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An Attempt at Rescue, of Love and the Past

I

With a thumb-and-forefinger rotating motion Richard kept pressing his cigarette into the ashtray long after he had extinguished it. He was sitting at a table in a downtown Toronto bar with two men from his department in the provincial civil service, and had been drinking since leaving work an hour ago. As Richard always did when he drank, he asked the people around him to give him multiplication problems, three digits in each of two numbers.

"623 times 284?" said the man to Richard's left, looking at an inside page of *The Globe and Mail* while he spoke.

"176,932," Richard answered after ten seconds of eyes-closed concentration, and the man seated across from Richard checked the answer on the pocket calculator he had removed from his briefcase.

"How the hell do you do that, Richard?" the newspaper-reading man asked.

"I've trained my mind . . . since I was a little kid," Richard explained without boastfulness. He rubbed at the side of his head, as if to pinpoint the location of his unusual ability. "I won't use a calculator. That makes your mind lazy."

"750 times 938?" asked the man with the calculator, holding the instrument in the palm of his hand.

"703,500," Richard answered slightly quicker than for the previous multiplication problem. He allowed a half-smile of pride onto his face.

"Two murders and an apartment-building fire of suspicious origin on this page," the newspaper-reading man said as though he were passing on inconsequential gossip.

"I hardly want to get out of bed when I hear about all the violence in the world," said the man with the calculator.

"Don't worry, nobody's going to cut your throat in our friendly little bar," Richard said, and used an unlit cigarette to make a throat-slashing gesture on himself. He attempted to form a menacing face, but his expression was more that of an inept mime. Richard had what his wife liked to call soft and gentle features.

"This woman in the States," the newspaper-reading man said, pointing to a small, mid-page article, "killed her two children. There's no way I'm ever going to understand the mentality of anyone who'd kill another person."

"Her own children, for God's sake . . . that's what I can't understand," the man with the calculator said, performing a random calculation.

"She was originally from Canada . . . from around here," the newspaper-reading man said without looking at the other two men.

"It's the air in the States that makes people act crazy sometimes," the man with the calculator said.

"Toronto's air isn't so great," Richard said, and let out a mocking cough.

"363 times 829?" the newspaper-reading man asked.

"300,927," responded Richard, taking nearly fifteen seconds to do this mental calculation.

"Right again," the man with the calculator said.

"If she's got a good lawyer, she'll get off on being a nut case, wait and see," the newspaper-reading man said. "She's thirty-six . . . a year younger than my wife."

"I'm thirty-six," Richard said. "Six times six," he added as if to lessen the severity of the years.

"What's the husband have to say in all this blood and gore?" the man with the calculator asked.

"They're *estranged*. . . I find that a peculiar word," the newspaper-reading man answered.

"455 times 544, Richard?" the man with the calculator said sharply, wanting to end the discussion about murder.

Richard did not answer. He was looking to his left at the newspaper page, reading the article about the thirty-six-year-old Boston woman who had shot her two children, ages twelve and fourteen, in the head with her estranged husband's revolver.

"Finally stumped?" the man to Richard's left commented.

"What's wrong, math whiz?" the man with the calculator said, working out the multiplication problem himself.

Richard absently scratched at his forehead, seeming to pick off a bothersome scab that wasn't there, and said, "I went to school with her. . . ."

II

"Where's Jamie?" Richard asked his wife Kirsten at the dinner table. He was looking at a newspaper, not usual for him at the table. Richard usually read in the living room, sitting in the stuffed chair by the large picture window.

"Where do you think?" Kirsten answered, and placed a plate of spaghetti under the newspaper and in front of her husband.

"I'm going to sabotage that boy's computer one day."

"What are you doing with a Boston newspaper?" Kirsten asked, only now noticing that Richard did not have *The Globe and Mail* or *Star* with him.

"I had to hunt all around town to get this paper, and it's a day old."

"When did you start reading Boston newspapers?" she asked, and began to eat her meal.

"There's an article about an old friend of mine I wanted to read."

"What old friend lives in Boston, Richard?"

