

NOR'EASTER

James DeMarse

I'm not sure you're going to believe this. I'm not sure I really believe it either but I must tell it. I apologize if I try to draw a lesson from all this because I'm not really qualified to explain or pass judgment on such a profound happening.

A year ago I broke up with my girlfriend, Karen. Soon after our breakup, I got the shocking news that she had died; I attended her funeral at Riverside Chapel in New York. According to the paper the cause of death was a head injury due to a fall. But her sister said it was a suicide. Suicide. I wept, I screamed, I got drunk. I knew I had to live with the pain, I also knew I had to move on; but a few days ago, her sister sent me, in care of Gloucester Stage, a photograph album that she had recently found in Karen's things; several photos I took on our trip to Maine. I don't remember giving them to her or having copies made. I didn't have any of them.

There weren't that many photos taken on that great trip, but I looked at them over and over again. Each one showed a different side of her: I saw peace in one, seduction in another, happiness, exhaustion, and finally sadness in the most heartbreaking one. Of course, she tried to hide it but you could see. I remember her being uncomfortable with touching; I was too. But we ate together on the trip, read plays together, laughed. Both of us were not comfortable in our own skin, but we were comfortable together and we made love. She haunts me because our time together was unfinished, our partnership never fully realized.

I turned my back. I walked away because I could not understand her depression. Her deep sadness frightened me. I ran from it even though I loved her. I turned my back on her pain instead of opening my arms to it. I left her on MacDougal Street seemingly impassive, but her eyes spoke to me. I turned away, walked to Washington Square feeling her pull like when we were together in Maine, like that night in bed when we looked up through the make-shift skylight at the sky ablaze with stars like lights on a Christmas tree and laughed and laughed and laughed.

I met her in an acting workshop devoted to the method that entailed sensory and emotional exercises to deepen the actors' approach to character. We

met in a large renovated studio on the top floor of a building on theater row; windows faced south across 42nd Street and east on Dyer Avenue. Hardwood floors and a clean bathroom in the hall. I think there were about twelve of us, a mixture of men and women in their thirties and forties who were professionals interested in deepening their craft. For me it was the beginning of a long process of awakening my instrument.

After a couple of weeks learning methods of relaxation, breathing, exploring objects and emotional memory that represented a deep emotional connection, we would work with a partner or solo on a scene or excerpt from a play. When we were not acting, our job was to observe, discuss how what we learned was being utilized in the scene. The first scene would be from *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams, with Karen doing Blanche.

Karen had gathered folding chairs and an old table from the storeroom on the second floor to suggest a kitchen area. She brought her own personal props: a suitcase, and a teacup.

I sat down. All was quiet. This was not a casual get-together, this was work. I saw Karen sitting with her eyes closed, breathing deeply, and every once in a while moving a part of her body to release tension. I could tell that she was in her sister Stella's shabby apartment in New Orleans. The last stop

on the streetcar named “Desire”—Elysian Fields. I could almost smell the apartment, the beer, smoke, and perfume; I could sense the time of day; watched her pull at the armpits of her dress and feel the New Orleans heat.

Our dedicated but workhorse teacher introduced the work; Karen would do Blanche’s monologue at the end of the play. I knew the play because I had done a production of it at The Playhouse in the Park in Cincinnati. The monologue takes place at the moment before Blanche is taken away to a mental institution. She has lost touch with reality because of her guilt about her dead husband and the abuse she endured with Stella’s husband, Stanley.

And there sat Karen, looking out now but not seeing us, not the real us or that place. She seemed to be holding back an emotional flood, but I could see the dam was ready to burst. Suddenly there was fear in her eyes, as if she had dug too deeply within herself. She took a few deep, deep breaths; she looked right at me. The dam was crumbling. I, too, was about to be flooded with unexpected emotion.

“I can smell the sea air. The rest of my time I’m going to spend on the sea.” Her voice came from deep within. Her emotion almost choked her, she moved her hands to her face, then away. She looked out into us but not seeing us. She was somewhere else. All of us were completely transported to that kitchen.

