

SHARI LAPENA

Things Go Flying

HAROLD WALKER KNEW in his heart that he was mediocre—a disappointment to himself and others. He suspected his wife Audrey thought so. His two kids were mediocre too, although neither one of them had enough education or life experience yet to realize it. But with that knack of youth, they could smell it in their father. Harold knew his sons were a perfect example of mediocrity, and blamed himself.

Still. He put in his time at work. He almost owned his own home. He was married to the same woman, after all this time. It was true that, in his late forties now, he had been letting himself go. This, in spite of the fact that he was terrified of having a heart attack.

He seemed to be having a midlife crisis, but it wasn't about wanting to possess young gorgeous women, or lusting after a car he couldn't even afford to insure. *Crisis* implies energy, and there wasn't much energy about Harold or his life these days. What he was having felt more like a midlife slump. A depression.

What could be more mediocre than that?

Still. He had his health. He truly loved his sons, regardless. And he loved Audrey, not with the red-hot love they'd started out with—that was hard to imagine now, let alone remember—but with something abiding.

However, he was at that age where a man reconsiders everything.

"God damn," he muttered, squinting at the newspaper.

"What," Audrey said. She was standing at the kitchen counter in her quilted housecoat and bare feet, holding the coffee pot.

Harold was slow to answer, perhaps not quite believing what he'd read. "Tom Grossman is dead."

Audrey came to peer over his shoulder.

"Heart attack." Harold felt a weirdness flooding over him, an alarming palpitation of the heart, a difficulty breathing, a pooling of the blood in his feet.

"I wish you wouldn't read the obituaries," Audrey said.

Mercifully, the strange feeling was already passing. "It's a good thing I do," Harold responded.

It was true that, if he hadn't read it in the paper, Harold might not have found out about Thomas Grossman's death, or at least not until long after the funeral was over, so different were the circles in which they now travelled. They'd been university roommates and best friends, but Tom had gone on to medical school, and Harold had become a civil servant. Tom's life had seemed to be always expanding, while Harold's had seemed to be always contracting. Somehow, they'd stopped keeping in touch.

But it was Tom all right; there was a photo. "Suddenly, of a heart attack at the age of 48." *Christ.*

Tom's life had just suffered a pretty definitive contraction.

"In lieu of flowers, please send donations to the Heart and Stroke Foundation."

"We'd better go to the funeral," Audrey said, seeing no way around it.

"Of course we'll go," Harold said, already thinking more about how much time he had left, and what kind of figure he'd cut among Tom's mourners at Mount Pleasant Cemetery, than about the loss of a man who, let's face it, he'd not been on intimate terms with for over fifteen years. Would his black suit still fit?

As if on the same wavelength, Audrey said, "I'd better figure out what we're going to wear."



Audrey had never been much of a worrier—that had been Harold's job—but she was worried now. She'd fretted about the little things, like whether they would be on time for wherever it was they were going, but she'd left the big items—money, health, and so on, up to him. She simply didn't have the disposable energy, staying at home to raise two unruly boys.

But now she was worried about Harold. Tom Grossman's death couldn't have come at a worse time. This wasn't the time for Harold to be staring mortality in the face, or to have his life thrown into relief with Tom's.

"I don't see why I have to go. I didn't even know the guy." Seventeen-year-old John was being just typical.

"It will be a good experience for you," Audrey said. John and his brother James, two years younger, had come this far in life without ever

having been to a funeral. It was time they attended a funeral. Audrey believed this. She also believed it would do Harold good to be able to show off his two almost-grown sons, for despite their shortcomings, they were both tall and handsome, and both looked good in a dark suit.

“I don’t want to.”

John complained about everything; Audrey was used to it. It fell on one deaf ear and went out the other. His complaining didn’t bother her as much as it bothered Harold, whom it drove up the wall.

“Tom Grossman was your father’s closest friend for years,” Audrey said.

“Then how come I’ve never heard of him?”

Sbit. “People get out of touch. It doesn’t change what was.” She looked up from her ironing; she was pressing her best black skirt. She was suddenly annoyed by his attitude, and his smirk, and she didn’t want to be annoyed. She had to attend a funeral in less than an hour with a depressed, self-conscious husband, not one but two rebellious teenagers—James had so far refused to come in from the basketball net in the driveway to shower and change—and she had a nasty secret of her own that was causing her more grief than the rest of them put together.