Richard moved the plate of spaghetti away from him and folded the newspaper so that he could better read the article. He had already read the article a dozen times, yet still could not take his attention from it. "I used to cheat off her during spelling tests when she lived in Toronto," he told his wife.

"You wouldn't cheat, Richard."

"I can't spell worth anything . . . you know that, Kirsten."

"I have a hard time imagining you doing anything dishonest."

"How about kicking Jamie's computer to pieces?"

"Try getting him to the table first."

"Come down for supper, Jamie," Richard called, but there was no response from his son in the upstairs bedroom.

"*Jamie*," Kirsten called, much louder than her husband had, and the boy shouted back that he wasn't hungry.

Richard, no longer concerned about his son's absence from the dinner table, stared at the newspaper and said, "There was only a tiny article about her in *The Globe and Mail* last week."

"So tell me, Richard, who's your famous friend?"

"She's gotten more beautiful," he said, talking more to himself than to his wife.

"Is there a picture of her there, dear?"

"She was the first girl I ever kissed. . . . I was eight."

"I'm emotionally shattered, Richard. I thought I was the first," Kirsten joked. "Let me see the picture."

"It's not a clear photograph. Someone got a terrible shot of her leaving the courtroom with her lawyer."

"Let me see, dear."

"No."

"Is it a top-secret picture?"

"It's not a good photograph."

"You said she's gotten more beautiful."

"She could spell just about any word. . . ."

Kirsten reached for the newspaper but Richard moved it out of her grasp. His quick movement was more reflex than deliberate avoidance.

"Was there more than kissing going on when you were eight?" Kirsten said, and blew a teasing kiss at her husband.

"I went out with her a few times in high school, years later . . . an on-and-off thing," he responded, sounding as though he were attempting to explain an embarrassing occurrence to a stranger, not his wife.

"What's her name?"

"You don't know her."

"Why so evasive today, Richard?"

"Certain things should be kept private."

"Until they hit *The Globe and Mail* and Boston newspapers."

"She tried to convince me to go to university in the States," Richard told his wife. "I, in my practical way of thinking, decided that staying close to home was smarter."

"Did she go to university in the States?"

"In Boston . . . where her grandparents lived."

Kirsten suddenly grabbed the newspaper away from her husband, attempting to make the theft playful, but he caught her hand and twisted the newspaper away roughly.

"You hurt me, Richard," Kirsten said angrily.

"I'm sorry."

"What's gotten into you today?"

His head bent in apology, Richard handed his wife the newspaper and stood up from the table.

"*Richard*," Kirsten gasped before she had finished reading the first paragraph of the newspaper article, "she killed her children."

"I got an A in spelling in Grade Three because of her. In Grade Four I got caught cheating. . . ."

III

Richard followed the Boston trial from Toronto as best he could. At night, he would find a Boston station on the radio, staying up late for any news report on the woman he had gone with to school. In Boston, the trial was regarded as one of the most important trials in years and covered extensively. In Toronto, it was referred to only periodically, and then briefly. . . .

"I've kissed a boy before," the girl told the boy as he stood before her at the side of the school building.

With a bashful grin, he admitted, "I've never kissed a girl."

Richard giggled after each kiss. He and the girl held hands when they had finished kissing, enjoying each other's companionship. Another boy, perhaps a year or two older than the two eight-year-olds, but much larger, a school bully, hurried at them before they could leave the side of the school building. He had been watching them kiss from a distance.

"What you kissing him for?" the bully said to the girl, and spit at the gravel near Richard's feet.

"Go home," the eight-year-old girl told the bully.

The bully took the girl's hand and pulled her away from Richard. Without saying anything, Richard struck the older boy hard in the face. Then a second time, even harder. The boy hit Richard back but it was an indirect blow that landed on the shoulder. Richard picked up a handful of gravel from the ground and threw it into the bully's face. Lunging awkwardly at Richard, the angered bully slipped and fell to the ground. Richard jumped on top of him, striking at his chest and face as though attempting to smash a pillow to flatness. The eight-year-old girl screamed for Richard to stop, but he wouldn't and she had to pull him off the unconscious bully. Together the two eight-year-olds ran from the school building, leaving the bully on the ground and bleeding from his nose and mouth.

