

ELIZABETH BLANCHARD

Bitch Curve

GERALD COULDN'T QUITE FIGURE out why he hadn't stopped when he first heard the sound. And the more distance he put between himself and the bend in the road where the incident occurred, the less likely it seemed he would. It might have been the initial delay in recognition, the soft quick thud too discreet and undefined to trigger a reaction. It would have been different had it been the sound of a fractured windshield or the keening of locked wheels across a paved road. Such violent noises would have set off an adrenaline dump, elicited all the appropriate reactions: hands clutching the steering wheel, elbows locked and spine pressing into the soft leather of the seat with one foot on the clutch and the other hammering the brake pedal through the pearl-grey carpet of the Audi. But as it was, Gerald was barreling down the stretch of road that lay between Salmon Point and Bathurst on his way to the hospital, half-listening to the mellow voice of a late-night radio host extolling the virtues of a little known Inuit writer, distracted by a thought scurrying on the edge of his mind. What had he hit back there where the road curved away from the sea at Salmon Point?

It wasn't even his weekend to be on call. Gladys had driven down the coast to their summer home midweek. After two patients cancelled their appointments Friday afternoon, Gerald left the office early and made the forty-five minute drive out to the cottage. He found his wife sitting on a green Adirondack lawn chair the neighbour's son had dragged down to the beach at Gladys's request. She wore a one-piece white bathing suit, and a bright orange sarong wrapped around her thick hips. Her freshly-dyed hair gleamed like a crow's pelt in the sun. Gerald disliked the color instantly, thought it too obvious in its attempt, but knew better than to say anything. He preferred her natural color, *whatever that is*, he thought wryly, but the thought carried with it an unexpected feeling of emptiness that gave Gerald a sudden urge to clear his throat.

Resting on the large flat armrest of Gladys's chair was a half-filled, oversized plastic glass, the kind you find in the seasonal display at Wal-Mart.

"You managed to get out early." She handed him a bottle of beer from the soft-sided cooler slowly folding into itself next to her chair. In it, Gerald spotted traces of her red lipstick crowning the neck of an empty vodka cooler. There was a time that image would have aroused him.

"I see you got the neighbour to cut the grass," Gerald said, eyeing the edge of the lawn where it had been chewed by the blade of a poorly manoeuvred lawnmower.

"Some caretaker. The place was a mess. How much did you agree to pay him this summer?"

Careful not to react to Gladys's aggressive tone, Gerald loosened his tie and slipped off his shoes and socks, yearning to feel the hardness of the stones against the soles of his feet, their sharp edges reassuring. He swallowed a mouthful of beer. "Al Grey asked me to take his calls for him until eight am tomorrow; says he's got some important banquet tonight he can't afford to miss."

Pivoting her chin over her sunburned shoulder, Gladys looked up at him, her dark sunglasses reflecting Gerald's heavy paunch, which hung over his belt. Although he couldn't see them, Gerald could feel his wife's eyes pause on him in quiet disapproval.

He instinctively pulled out his shirt. "I'm going to change out of these clothes. Need anything at the cottage?"

"Pick up after yourself," Gladys said, as she turned her gaze towards the water and took a sip of her drink. "We're having guests for supper. Nancy just got back from spending two weeks in the Caribbean with her new beau, Todd. I've invited both of them to dinner. Imagine! Going on a trip with someone you've only known for a month." She shook her head and laughed, a hint of envy trailing in her voice. "Nancy tells me he's at least fifteen years younger than her."

Gerald, feeling his face flush, turned and headed towards the cottage.

Later that night, when his beeper went off, Gerald was relieved. As he drove out of the yard, he could still hear them out on the deck finishing off the second bottle of wine of the evening, Todd's voice garishly loud, Nancy and Gladys laughing in high-pitched squeals.