She put down the iron, looked severely at her eldest son and used the tone of voice that she saved for when she really had to get results. “Go get your brother and get dressed. You have half an hour.”

She knew Harold was lying down on the couch in the family room, having succumbed to the same aggravating passivity that had lately characterized his weekend days at home. He used to work on the yard at this time of year, tinker at home improvement projects, of which there were always plenty. Right now for instance, the eaves troughs needed cleaning and the gate was coming off its hinges in the back yard. Harold had once tried to get the boys interested in how to use his tools, but they just made fun of him behind his back.

Her sons were useless around the house, absolutely useless.

Audrey put the iron down and listened intently. From long practice, she could tell exactly where everyone in the house was and what they were doing, and by checking her watch and making her various rapid mental calculations, she could determine to the minute how far they were from being on schedule, and could make the necessary adjustments.

Because she was so damn good at it, no one appreciated how difficult this was or how much energy it cost her. Getting three people out of the house at the same time, at the *right* time, adequately nourished, dressed, and prepared, making allowances for moods and the inevitable other difficul-

ties—well, sometimes it came together like a beautiful, functional ballet. At those times she felt like a gratified choreographer.

But more often, getting the boys moving was like shifting wet earth. And now Harold was getting harder to shift too.

At least James had come in—she'd know that careless, arrogant slam of the door anywhere. Audrey slipped off her quilted housecoat, beneath which she was already wearing a darkish blouse and her charcoal support pantyhose, and stepped into her freshly pressed skirt. She looked at herself in the full-length mirror of the bedroom she shared with Harold. It was unjust, Audrey thought, that when a woman reached a certain age, her shins should begin to look like kindling and her thighs like pillows. Well, she wasn't quite there yet. She'd put on weight, especially around the middle, but in the right clothes she still looked presentable. Nothing to be ashamed of, at any rate. And she'd produced two truly and equally handsome boys, even if they did look as different as night and day.

It was time to go get Harold. He needed roughly nineteen minutes to shave and dress on a regular day; today he might need twenty-three.



John Walker wasn't appreciably different from other seventeen-year-old boys. He thought about girls a lot and about sex almost constantly. He treated his cell phone and the Internet as extensions of himself.

He didn't know what he wanted to do with his life, but as far as he could tell, neither did anybody else. He lived moment-to-moment, trusting partly to luck—and more practically, to his parents—to have things work out for him.

Now, as he was dressing, he heard a tap at his bedroom door, and turned, bored, expecting his mother checking on his progress.

But it was his father who opened his door and stood there, strangely hollow-eyed. John found he couldn't look at him. He bent down and pretended to straighten a dark sock.

“What?” He tried to sound dismissive without sounding like he was looking for a fight. He had to get the inflection exactly right to pull it off; it was tricky.

When his father didn't answer, John worried that he'd blown it. The adrenaline started, and he looked up guardedly, wishing his father would go away. He didn't want to deal with his father's grief or whatever it was.

But then he heard his mother's voice from farther down the hall, saying “Harold?”

His father turned his head in the direction of her voice, and John, observing his father's profile, thought, *he looks old*. Then, gratefully, *Good timing, Mom*.

He heard his mother tell his father it was time to get dressed. His father turned back briefly to him and said, "Never mind," and left to do as Audrey told him.

Harold was probably no less relieved than John was that they'd been interrupted. He only wanted to tell his son that he appreciated his coming with them to the funeral, but lately, everything between them had smacked of a power struggle, and he'd feared that John would see his attempt as patronizing.

"I've laid your clothes out on the bed," Audrey told him unnecessarily, as she moved past him in the hall to stick her head into John's room.

Suddenly Harold felt like he was a sheep, that they were all sheep, being herded to who knew where by an extremely efficient border collie. He didn't blame Audrey; she was just a small part of a much bigger picture.

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"When I get my G1, you have to let me drive all the time," James said from the back seat of the mid-sized sedan that was their sole family vehicle.

"As if," John said, driving a little too fast, and with a little too much flourish, but not quite fast enough or with sufficient flourish for her to make an issue of it, Audrey decided. Besides which, they were running almost ten minutes late due to the fact, unforeseen by her, that they would need to get gas.