IV

"Using plastic explosives, you can make a really powerful bomb the size of a pack of cigarettes. It could blow our house right off the face of the Earth," Jamie told his father.

Richard, standing next to his seated son in the boy's bedroom, removed a cigarette pack from his pocket, inspected it as if it were an explosive device, and said, "You learn that in school, Jamie?"

"In this science magazine," Jamie said, and tapped the magazine page on the desk which also held his home computer. The computer had been a combination thirteenth birthday and Christmas present last year.

"You planning on making a bomb?"

"Don't be silly, Dad."

"If I ever have nothing to do, I might try to make me one."

"It's simple as pie, Dad, if you got the materials. . . . The detonator is the easiest part."

Richard held the cigarette pack at eye level, and said, "A bomb this small, pretty hard to believe."

"I thought you were going to stop smoking, Dad."

"After I finish this pack. . . ."

V

"She got a master's degree in English literature . . . married when she was twenty-two like me . . . became very middle-class . . . had two children, a boy and a girl . . . separated from her extremely successful architect husband . . . went back to school to work on her Ph.D. . . ."

"How do you know so much about her if you haven't seen the woman since high school?" Kirsten asked her husband. They were both sitting in the living room, ready to watch the evening news on television.

"The Boston newspapers," Richard answered his wife.

"You think she'll be convicted?"

"I hope not."

"She *killed* her two children."

"There has to be an explanation."

"Why such faith in a murderer, dear?"

"She hasn't been convicted yet," Richard said harshly, as if responding to a personal insult.

"You act like she's still your school sweetheart."

Richard, attempting to avoid getting into an argument with his wife, looked up at the ceiling before he spoke: "We used to go down into her parents' basement and pretend we were black blues singers."

"Not you, Richard," Kirsten exclaimed, her reaction of disbelief as strong as if her husband had divulged that he had climbed Mount Everest or swum the English Channel.

"Yes, me," he said emphatically. "She sang and played the guitar, and I went wild singing my lily-white soul out."

“You can’t even carry a tune, dear. . . .”

Richard gave his wife a quick kiss and left the living room. He went down to the storage room in the basement, a spot he had been visiting frequently lately. From behind some old furniture, he pulled out a cardboard box in which he kept all the letters and drawings that he had from the time the woman on trial in Boston and he were eight to the last time she had written him, when they were both twenty-two. As long as he could remember, the woman liked to draw. He had last seen her during a visit to Boston, on her twentieth birthday. Now he studied a nude drawing she had done of herself when she was fourteen and had given to him.

“Don’t be afraid to open your mouth when you kiss,” the teenage girl told the teenage boy. “That’s the way my parents kiss.”

“It feels funny,” he told her.

“It feels good. . . .”

She kissed him longer this time, then took his hand and pressed it against one of her breasts. Her passion was stronger than his. Richard had known her six years now and wanted to talk about the time they had first kissed at the side of the school building, when they had been eight. They hadn’t been together in nearly two years, but it was as though they had not been apart a second. In the basement of her parents’ home, she began to undress as he reminisced about when they were eight-year-olds. He was nervous, but somehow could remember a few of the words on the spelling tests they had been given in Grades Three and Four. She had written large on her test papers so he could see the words more easily.

VI

Richard told his departmental supervisor that his father was dying and asked for a week off to be at his side. Richard had returned from vacation a little more than a month ago, but the supervisor told him he could take a week of sick leave. Then Richard went to the bank and withdrew two thousand dollars from an account he had never told his wife about. Any extra money he needed, he could use his credit card for. All the other money was in joint accounts with his wife, and she would notice the withdrawal of any large amounts. A week in Boston. All he would need was a week in Boston. The trial was starting its fourth week and every indication was that it would last only one or two more weeks. The prosecution wanted a first-degree murder conviction and the defence was attempting to secure a not-guilty-by-reason-of-

insanity verdict. The coverage of the trial, in Boston at least, was not diminishing. The accused woman was beautiful, educated, and appeared to be the furthest sort of person from a murderer. Next to how beautiful and composed she was in the courtroom, the most frequent references by the media were to her articulateness.

