that came to her quite naturally (part of the package deal, part of the ticket), the language that belonged to this sudden time-out from her life, perhaps she said something appropriately ambiguous and arch. *Do you?* she might have lobbed back at him, raising an eyebrow.

Not quite like this, he might have said.

Or it was possible that nothing was said. What did happen (she could be virtually certain about this) was that for the length of the ride to the airport they watched this thing, this kind of economy-class nova, that was vibrating and humming between them, giving off heat. Where there was bodily contact — lightly and coincidentally along the thigh, and after some slight jolting of the bus (which happened opposite the Canadian National Exhibition Grounds, or maybe not until the Carling O'Keefe Brewery) also along the forearm — at such points of contact, there was a burning sensation. An exchange of breathing, of the smell and taste of the body opposite, seemed to be taking place.

Katherine supposed that the name for all this dazzle and heat was lust. She did not think it was ordinary lust — though she could hardly claim to be an expert on any of the varieties. Still, passes had been made off and on throughout her respectable married years (colleagues of her husband, one of the doctors at the clinic, her son's gym teacher) and this seemed altogether different. It must have been a case of convergence, she decided; a random confluence of needs and nostalgias; a sort of King Tide of concupiscence.

She thought she asked him, when they found themselves in the hubbub of the international terminal, where he was going, what flight. And she thought he said, rather tersely: "Obviously, for now, nowhere. Back to Boston later." He did something at the Delta Airlines desk, then made a call from a pay telephone, while she waited and watched as if drugged.

It was when he motioned her back through the instamatic doors and into the taxi — something about the way he leaned forward and told the driver "Bristol Place Hotel," pointing to it, because the driver was Portuguese, or Mexican possibly, or Guatemalan, or at any rate not in command of much English; and because the hotel was just a step away if one did not mind stepping across tarmacs and super-highways — it was something about the way the curls fell across his forehead and about the quick purposeful negotiations with the driver that made her say to herself: "He could be Nicholas."

As though the thought pricked him, he leaned back into the seat and took her

hand and ran his tongue across the tips of her fingers. "So who was I supposed to be?" he asked.

A small nervous fledgling of a laugh rose from her lips. "Nicholas," she said, relieved that it came out flat, devoid of meaning. "A boy from the golden years of my youth," every syllable mocking itself. "Ancient history. What is your name, anyway?"

"Nicholas will do nicely. I can fit into that as well as anything."

It is amazing, she thought, how thick with erotic meaning a simple declarative sentence can become when you are in the back of a taxi with your fingers in some stranger's mouth.

"All right," she said. She felt she knew the rules of this game by instinct. The mask, the costume made her brash. She withdrew her hand from between his lips and loosened his tie. "And what's my name?"

"You don't have a name."

Her hand stiffened at the top button of his shirt. "Oh yes I do," she said sharply. Options whirred through her mind again, like symbols on a poker machine. I don't have to go through with this, she thought.

He raised an eyebrow. "Backing out?"

"No," she said evenly, her heart pounding, her voice calm. "But I do have a name. It's Katherine."

She waited, flag planted, daring him to challenge her terms.

"As you wish," he said smoothly. "Katherine."

The sheets at the Bristol Place are stamped, not embroidered, with the hotel's name. Katherine pleated them between her fingers as she watched him light his pipe by the window. What could one compare it to, sex with a stranger?

Sex with a stranger, she repeated to herself, as though it were a catechism she might come to believe in time.

It was not unlike finding yourself running full tilt into the side of a bank: strangely euphoric while it lasted, but afterwards... not very real; afterwards, one felt slightly bewildered and distinctly foolish. And compelled to explain.

She propped herself on one elbow and studied him. He had dressed already. He believes nakedness puts him at a disadvantage, she thought. She sensed suddenly: He always feels naked.

She, surprisingly, felt languidly uninterested in her clothes, though she was covered demurely enough with the sheet. She rather imagined that after sex with a stranger, men (who presumably did this sort of thing all the time; well, not her

husband of course; not anyone she knew well, but *men*, men in the broader foreign sense of the term) she rather supposed they wanted to get away as soon as was decently possible. She did not imagine they dallied for post-coital chats. But Nicholas II showed no sign of haste; he sat on the broad ledge of the windowsill and looked out over Route 407 and the tar-macs and runways and the furthest dreary suburban and exurban reaches of Toronto. He puffed reflectively on his pipe.