Lost in her lost world. “And when I die, I’m going to die on the sea. You know what I shall die of? I shall die of eating an unwashed grape one day out on the ocean, and I shall be buried at sea.” She was lost in her dream, euphoric, but tears filled her eyes; my eyes too.

Her fantasy onstage became reality offstage. She could escape all the horrors of the real world. But not that day as we sat sipping espresso and cappuccino in a café in the Village when the reality of the world and my words overwhelmed her. And I deeply regret how our story unfolded and ended.

A Streetcar Named Desire is a play about the violence and cruelty of this dark world and the struggle to survive it. Where do we look for tenderness and understanding when we have exhausted our search? What pushes us over the edge into madness? Can we be forgiven for past sins?

It was a spur-of-the-moment vacation about a year ago. I just started driving north on 95 headed to Maine. After an eight-hour drive, a night in a motel, I scouted around Down East. I found this exotic place to stay, a rustic cabin on a tidal farm owned by this older couple who looked like Mr. and Mrs. Santa Claus. Once I was settled, I invited Karen to meet me in Bar Harbor. She flew in from New York on a rickety two-engine plane. It was like an old World War Two movie where she was Donna Reed, coming in from Pearl Harbor to

take care of the wounded on Iwo Jima or someplace, and I was Van Johnson, greeting her and falling instantly in love as she disembarked. We embraced with smiles and kisses. I carried her bags to my Toyota. We drove off through Acadia National Park, headed to my cabin in Jonesport. She was excited to be there, told me all about the noisy, dirty city she left behind. She looked into the night as she lowered the passenger window. She took a deep, deep breath of the ocean air while peering into the darkness and sighed as if she was looking at the trees and the ocean in the light of day.

We made love on an old feather bed with the summer breeze creaking the walls; we ate lobster under the quaking aspen; and in the morning, over coffee and muffins, watched the seals chase the herring into the cove. Later the cormorants would stand on the outcroppings of rocks and spread their great wings to dry after a hard morning of diving to get what was left of the herring. Red-tailed hawks and golden eagles soared overhead, looking for small birds, cats, mice. At night in bed, we watched the stars through the skylight made of three old windows nailed together. One night the sky was lit up with so many stars you could hardly see the blackness in between. We were overwhelmed, we didn't know what to do, we gave in to laughter. The world could not touch us at that time, in that place. I surrendered to love, fell down, worshipped her.

When I got the photos from her sister at Gloucester Stage where I was acting in a show, I couldn't think straight. I knew I wanted to get as close as I could to the memory of her. I knew it had to be Halibut Point where I could see the distant coastline of Maine. It was only a half an hour away. I decided to go right after the matinee. Karen and I had stopped there on our way back to New York, had a picnic, and looked longingly at the ocean vista. I thought I might get a glimpse again of the coastline despite the gloomy weather.

After I got there, I parked my car, and walked along a wooded path to the overlook, where I could sit and see what I could see, at least listen to the surf and breathe the ocean air. As I walked along the path, I sensed someone behind me; I turned but saw no one. When I turned back that someone was in front of me. I thought I must be a little distracted. As I approached the overlook, he went off. Or was it a she? He or she sat on a rock while I sat on a granite bench about twelve feet away at a slight angle. I nodded. This figure gave me a slight nod in return. They seemed familiar somehow, although not physically solid in the mist. I turned to look out, hoping to see a hint of land, but I could barely see the ocean in front of me. Behind me the sun moved lower in the sky, but it would be a while before it disappeared completely.

A man and a woman stood near us, taking in what they could of the view. We both listened to them as they talked about how the ocean shared the same depth of mystery as the Milky Way, then, in sorrowful tones, talked about fish, turtles, whales, and other tortured creatures of the deep that came to the surface to die from an overdose of plastic. They said they had to fix that; they didn't get how. Then they walked by us toward the path that led to the rocky shore below so they could get a better view of the water and the powerful waves crashing on the rocks.