VII

“Was she crazy when you knew her?” Kirsten asked her husband while they were lying in bed early Saturday morning. Kirsten had wanted to make love, but Richard’s mind was elsewhere.

“No,” he answered, and reached for a book that was on the bed’s headboard bookcase. After not reading fiction in years, Richard had recently begun to read a novel by Edith Wharton, the author the woman on trial in Boston had written her master’s thesis on.

“No clues or hints she wasn’t right in the head?”

“None.”

“There had to be something, dear. . . .”

Richard said that he was going to the bathroom, and left his wife alone in bed. He went to his son’s bedroom and knocked at the door. When there wasn’t any answer, he opened the door and entered. The magazine with the article on bomb-making was all he wanted. He looked at the computer’s display screen and it seemed as if it were a dull green eye spying on him, intruding into his thoughts. Richard wished there were a way to press a few console keys and free the woman on trial in Boston, bring her to his arms. He should have gone to university with her in Boston, married her, had children. . . . *Had children*. . . . Everything would have been different had they lived together. What had happened to the woman in the sixteen years since he had last seen her, Richard was certain, had caused the woman—driven her, he preferred to think—to kill her children. They would have had different children and a different life together. He remembered her childish kisses at eight, her teenage kisses and touches, the start of womanly kisses and caresses, their lovemaking, the singing like black blues singers. He should have visited her more often. He had travelled to Boston only three times, and each time they had slept together in her dormitory room, against school rules. He was afraid she would get expelled if they were caught, but she wasn’t afraid. Like making love in my basement with my parents playing cards upstairs, she had told him. They wrote to each other—and she would enclose a drawing or two in each letter—until she told him that she was pregnant and would be getting married to a wealthy architect twice her age

whom she didn't love. Richard had all the letters and drawings in a cardboard box in his basement storage room, wouldn't part with them for anything. He could have had an affair with her after she married if he had made an effort . . . he should have. He had not slept with another woman since marrying Kirsten, afraid of hurting his wife. Yet he thought of it often, even fantasized about love affairs with some of Kirsten's friends, but nothing as real as how his mind embraced the woman on trial in Boston. Her passion used to frighten him. Now he wanted that passion. In the basement storage room, touching her old letters and drawings, Richard made love with the woman, saved her from the school bully, married her. . . .

VIII

"415 times 861?" the woman sitting next to Kirsten asked Richard.

"Don't start him up," Kirsten told her friend. It was Saturday evening and the two couples were sitting cozily together at a table in a supper club featuring a jazz band. It was the woman's husband who had suggested that the four of them go out and listen to jazz.

"357,315," Richard said, and felt the woman's leg touch his under the table. He was unsure if the contact had been intentional.

"Richard, you'd be a sensation on TV interview shows," the woman's husband said.

"He'd freeze up on television," Kirsten said, and gave her husband an affectionate pinch on the cheek. "Richard's too shy to be a celebrity."

"People learn to be celebrities," the woman said. Richard felt her foot brush against his ankle. He would have bet that this contact had been intentional.

"687 times 995?" the woman's husband asked, displeased by the way his wife was flirting.

"No, Richard—no more math problems," Kirsten said, and she put her hand over her husband's mouth before he could answer. "We came here to listen to jazz."

Richard, annoyed by his wife's restraining gesture, blurted out, "I'm going to Boston tomorrow night."

"*When* are you going to Boston?" Kirsten asked her husband, taken by surprise by Richard's revelation. At first she had thought he was making a joke, but his tone was too serious.

"I'm taking next week off, Kirsten."

"You had your vacation last month. You couldn't wait to get back to work."

"I need a break."

"From what, Richard?"

"From Toronto . . . from my job . . . from everything."

"What are you talking about?"