He could be Nicholas, she thought again. It was as though she had been given a chance to unravel the great puzzle of her adolescence: here was Nicholas in a *petri* dish. Freed of need and anguish, she could study him, work him out: a researcher's dream. How was it, why was it, that *afterwards* he was still a stranger who was always walking away? Why would he always be sitting in a windowsill with his back to her?

"Are you married?" she asked him.

He turned around, startled, as though she had broken the rules of the game. He seemed to consider not answering.

"Was," he said curtly. "Big mistake." He looked at her, just in case there were unclear boundaries: "Not something I'd do again."

"You left her?"

"In a manner of speaking." He tapped out his pipe, reaching into the pocket of the jacket that was thrown across the chair for the pipe-cleaning tool, scraping out that part of his life.

"Any children?" she asked.

He chose to ignore that question.

"I do," she said. "Have children. Three. Two are teenagers, and the other's still in grade school."

He looked at her startled, then shrugged. "Rough," he said. "Being a single mother." As though he were well acquainted with the phenomenon. (She saw a ghostly trail of sex-hungry single mothers throwing themselves at him on trains, on buses, in the street.)

"Oh, I'm not a single mother," she announced comfortably, propping herself up on the pillows and holding the sheet over her breasts. "I'm quite happily married."

"God!" he said, shocked.

For some reason, it pleased her enormously that she had the power to disconcert him. "Yes. My husband's an academic. Well, so am I for that matter. My husband looks a bit like you, actually. He wears corduroys. Smokes a pipe. That sort of thing. What kind of a woman did you think I was?"

"I don't know," he said embarrassed. "The usual kind, I suppose. Young career star, graduate student maybe, fast track, single or divorced."

"Young!" she said, foolishly pleased. "Graduate student!" *Fast track*, she thought sardonically. She poked at it warily, this exotic view of herself.

"It didn't really matter what kind," he said.

"Ah. All the nameless young women."

"That's right." He came and sat on the bed. He relit his pipe. She thought: He has to be doing something with his hands; and he looked at her as though aberrant behaviors had made them far more intimate than sex. Then he said to the cheap framed reproduction above her head: "There's this wall with a crack in it. I have to keep stuffing it with something or chaos comes in. Like the little boy, you know, with his fist in the sea wall." He walked to the window and back again. "Work or sex," he said. "Either will do." Words, explanations, seemed to be caught in his throat, they might choke him. "Today," he said, coughing, "happened to be urgent."

"Yes?" She leaned forward with intense interest. She felt as though she were on the verge of a major discovery. "But why, Nicholas? Why?"

"Does the name Zundel mean anything?"

Katherine went spinning, spinning. She held onto the frame of the bed. Now she remembered what had summoned Nicholas from the dormant files of the past. She saw it again, the newspaper stand on the sidewalk in Front Street, outside the Royal Bank:

DID SIX MILLION DIE?
HOLOCAUST A HOAX, ZUNDEL
SAYS.
MORE SURVIVORS GIVE TESTI-
MONY TODAY.

"Naturally, it means something," she said. "The trial, the anti-semitic crank."

For a moment he looked startled. He looked as though she were privy to disconcerting private data on his life. He shrugged. "I forget everyone knows about it here. In Boston, I have to explain."

Katherine wrapped the sheet loosely around her body and swung her feet to the floor, dragging the bedding like a train. She paced the room. Is coincidence possible? she wondered. "Do we somehow make things happen?" she asked him. "Do you think that's possible? Do we give off radio signals, or what?"

But he had settled into her space on the bed, except that he huddled more, and took one of the pillows in his arms.

"When I was a child," Katherine said,

"there was a girl in my school... Verity Ashkenazy, her name was. There were all sorts of stories about her. I didn't really figure things out till years and years later. Her parents both disappeared in the holocaust, but she herself, apparently, was hidden by nuns in a convent. She grew up Catholic, and then after the war—"

"My wife," said the man on the bed, "gave testimony today. My ex-wife. At the Zundel trial."

"I was in awe of her," Katherine said. "She was older than me by several years. She was like... how can I explain? People said she was brilliant, but it was something else besides that... She'd been immunized against harm, nothing could touch her. There was something... she gave off something... She fascinated me."