The nagging doubt had now mushroomed into a grim anxiety. Gerald pulled the car over to the side of the road. The engine idled as he sat silently with both hands on the wheel. There were no streetlights on this stretch of road. It couldn't have been a bird, not this late, not in the dark, unless it was a bat. And it had to be at least the height of the door to make that sound or the tires would have simply rolled over it like a speed bump. It wasn't a particularly clear night, but there had been no fog around the point so he would have certainly seen someone had they been walking. He pictured the familiar bit of road in his mind, how the gravel shoulder narrowed as the road bent sharply around a curve and funnelled its way through a thick patch of forest, a sudden crowding of pine and spruce eclipsing any reflections of moonlight the sea might have had to offer. Bitch curve is how the paramedics referred to it, when sitting around the ambulance dock. Young men who had not been on the job long enough to dampen the swagger in their walk. Young men who themselves weren't exempt from joyriding the curve when off-duty on a Saturday night, during one of Salmon Point's infamous bonfire parties.

Why hadn't Gerald stopped when he first heard the sound? His mind was on other things; on the patient whom the nursing supervisor described as stable but needing attention. And yes, the radio was on, he might have been fiddling with the stations, had his head down, or he might have been distracted by the music. But he had definitely heard something. Eyeing his cellular on the dash, the thought of calling the police crossed his mind. He imagined two RCMP officers squatting near a dead dog, poking its blood-matted fur with a stick, making some wry comments in their Quebecois accents. And there was the matter of the wine. He cupped his hand to his mouth and exhaled. The question would be asked. Annoyed with his own indecisiveness, he began pulling away from the roadside when he first heard it: the screech of a siren weaving its way in the night towards him. He became very still, his skin barely able to contain the punching of his heart as he sat and watched the flashing red lights come into view then disappear from his rear view mirror. He wondered if Gladys and Nancy could hear the siren from the cottage.

Gladys met Nancy when Gladys decided a cottage was needed to fill the wasteland that had become her life, or at least that's how she explained it to Gerald after he'd returned from the hospital late one night. She said it in a calm voice, lying in bed as Gerald took his pants off in the dark. The next day Gladys contacted a realty agent, Nancy Atkinson, a small divorcee with a voracious appetite for new things.

"Gladys tells me you're an orthopaedic surgeon," was how Nancy introduced herself the first time she met Gerald during one of Gladys's

many parties. She lowered herself onto the arm of Gerald's living-room sofa, Perrier in hand. A silver anklet dangling from her thin ankle bone, her raspberry pink bra straps clearly in view under her sleeveless blouse, Nancy held Gerald's gaze and smiled at him as though he were a potential buyer. Gerald, unaccustomed to such male-like boldness in a woman, felt an instant discomfort, the kind of discomfort which arises when stumbling upon the illicit. In retrospect, Gerald would like to think that it was Nancy who pursued him. After all, wasn't it Nancy who came over to their cottage that weekend looking for Gladys when she knew Gladys was on a shopping trip with her sister? Wasn't it Nancy who offered to cook supper for him, who stayed too late discussing property values?

"I get the impression you'd sell anything," Gerald said, allowing himself to slip into Nancy's promiscuousness, his fingers feathering the back of her neck.

"And do anything for a sale," she replied, the intent in her voice, Gerald thought, unmistakable.

In hindsight, that's where Gerald could have stopped it, gone no further, a momentary arousal dealt with later in the privacy of his bed, alone, with Gladys in mind. But it didn't happen that way, and after the initial release, with Nancy's thighs still straddling his hips on the living room floor and her hands pressing his against her small sagging breast under her unclipped bra, he could feel the guilt thickening the air in the room.

"That was my daughter Rachel," Nancy said evenly as she flipped the cellular phone shut. "She needs the car early tomorrow morning." She smiled thinly while pulling on the straps of her high-heeled shoes. "Smart girl, that one. She knows her mother's bad habits so she's not taking any chances."

