



HOLIDAY READING

CMAJ

REFLECTIONS

A calling

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S ometime in December the notice of closure went out to all their patients. The husband and wife team would close their clinic. People were upset. Some were resigned. Many said they had seen it coming. Then the following September, to everyone's great surprise, the clinic opened again. And you know, people said, he seems content. She seems content. Looks at you differently, they said. He does, she does.

In between, there was one very snowy night.

Had her tremor disappeared? It was late, and he felt he should ask, but as snow flew against the windows, he simply read. He was heavy, past mid age, drifting into several glasses of port.

In his chair, he inhaled and shifted as if about to make a point. She looked up. But he said nothing and just read on. She turned back to the computer, fidgety and clicking the mouse. She was younger than her husband and had a pretty face lined with occasional tiny wrinkles. She sighed. He turned the next page of his book, then another, later another. On and on went her sighs and clicking, his shifting, and the gusts of wind outside.

At last he turned over his book. He was bored. He watched her.

– Rachel?

– These sites ... how're you supposed to ... ?

– The way you're moving the mouse, you don't seem to have a tremor.

She typed, exhaled shortly, and wrinkled her face at the screen. I ... she said vaguely.

– Rachel?

– Tom? She sent him a brief smile, then wrinkled at the screen again.

– It's not gone?

– Sorry?

– The tremor, Rachel.

– I don't know. No it's still there, she said. Her voice rose, smiling. Tom, can you take time off next month? I found a Grand Cayman inclusive, with a flight —

– Rachel did you dream last night? He was looking away to pour himself another port.

– Why the questions?

– No reason. He gazed at the ceiling. Do you think Cayman would be wise? What if you have another episode?

She gave him a sharp look. Just stop, she said. You know that the Grand Cayman thing was before.

– I can go if I finish the project. His voice was lazy, unconcerned.

– It's been years since the last time, Tom.

He took a sip.

– Years, Tom, really years.

He wondered, was she getting teary, but didn't look at her.

– After the project, he said. And we will have one hell of a time, his voice filling but false.

He said nothing for a while, and then softly, You know you really don't seem to have a tremor.

She furrowed her brow. I wasn't talking about my tremor, she said.

In the long pause following she swirled her drink. Maybe he can tell, she thought. Maybe I should tell him that I have no tremor, that I dreamt last night for the first time in years, and that I feel alive again.

The lights went out.

– Again! He shouted, annoyed.

– Oh, well there you go, she said. Her voice was cheerful against the sudden darkness. She walked to the window. Look Tom! The lights are out all over. Hey Tom, come here. Come here and watch the snow with me. She turned, but by the dim snowy moonlight she saw that he was already walking toward the doorway.

– Minute, he said.

– Come on, just watch a bit. It's whirling with flakes outside. Look!

– I'll be right back. I'll bring a flashlight.

– Tom, bring a candle.

– I will, whichever.

– A candle.

– Alright.

It was perhaps a half-hour later, as he rummaged about, that he received the phone call that changed him, as he would later say. At the time, it was initially irritating. He didn't recognize the patient's name, and he could hardly hear her over the wind blasting her phone. But as she talked, something in him responded. Within him something new began. Yes I do think I understand you, he told her.

Before that call, when he was still downstairs, she had looked into the night. Snowflakes whirled urgently toward the window and dove to the side. He could've stayed a while, she thought. Only so many times could she try to bring him back.

The attic creaked in the wind, and not a sound from downstairs.

Years ago, another doctor had said, I don't know that you really need this medication, but I think it could help. And in a less up-and-down way the years had been good. Then last night, weeks after stopping the medication, the first dream came. And a feeling of great space. The room felt now in comparison close around her. Here was something new, troubling and wondrous.

She held out her hand, which was very much her hand, yet somehow unfamiliar. The window shuddered faintly and she

looked up. She turned the latch and pushed the pane outwards. Snow rushed in and fell against her and flew across the floor.

Leaning out, her hair flew this way and that. Why not? she thought, looking into the night. She stepped onto the ledge, closed the window, and walked. At the roof's edge she sat, in snow falling, in wind, in darkness. Sitting here without him is the start of my life, she thought, the start of goodbye.

I'll let time pass. Enough time for him to find a candle or a flashlight, to come back upstairs and wonder has she gone to bed, then for him to read a little while, and to find afterwards that I'm not in bed, and to begin at last to worry.

She was becoming cold. The wind was strong. She looked up into the darkness, and she saw the leaping treetops in the wind. And behind the trees, deep black and fret with stars, hung the night, full and close suddenly, like she could throw herself up into it. Momentarily, it seemed the world opened for her to climb in.

Or for us? she thought.

She called the doctor that she'd never called before, making up a name, and she told him everything. For the first time in years she felt alive, but afraid, she explained. He listened. She was filled with things unexplainable. Like the melody that had come recently from nowhere. She sang a snippet over the wind. And he, listening, felt suddenly the notes free a memory — a song written for his wife, that he had played for her once, twice. The remembering nipped him like a distant joyful shout. And now he began to speak with this woman on the phone, to ask, to hear. And for the first time in so long, she felt understood.

Later, she climbed back into the house. The lights had come on. She closed the window and simply stood in the attic room, shivering. He found her that way.

But why did you go out? he asked. It's snowing.

– I know. It just seemed the right thing.

She paused.

– Tom?

He waited.

– That was me on the phone.

Later that year they took a trip together. Then in September the little town received word that Dr. Tom and Dr. Rachel would reopen the clinic. Good news, people said. And did you see how they're different now?

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All characters in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

CMAJ 2012. DOI:10.1503/cmaj.120807