"Be careful," I said.

They nodded and smiled, then slowly climbed down the steep, narrow path. I was nervous about their descent.

The waves pounded against the rocks along the expanse of the shore below, exploding dramatically. I thought of the movie *Captains Courageous*. Spencer Tracy entangled in rope from a mast broken off during a storm; a tearful Freddie Bartholomew restrained by the captain from jumping overboard in an impossible rescue; Tracy finally disappearing into the churning sea. I knew a storm was coming later that night; the damp air gave me a headache.

When the sky was clear, you could see New Hampshire, Maine, and a couple of small islands to the north and, directly in front, the expanse of ocean

ending at the sky, the firmament. Now I was being enveloped by a cloud that took me farther and farther away from the real world so full of death and suffering.

As I sat on a granite bench that nature had chiseled down to its basic elements, I looked down to see shards of maroon, black, and steel gray deep within the millions of years of its history. It felt vital, alive almost. I felt as if I had been transported to another world where that figure opposite me was not solid flesh but a vision.

I have seen apparitions before, but it was years ago when I first came to New York in my twenties. One night I was awakened by an old, bearded man leaning over me, studying my face. Another time, when I was doing dinner theater in Atlanta, in the middle of the night I saw a ghost in a white sheet bouncing up and down on the empty bed next to mine. Maybe it was a family trait. My mother also saw images when she converted to Catholicism: a dark shadow before she converted and a white glow after. As time passed, I thought they must've been waking dreams caused by some religious fervor or hidden trauma, but when they were happening, they were real. Like my mother I was devoted to the liturgy of the Church; I believed with all my heart in the love it promised. Grace waited in the form of Communion—the flesh of Christ

changed into unleavened bread during the Consecration of the Mass, a miracle of peace and comfort. The euphoria of holiness flowed into me then like the miracle of tinsel from a Christmas tree, or that wonderful diamond-like glitter on fresh-fallen snow, especially when night fell and the streetlight shone. And then I grew up.

He sat there near me, not demanding but just sitting there, taking in what little view there was with his legs crossed. I got a clearer look. The figure's presence was masculine but also radiant in a feminine way. His bright-red hair flounced in the easy breeze; his smooth, brown face, light blue, almost transparent eyes seemed to say that for one moment he was a woman, the next a man. I sat there trying not to look at him. I squirmed. I always thought that the essence to sitting was to relax, but I felt a buzzing in my legs that traveled like an electrical current to the top of my head.

Then she turned her head, uncrossed her legs, stared right into me as if she could read my thoughts. All became silent; even the thunder of the surf had muted.

"Not a perfect day to sit and watch the ocean," I said.

"You can feel it," she replied.

"Days are starting to get shorter," I said as I cleared my throat.

“You from around here?” he asked. Now his voice sounded masculine.

“New York. I’m an actor, doing a show at Gloucester Stage.” I said this with some pride.

“What show?”

“*Trip to Bountiful*. It’s about an old woman who goes back to the house where she was born. She finds it broken down, a shack. Sometimes the illusion of past memories is better than the reality. We can only live in the present. One way or the other.”

“Gets to the heart of the matter.”

“We just opened. We had a matinee today. I came over here right after the show.”

He/she seemed close but must’ve been at least fifteen feet away. The light was fading. It became eerie, something like a Sherlock Holmes movie with that fog swirling down alleys hiding Jack the Ripper or Mr. Hyde. I squinted to see her but could barely see the outline of her body; now she seemed to be out of focus, hazy almost. I turned and looked to the ocean. When I visited in the past and it was clear, I felt as if I were a part of this grand event of nature, this huge body of water on a spinning sphere; but now it felt more intimate with the salt breeze, the pine and oak along the path. The expanse out there had

been transformed into something abstract, something spiritual, that electrical buzzing perhaps, a surprising intimacy, not just a feeling of awe.