That was John's fault. He'd used the car last. She couldn't be expected to keep track of *everything*.

Family car rides were stressful for Audrey. The forced proximity, testosterone galore, questionable judgment—and then there was everyone else on the road. This was Toronto after all, on a Saturday afternoon, and half the drivers out there were pissed off about something. And the other half were late, like them.

"Turn here," Audrey said, pointing to the entrance to the funeral home. But the parking lot was already full. They had to cruise around the block, and it was another excruciating five minutes as John stubbornly tried to parallel park, although he hadn't got the hang of it yet, and the space was tight, and other drivers honked him, impatient to get by in both directions.

Doggedly, he kept trying, his face tight with concentration, pulling the nose of the car up alongside again, trying to get the angle right, cutting, it too shallow, then overcorrecting and cutting it too deep—holding up traffic—and turning visibly red while James sniggered audibly from the back seat. John pulled aggressively up alongside again for another attempt.

“Way to go,” James scoffed, as John bumped the parked car behind.

“Fuck off.” It was a mild, sunny late-September day, and John was sweating with effort in his dark suit.

“Hey,” Harold said, galvanized by the bad language.

John’s temper got the better of him, and he hit the car in front.

“Jesus,” Harold said.

“Good enough,” Audrey said, opening her door. It was a good three feet to the sidewalk. James opened his too and said, “That’s okay, we can walk to the curb from here.”

Why couldn’t James ever leave it alone? Audrey thought.

“You’re *so* original,” John said, trying to be scathing. But he looked miserable, slamming the car door, shrugging self-consciously inside his suit. Suddenly, he crossed the street and walked rapidly away, down the residential block toward the funeral home, without looking back. *What a good-looking boy* Audrey thought, watching him go.

“What the hell is he doing?” Harold said.

Harold had wanted his sons to come to the funeral. He was proud of them, after all. They were his sons. There would probably be people here he hadn’t seen in years. But if John were going to embarrass him it would have been better if he’d stayed at home.

“Did you have to be such a smartass?” Audrey said to James, as the three of them crossed the street and began walking down the sidewalk behind John, who was now yards ahead. Harold was asking himself *How many other families come in the same car to a funeral and arrive separately?*

But it began to look like Harold had put too positive a spin on things. With disbelief they watched John reach the main road, but instead of turning to his right, toward the funeral home, or waiting for them, he jay-walked across the busy stretch of traffic and carried on up the street.

He’d blown them off. Harold couldn’t believe it. The three of them stopped at the corner watching after John, Harold with his mouth hanging halfway open.

“He’ll come back,” Audrey said, wanting to comfort, but realizing as she said it that she had no earthly idea what their son was going to do. To her intense annoyance, James looked impressed.

It was an open casket; Harold saw that right away. He made a mental note to be sure to tell Audrey that he himself did not want an open casket, when the time came. Maybe Tom hadn't wanted one either, but what kind of control did you have over anything after you were dead? What kind of control did you have over anything while you were alive, for that matter? Tom had had the world by the tail, and now look at him.

Only, Harold didn't want to look at him. But no matter how much you didn't want to look, an open casket *made* you look. That's what Harold hated about it—it was so manipulative.

Funerals made him even more self-conscious than usual. Why had he come? Women, he told himself, loved this sort of thing, although he noticed that Audrey was looking unusually stiff.

They were late, but the service had not yet begun. The organ music swelled dramatically, the room was stuffy with breathing bodies, gaudy with funeral flowers. People were still filing up to the front, peering at the corpse, and moving on. It made Harold think of a graduation ceremony.

Audrey joined the line, pulling him with her discreetly by the hand; James she permitted to fade silently away. Harold tried to think about something else. It would be awful to show emotion; he hated to draw any kind of attention to himself.

They shuffled slowly forward, and as they approached the front, as Harold stepped up to the coffin and saw Tom—definitely looking older, but somehow not looking dead, in spite of everything—Harold felt that weirdness again, the same alarming palpitation of the heart, the difficulty breathing, the pooling of his blood in his feet. The world started to go black, as if from the outside in.

The last thing he remembered, before he keeled forward and struck his head on the hard ebony casket, was the look of reproach on Tom's once-loved face.