"My wife," said the stranger on the bed, "was part of the group who laid charges." He bent double across the pillow, as though stuffing it into some terrible pain, some gaping hole in his side. "She has nightmares whenever she relives it, nightmares, night terrors... you've no idea of the..." He puts his hands over his ears.

"As a matter of fact," Katherine said. "She changed my life. There was a certain kind of strength she gave me." She looked at something in her cupped hands. "She fascinated everyone. But Nicholas most of all."

"She sobs," said the stranger on the bed. "She writes letters to dead people in France, in Le Raincy, that's where her family lived. Sometimes I think it's heroic and sometimes I think it's perverse." He held the pillow to his face, blocking out the light. "I shouldn't have gone, but I had to be there. You can't leave, you can't

abandon someone like that."

"It's all right," Katherine soothed. "It's all right, Nicholas."

"In some ways," he said. "She's a tyrant."

"It's all right," Katherine soothed. "It's all right."

He began nuzzling her, sucking her, biting her impersonally. Ravenously. She might have been prison rations. Twisting into his need and her own, she unbuttoned his shirt and kissed the hollow of his neck. She kissed the star-shaped mole in the hollow of his neck.

When Katherine woke it was dark, and a stranger lay beside her in bed.

"Oh god," she said, looking at her watch. "Oh my god." Her arm was pinned under the stranger's shoulder.

First the tidal waves of lunacy recede, and then a most ghastly clarity is left in their wake. This is a physical law. She tugged her arm free.

"Wha-?" he mumbled. "What time is it?"

"It's after midnight," she said. "Oh my god. My family will be frantic. I have to make a call."

"Midnight?" he said. "Oh no, I've missed the last flight. Shit. I've got a class first thing in the morning."

"A class?"

"I teach at M.I.T. I'm a physicist."

"Oh, no, not another academic. I put my whole respectable life at risk for another academic?"

"Are you going to tell me," he said dryly, "that you're not in the habit of doing this?"

"I'm not in the habit of doing this," she said levelly. Her hands, sliding over zip-

pers and buttons, were beginning to tremble with anger, with anxiety, with self-disgust. "And I would like you to remember that I do have a name. It's Katherine Sussex."

(Later, surprised, she wondered why her tongue had instinctively reverted to Sussex, why she hadn't given her married name. Was it middle-class prudence? Or was there some other more arcane reason?)

Above the pulling-on of his trousers, he smiled at her. "Thanks for the lovely evening, Katherine." Sardonic, but not insulting. He fastened his belt buckle and then held out his hand. "Koenig," he said. "Actually, I'm the one who should be embarrassed."

They shook hands.

Oh Nicholas, she incurably and foolishly thought, as the lamplight fell on his curls.

In the taxi, arranging and rehearsing versions and explanations, she saw again the moment at the desk: two strangers paying for several hours' use of a room, a meticulous sharing of costs. She saw the desk clerk's glance in her direction; it was a discreet but unmistakable smirk. She wanted to hit him. Where the smirk touched her, nausea sprang like a weed. She was feeling queasy. The feeling grew rapidly worse.

"Excuse me." She tapped the taxi driver on the shoulder. "Could you stop for a minute? I think I'm going to be sick."

She had to hang onto the guardrail that ran between the shoulder of the 401 and the hulks, the bland and indifferent hulks of condominium towers.

Pretty Goldfish

A Story by Libby Scheier

During bran flakes Sam noticed that Pretty Goldfish was belly up. "What's the fish doing, Ellie?" he asked.

"I'd rather be called Mom," I said. "Why do you keep calling me Ellie?"

"Because that's your *name*," Sam said. "Don't be dumb."

"Maybe you could try Mom once in a while."

"Everybody's called Mom. Nobody's called Ellie. It's special."

"But Mom makes me feel like I'm special to you," I said.

Sam sighed. "Okay, I'll try and do it sometimes. What about the *fish*, Ellie. What's the matter with the fish?"

I looked at the goldfish bowl. "Oh no. It's dead."

Sam couldn't believe it. "What do you mean he's dead. How come? How come he's dead? Is he really dead? How come?"

After a minute, I said, "I think it was just time for it to die, you know. Fish don't live a really long time. I think it just died because it had lived as long as it was supposed to."

Sam's eyes got red and wet. He was