Gerald remembered Rachel from the party, a pale, sullen eighteen-year-old in a frayed jean jacket and thick black eye-liner who kept fingering the three tiny studs in her nose when she wasn't checking her cellular to see if she had missed any calls. "How did she know you were here?" Gerald's voice cracked, suddenly jarred by the magnitude of his transgression.

Nancy stood in front of the hall mirror, a hairclip clenched between her teeth. "Relax Gerald," she said in an irritated tone, both hands twisting her copper coloured hair into an unkempt pile on her head. "She called on my cellphone. And besides, she's pretty discreet." She softened her smile and touched his face. "Hmmm, you were wonderful, hope we can do this again."

Never again, thought Gerald, grappling with the sudden weight of infidelity, not as much his own as what he foresaw as Nancy's lack of discre-

tion with her daughter. It was, he thought, inevitable, as if Rachel had been standing outside with her face pressed to the living-room window.

But boredom has its own way of undermining resolve and, as Nancy had hoped, they did do it again, mostly in Gerald's office after hours. Nancy would simply show up on occasion after the secretary had gone home and sit in the waiting room, reading "Ask Your Doctor" pamphlets until the last patient left. At lunchtime one day, anticipating one of Nancy's visits, Gerald bought her a jade pendant. Its oval shape and smooth contour appealed to Gerald. He showed it to Nancy that evening as she took off her sunglasses and unfastened her blouse. An hour or so later, Nancy picked the pendant off of Gerald's desk and put it in her purse on the way out. That was the last time she came to his office.



Gerald slowed the car to a crawl, taking no notice of the police officer waving him past the scene of the accident. His eyes were riveted on the body being lifted onto a collapsible gurney wheeled to the side of the road and illuminated by the headlights of two police cars, their neon green and red strobes lending a surreal eeriness to the scene. In the odd angle in which the right leg lay, Gerald recognized a twisted deformity of the pelvic bone, probably fractured, the right leg no longer in proper alignment as though the head of the femur had been wrenched from its protective socket. He imagined the surrounding ligaments stretched beyond functionality, the smooth neck of the femur snapped, exposing its trabecular marrow. He had seen such bones, touched them, guided wires into their centers through tiny drill holes, inserting pins and fastening screws, always confident in his crisp ability to restore full rotation, or have the final say in those beyond repair. But what lay in wait for him tonight could not so easily be fixed or passed on to a colleague. He sat clutching the wheel, unable to take his eyes from the sight.

A car honked loudly behind him and for the second time that night, he pulled over to the side of the road.

It suddenly occurred to him they would be looking for the driver of the car that hit the man. He jerked the door open and stepped out into the sound of voices and car engines made sharp by the cold night air. He made his way around the front of his own car and walked slowly towards the back along the passenger side, running his hand along the door and the angle of the trunk looking for any telltale signs, the metal trim cold under his sweaty palm. The fibres in his lungs tightened at the thought of

the contorted body being wheeled towards the ambulance. Was his lawyer's home number in his BlackBerry?

"Dr. Owens?"

Gerald hadn't heard the young paramedic come up behind him. Short and stocky, the young man looked like he had just walked out of a weight training session, his white short-sleeved shirt tight around his neck, arms and chest. "Afraid you're too late on this one, Doc," the paramedic said, expanding his chest with self-importance. "It looks like he fractured his pelvis and crushed his rib cage on impact," he continued, spreading his feet apart and crossing his arms. "We suspect he probably died of internal injuries."

Gerald felt his stomach heave.

"Too bad. Just a young guy, a kid really. The police tell us they broke up a party at Salmon Beach earlier, figure the teenager must have decided to walk home."

Gerald wished the young man would just shut up.

"And check out the guy that hit him, not much older than the victim."

Gerald's head spun as though he had just been struck. He looked at the paramedic, who was nodding in the direction of a police cruiser. In the dark, Gerald could make out the silhouette of a man leaning against the police car, shouting while gesturing vigorously to two officers standing in front of him in their glossy blue-black jackets and bulbous-toed boots. The man's movements were exaggerated and uncoordinated.