The path to the parking lot behind me was even obscured by fog. I was being enveloped in a cloud that took me farther and farther away from the real world. I thought of clouds in paintings of God or Christ or Zeus or the Virgin Mary, saints, gurus, holy men and women. It was about the universe of heaven, not hell. Not the hell of this world we live in.

“Karen died.”

“Ah.”

“She had Epstein-Barr and was taking lithium to stabilize her mood swings. She committed suicide.”

“Oh.”

“I left her.”

“Right.”

“I turned my back. I walked away because I could not understand her depression. Why am I talking to you like this?”

“It’s what you’re supposed to do, I guess.”

“I am trying to understand. I even pray to God, not getting any answers.”

“God?” He/she first looked at me, then at the ground. “I’m a first responder.”

“Oh.”

“There are certain things I can do to prevent a complete wipeout in a flash flood of emotion.”

“What?”

“Put out the fire, stamp it out with the sheer will of your boot. Call up fire’s opposite. Deprive it of oxygen, jump out a window.”

“Fire’s opposite?”

“Water.”

“Yeah, of course.”

“When you see fire burn, when you see smoke, see smoke billow and smother. Try to save somebody. Run in. Try to save some stranger and then not.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Eight people went on a weekend excursion down the coast to scuba dive. Their boat was anchored off of Folly Cove for the night. Tomorrow they would probably go looking for an underwater photo op of giant tuna in Ipswich Bay or go farther off the coast to swim with the gray whales. All were downstairs

asleep except for the three-man crew. The engine caught fire. For some reason they couldn't open the hatches. They were trapped. As our boat rounded the point, we saw the light from the fire. We heard shouts for help, then screams. The fire roared. We couldn't bring the rescue boat any closer. I shouted that I would swim over and open the hatches. 'The deck is burning!' the chief shouted. I got ready to jump in anyway. They held me back. I screamed, no! They all restrained me on the port rail. The shouts of help stopped. We watched it sink. Helpless. Now something happens within me but I don't know what."

"Inside, you mean?"

"Your spirit can kill you like fire. Some feelings inside there don't let you alone. You are in a burning boat. It's too hot. You shield your red-hot face before you die. I tried, I failed. That feeling is like a tapeworm. It can eat you alive. You must reach in deep and pull it out. It might take awhile because a tapeworm can easily be twenty feet long."

"I'm pulling. It hurts."

"You, your gut, your heart, your brain, your nerves. It's a hurricane of fire and water thrashing, pulling, uprooting. You see?"

"So what're you going to do?"

"I'm doing it. You just can't see it. You probably won't feel it until you wake up tomorrow morning."

"This is crazy."

"The craziness is within. You feel excited but it's the gale-force wind of anxiety that's uprooting all that you felt was sturdy and trustworthy. All of us."

"I want an answer! Did God create these disasters? Does God have control over life and death and how we die, or is God too big for that kind of stuff? Can God accuse, sentence, and punish? Why don't we just say that there is no God? The hell with it! Live life trusting the Categorical Imperative or become a Utilitarian? Live my life as if I have been abandoned by God? We are in hell here. What are we supposed to do?"

"You are trying to make sense out of a tragedy instead of accepting that it does not make sense; that's why it's called tragedy, after all."

"No, no, no! Bullshit. What are we supposed to do? Goddamn it!" I screamed.

At that very moment the couple we had seen before going down the path came up from their walk. I turned to look at them. They were out of breath.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

“Sure,” the man said. The woman grabbed his arm to help her last step to the top.

“Are *you* all right? We were a little worried about you. You were shouting.”

“I’m fine,” I said, not really meaning it.

“We don’t mean to intrude, but we care about the people around us. We have all our lives. I’m Gabby, he’s Archie,” Gabby said.

“Thanks. I’m okay.”

“We used to run a wellness camp for troubled young men and women,” Archie added.

“That’s nice.” I was still angry. My hands were shaking.

Archie looked out to sea, then turned and looked at me with his pale-blue eyes like the first responder and said, “We found that interpersonal contact was always the first movement toward health. You know, talk, physical touching, expressive movement like dance.”