"I was going to tell you when we got home. I'll be back in a week. Don't make a big deal out of it, Kirsten."

"Are you going to that woman's trial?"

"If I have the time. . . ."

IX

The trial was in its sixth week, and clearly appeared to be nearing its conclusion. On Monday morning, after arriving in Boston the night before, Richard had been unable to get into the packed courtroom. Tuesday—and each subsequent day—he arrived early at the courthouse, earlier than anyone else. During the last days of the trial, he sat at the back of the courtroom and watched the woman who had been his first love. She had aged well, Richard thought, better than he had. He smiled at her occasionally, and was certain that she saw him in the courtroom. It was so easy for him to remember how he had cheated off her on spelling tests . . . their kissing . . . making love. . . . Friday, he would free her on Friday. The plan had to work. If they could get out of Boston and then out of the United States, no one would find them. Somewhere in Mexico, he had decided, but didn't yet have an exact idea of how they would get there. He had saved her from the school bully. He could save her from prison.

X

"The sixth word, class, is 'floating' . . . The kindly grandfather liked *floating* in the swimming pool. . . . 'Floating,'" the teacher repeated to the Grade-Four class. "The seventh word, class, is 'glimmer'" On their test papers the students spelled the words the teacher gave them. Every Friday, twenty words, eighteen correct for an A.

". . . 'Insistent' . . ."

Before Richard had finished writing down the word "insistent," the teacher had lifted the boy's test paper off his desk.

"Please come with me, Richard," the teacher said. "I will be right back, class," she told the other students. "Everyone put their heads down until I return."

Silently Richard stood up from his desk, and turned to look at the girl who sat next to him. Her head was already on her desktop.

“Cheating is very serious, Richard. It demonstrates a lack of character,” the teacher told the nine-year-old Grade-Four student when they were out of the classroom.

“I didn’t mean to,” Richard said tearfully.

“I watched you. . . . You cheated on almost every word. . . .”

He loved the girl even then, had for over a year. The frightened student wanted to tell his teacher about how wonderful the girl’s kisses were.

“Stay out in the hall, Richard, until after I finish giving the rest of the class all the words. I will talk to you about your cheating after school. . . .”

XI

The jury was receiving its final instructions from the judge. Richard would act now, and not after the verdict was delivered. The jury wouldn’t acquit the woman on trial, he had come to realize that. The best she could hope for was commitment to a mental institution. He would help her escape . . . free her. Richard thought of multiplication problems to keep himself calm. He even attempted to do problems with four digits in each number, but was unable.

After removing the surgical tape and pulling the plastic detonator from beneath his pant leg, Richard stood up and walked slowly towards the prisoner’s dock.

“I have explosives under my shirt,” he said in a firm, controlled voice to everyone in the courtroom. “Please, no one move.” At school he always became nervous when he had to get in front of a class to speak.

There were several police officers, male and female, in the courtroom, and Richard pointed the detonator at those he could see, as if attempting to shoo away troublesome animals.

With each step towards the prisoner’s dock, he felt the woman’s kisses stronger. When they were away from all this, they would be lovers again, and his passion would equal hers.

Approaching the prisoner’s dock, Richard smiled lovingly at the woman, but she merely stared at him. A police officer moved at Richard and he halted the man by saying, “I have enough explosives to flatten this courtroom. . . .”

Richard stopped less than three feet from the prisoner’s dock, and said in a whisper to the woman on trial, “My darling.” He wanted to tell her that he still loved her, had never stopped, but there were too many people in the courtroom.

“Who are you?” the woman said when Richard took another step closer to the prisoner’s dock.

“Richard. . . . I’m Richard from Toronto.”

“Get away from me,” the woman shouted. “Get away from me. . . .”

Richard made a groaning sound. The past stabbed him from a thousand different directions, and all the wounds were deep and painful. He pressed the detonator, and was immediately tackled from behind by a policeman he had not seen. Richard had forgotten that the bomb he had constructed was not real. In his attempt to recapture the past, to rescue the woman he had loved since he was eight years old, he had forgotten a great deal.