"That's the driver of the car that hit the poor bastard," said the paramedic as he slipped his thumbs in his belt and shook his head disapprovingly. "He's high as a kite. His girlfriend was in the car with him when the accident happened." He pointed to the back seat of the cruiser.

For the first time since stepping out of the car Gerald took in the surrounding scene. Just beyond the ambulance, on the opposite side of the road, an old Dodge Charger had rolled half way into the ditch, the front bumper scarcely visible at road level, its back wheels barely touching the pavement. An RCMP officer, with what appeared to be a surveyor's measuring tape, squatted in the middle of the road where black tire marks darkened the pavement, while another officer held the end of the tape and walked slowly the length of the skid marks, unwinding the tape, its metal edges glinting sporadically in the police car headlights.

Gerald felt the muscles in his legs weaken. He leaned back against his car, bending at the waist and bracing his hands against his knees, desperate to keep the blood flowing to his brain.

The relief was overwhelming.

"Are you okay, Dr. Owens?" The paramedic had lowered himself unto his haunches and placed his hand on Gerald's shoulder.

"I'm fine." Gerald stood up abruptly and walked away from the car, his relief beginning to give way to feelings of foolishness. The man in police custody was increasingly belligerent, shouting incoherently while trying to pull himself away from the officers restraining him. Keeping his distance, Gerald circled the police car and found himself standing on the passenger side when he saw the girl sitting in the back seat. The door was open and as Gerald's eyes grew accustomed to the dark, he recognized the girl.

Rachel looked small in the back seat of the police car. Her dark hair, stringy and matted, hung over a bandage covering the width of her forehead, the right side of her temple bruised and beginning to swell. She looked up at him and said nothing. He struggled with his thoughts, wished he had never gotten out of the car, all the while feeling obligated to say something now that she had seen him.

"Are you okay?"

Rachel said nothing, but instead raised her hand to her face, her index finger and thumb nervously fingering the studs in her nose. Gerald was about to offer to call Gladys at the cottage, knowing full well that Nancy would still be there drinking wine, when he noticed the smooth oval hanging around Rachel's neck. He recognized the jade pendant he had given to Nancy. The sight of it made Gerald flush with heat, recalling images of Nancy riding his lap in one of his examining rooms at the office, his pants down around his ankles, her greedy insistence, his own eagerness pathetic. He turned to leave when Rachel finally spoke.

"You won't tell my mother, will you?" Her voice was quiet but defiant. She did not look up at him.

How ironic that Rachel should be asking him not to betray *her*.

"You know I can't keep it from her," he said evenly, trying to conceal the spite in his tone. "You know that regardless of what I do, she'll eventually find out."

Rachel was quiet for a moment, as if weighing the veracity of Gerald's comment.

"He's right, you know," she continued after a few minutes.

"Who's right?"

"Nick, my boyfriend," she tilted her head towards the young suspect now face down against the hood of the car, being handcuffed by the officers, who were quickly losing patience. "It wasn't his fault."

Gerald's beeper went off. "I have to go."

"It wasn't Nick's fault." Rachel raised her voice.

"I'm expected at the hospital," he said, the smell of the car's exhaust fumes nauseating.

"The guy was already down, he was already lying in the road," Rachel was now looking directly at Gerald. "Nick turned hard to avoid him and we ended up in the ditch." She paused and held Gerald's gaze. "It wasn't his fault."

Gerald felt a tightening in his throat, felt the need to wipe his palms across the front of his jacket.

"They'll eventually figure it out." Rachel's voice dropped as though talking to herself. "Figure out that it wasn't Nick's fault."

Gerald looked over at the boy pressed up against the car, then beyond the boy, down the road beyond bitch curve, where the taillights of the ambulance disappeared into the dark patch of forest, its siren noticeably silent.