“What about God?” I asked, frustrated and on the verge of tears.

Gabby stepped a little closer, smiled. “To tell you the truth, I don’t really know if there’s a God or not. We tell our kids that God is within, and is personal, and is actually no one’s business. We encourage our boys and girls to

listen to themselves and take their clues about who they are from that. Awaken their unconscious. When they hear words of hate, or words of fear even—”

“Flip the pancake,” Archie said.

“Thank you, dear. What my husband means is that you flip the word hate to its opposite, which is love; for fear, think about courage and bravery. God, or some well-chosen words, can bring wisdom to chaos.”

“Should I spoil the surprise?” Archie asked with a smile.

“No, go ahead, dear.”

“You are God, not just a manifestation. You are part of this beyond-comprehension God.”

“I’m just an actor.”

“Well, put on your God costume, your God makeup, go out on stage, perform your life, and don’t be thrown if you are interrupted from time to time by thunderous applause.”

“With my luck right now, I wouldn’t be surprised if I was booed off stage. Look, thanks. You’ve given me a lot to chew on, but, you know, I just lost someone. I think I need to be alone.”

“Honey, I think we’ve said enough.” Archie said this as if he was uttering a prayer.

“Oh. Well, we know a little about that too. We lost our son recently.”

Stillness as I heard more about death. It continued on with or without God.

“My God. I’m so sorry. So sorry,” I said with shock.

“We as well.”

“Sometimes you don’t need to be alone,” Gabby said as her husband nodded in agreement.

“Well, good-bye. We hope it all works out for you.” They both said this in unison.

They walked past me. He reached for her hand. A desire to touch, to hold, I thought. I watched them disappear up the path. I turned to look at the first responder but he was gone. Where did he go? How did he just vanish like that? He was right there. Looking at me. Talking to me. Now gone.

“Beckett said he lived on because he must,” I said to no one. “Must what? Something inside him said he must go on, his will maybe, his conscience, because life, like Mount Everest, it is there.”

At that moment I heard his/her voice, but I could not make out any physical presence.

“Anger is a part of acceptance, but there is no cure for the sorrow or pain that follows. We are both witnesses to pointless suffering, the inevitable truth of the end. My job is to save; failure is an integral part of it. So, I will go on. You see, I’m talking myself into going back, facing the shit of loss. And the victory may be one breath breathing, one lost, one found. Maybe here on Halibut Point.”

I looked for him/her in the direction of the path leading to the parking lot. I couldn’t see or hear any movement. The fog was thick now. I turned to the steep trail where the older couple had come from. Nothing, no sound, no outlines of the first responder. I looked toward the overlook, all around. Of course she was gone. The moon was out of focus; all around me was a haze. I seemed paralyzed. Suddenly, out of nowhere, I saw Karen standing by the cliff. I could barely hear myself as I said her name.

“Karen.”

The vision seemed to move back and forth in the breeze, with the mist obscuring a clear view of her face, but it was definitely her. I tried to speak again but nothing came out. I lost all sense of my body. It was then that I thought I saw her face, saw that excited look when she got off the puddle jumper in Bar Harbor. Then she was gone.

I sat on the granite bench until the storm descended. I ran back to the car. The wind seemed to scream, and sheets of rain whipped this way and that, like special effects in a movie.

As a playwright, JIM DE MARSE has had Equity showcase productions in New York of two full-length plays: *Knock 'Em Dead* at the Image Theater and *Breaking Through the Clutter* at the 42nd Street Workshop, where he was co-artistic director for several years. He also had numerous productions and readings of other full-length and one-act plays: *Urban Disorders* at the Company of Characters Theater in LA, *A Dress Unknown* at the West Bank in New York. His play *Existing Privilege* was chosen for the Elia Kazan Festival at the Actors Studio and given a slot at the Berkshire Playwrights Lab. He has also completed a novel, *The Deer that Carried the Son*, a novella, *Rescue this Cat*, and a collection of short stories.