

Room for a view

Wedding

“I’m leaving the hospital in January.” We are seated at a December wedding for a colleague’s son. We have never met before, but there is a code of understanding between us. He is at the end of his career. I have taken my first staff position at a teaching hospital. Since childhood I have dreamt of medicine. My uncles and cousins are doctors. Now, after all my exams, I cannot believe that I am a doctor. I have dreams misplacing lecture notes; not finding an exam room; patients dying.

These fears never leave me.

He reminds me of one of my uncles. With short grey hair and flinty blue eyes he is tall and fit, elegant in his tuxedo. I listen carefully. He trusts me; otherwise he would not speak. I think this is because I am alone. My wife is at home; our babysitter has the ‘flu.

“I turned sixty-four last week.” He smiles, then sips his white wine. “I was head of the department for twelve years. They couldn’t find a replacement.”

“Did you like the challenge?”

“What was not to like?” he says. “How do you find the salmon? The wine?”

“Excellent.” I taste the wine. It is dry, crisp and fruity.

“We can talk of food or weather,” he quips. “It was snowing when I came.”

“I put four snows on my Volvo,” I add. “Do you think this will be a dull wedding?”

“Duller than the hospital,” he says. “The department was my family. I did everything for them, they loved me.” He gazes at the ballroom floor to watch the young couples. The band plays swing.

“They dance well,” I say.

“Yes. But do they know what lies ahead?”

We stare like two morose bachelors. He knows both the bride and groom’s family, I only know the groom’s. Through the evening speeches alternate between English and French.

The band hushes, the dancers slow. We sip our wine, detached.

“You have children?” the doctor asks.

“A daughter. Six months.”

“I have four girls,” the doctor says. “Grown up and left the province. Everyone leaves, if they can. You can’t stop them, can you?”

“Your daughters are married?”

“My wife worries she will never see the day,” the doctor says. “She’s having a bad time. Cancer, you know. Day to day.”

He wants to tell me about it, so I listen. His wife has struggled for years with treatments. She is too ill to come. This is his first wedding in ages, but it has been a mistake. I see his face grow empty, his eyes become shadows.

“You know,” he says, “I was unfaithful to my wife.”

I play with my napkin and glance away.

The bride and groom dance alone on the Ritz-Carlton ballroom floor, two doctors, slim and effortless as they dance. Lessons, I figure. The band plays *Moonglow*. We watch.

“A doctor is a priest,” he says.

“How do you mean?”

“I was with patients, my staff and residents. They were my flock. I thought there was time. I was young. I felt I had a gift of healing. Do I sound foolish?”

“No,” I say. “Forgive me. You feel the way you feel.”

Something has opened between us. He stares at me and my eyes burn.

“There was something sacred then about being a doctor — I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry for what you believe.”

“Believed. There’s not much more to me,” he says. “I’ve had dinners and re-

wards. I was a good doctor, but afterwards—it’s empty space, you know.”

The band plays a slow number. Everyone is dancing.

“I’ve dreamed of being a good doctor.”

“Don’t be too good. Beware of that. Think what you lose.”

“Are you all right?” I ask. “What will you do now?”

“Tonight? I’ll have a coffee and drive home. I hate big weddings. I should never have come. At least I talked. I haven’t put you off, have I?”

“Of course not.” I return to his first words. “What about January. You said you were leaving the hospital. What will you do then?”

“Nothing.”

“But you will do *something*.”

“What is left?” the doctor says. “Tell me. I’ll take the books and files out of my office. I’ll go home. I’ll practise a



few days a week. I'll try to live with Louise. I should have done that a long time ago. Living."

He leaves soon after. He stands very erect and waves goodbye.

I doubt I will ever see him again.

That night as I drive alone along Sherbrooke from the Ritz, snow falls heavily. In some places it sparkles like stars. In other places it is treacherous, slippery and difficult to see a few feet ahead on the road. One or two cars have spun out. A good six inches have fallen since the wedding began. I turn cautiously up Park Avenue past Fletcher's Field and see the snowy statue of a guardian angel to my left touching the sky. Whenever I look at her I feel safe. I drive to our flat in Outremont and park in the alley. Everywhere snow is falling and I feel a cold dread.

It is like the anxiety I have in dreams.

I get home and peer over my daughter fast asleep. My wife shifts when I come to bed, kisses me, and asks about the wedding.

"Did you see the sweet table?"

"No, I left early. How is Lexi?"

"Fine. Go to sleep. You have rounds tomorrow."

The snow blows against the window. A cool draft enters our bedroom. Most nights I welcome the cold, but now I feel emptiness. I spoon against my wife's warmth. Our lives stretch before us, but we cannot see the distance. It is nothingness that lies farthest ahead, but we do not know who will reach it first.

Ronald Ruskin

Psychiatrist
Toronto, Ont.

Creative convalescence

I enjoy convalescence. It is the part that makes the illness worth while.

— George Bernard Shaw

Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, was converted to the religious life while recovering from a battle wound. Convalescence has been put to interesting use by many thinkers, artists and writers. Some, like Robert Louis Stevenson, became famous for it.

Tell us about recovery times — yours, or your patients' — in *The Left Atrium*. We welcome prose submissions of up to 1000 words (annemarie.todkill@cma.ca).

Lifeworks

Art and technology at the Venice Biennale

The Venice Biennale is generally considered the world's most important international exhibition of contemporary art. Since its official inauguration in 1895, the Biennale has continued to expand, and this year's show — the 50th — was enormous. Entitled *Dreams and Conflicts: The Dictatorship of the Viewer*, the display included works by 380 artists from 63 different nations. The most recent Biennale occupied three main sites in Venice, with associated events and performances held in public spaces throughout the city. The Museo Correr hosted *Painting from Rauschenberg to Murakami*, an installation of paintings from 1964 to the present day. The large, military spaces of the Arsenale housed a wide range of works, including video projections, posters, sculptures and digital art. Further down the Grand Canal, the best-known location, the Giardini della Biennale (Gardens of the Biennale) featured about 33 national pavilions. Built on site by individ-



Patricia Piccinini, 2002. *Still Life with Stem Cells*. Silicone, acrylic, human hair, clothing, carpet.