Audrey had turned away from the casket—tanned, healthy skin against white satin—when she heard a funny gurgling sound coming from Harold. When she turned back to look, she knew instantly that something was wrong. Harold was an odd, unrecognizable colour, and he seemed to be hyperventilating as he stared at the corpse.

We shouldn't have come, Audrey realized. *How had she allowed this to happen? Should she not have foreseen it? She wasn't doing her job.*

The noise he was making became louder. It was an involuntary, struggling, personal, embarrassing sound, and Audrey was mortified. People started to look.

It was true what they said about slow motion then. Audrey watched, stupefied, as Harold weaved unsteadily on planted feet and then pitched forward and to the right, striking his head on the casket with a noticeable thud. Then he slid, slowly and with no grace at all, down the side of the coffin and landed awkwardly on the floor.

Everyone within close range took a silent, coordinated step back to give him room. Other than that, for a moment, no one did anything but stare. Then Audrey let out a yell and things started to happen.

The slow motion thing was over, and now everything was happening so fast that Audrey wasn't really taking it all in. Someone called for a doctor and a number of middle-aged men quickly stepped up. Audrey remembered anxiously that Tom had been a gynaecologist. Remembered it anxiously because by now, Audrey was convinced that Harold had had a heart attack, a massive cardiac arrest, that he was being taken from her, and she wasn't prepared for this at all.

They laid Harold out on his back right below the casket, his head at Tom's feet. His jacket was opened, his tie was removed, and his shirt unbuttoned; there was interest, definitely, but no one was doing chest compressions like on TV. *Why the hell not? Were they all gynaecologists?*

"Do something!" Audrey shouted, feeling hysterical. *Where was James? Where was John?*

Someone said, "An ambulance is on the way." Desperate, she got down on her knees beside Harold and bent over him, imagining fleetingly how she must look, with her big behind up in the air. She'd taken CPR, years ago when the kids were little. *Did she have to do everything herself?*

Audrey put the heel of her left hand down on Harold's chest where she presumed his heart to be, placed her right hand on top, and was ready to lean into her first compression, when suddenly—unbelievably—a hand grabbed her left forearm and tugged, causing her to fall forward as she lost her balance, and tipping her behind farther up in the air.

"Lady, what are you doing?"

"I think that's his wife."

"We can't just let him die!" Audrey sobbed.

"He's fine," said a reasonable voice. "Look, he's breathing. Here. Feel his pulse." Audrey let the man guide her hand until she could feel Harold's pulse, rapid but strong.

"That's okay then," Audrey said, readjusting her take on things.

“He fainted. The worst thing is the knock on the head, but it’s probably not as bad as it looks.” Audrey turned to the man, undoubtedly a doctor—he had that bedside manner thing down—and found herself nodding vigorously in agreement, just as if she hadn’t been clumsily trying to revive Harold seconds before. There was a nasty lump on Harold’s forehead. And then James was there at her side, holding her hand.

“He’s coming around,” said the doctor.

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“The bank called here for you today,” Audrey said, now that she remembered, turning to Harold and lowering her reading glasses a little on her nose. “I told them to call you at the office.”

“They didn’t call me at the office,” Harold said irritably. “What did they want?”

“They didn’t say.” Audrey went back to her magazine. She was reading a diverting article on cannibalism and Audrey badly needed diversion might now.

Harold was sitting up in bed beside her, making another attempt at the Saturday paper. It was now Wednesday. He seemed to be finding it harder and harder to keep up with just about everything.

The mark on Harold’s forehead had pretty much faded, and she was almost able to look at him without thinking about what had happened at the funeral, but not quite. She was now worrying full-time.

“Probably trying to sell RRSPs or something,” Harold guessed.

“It isn’t RRSP season,” Audrey said vaguely.

Most of their late night conversation these days was perfunctory like this. Harold rattled his newspaper and Audrey returned to her article. But even cannibals were no longer sufficient to distract her from the cares of her own life.

Audrey had promptly sent Harold to the family doctor, who had pronounced him sound as a bell, which was a relief. But it was his opinion that Harold had probably had a panic attack. This was cause for concern, but Dr. Goldfarb had felt that as it had happened only once—at a funeral, which is an admittedly stressful event—they would do nothing in the way of medication at this time, and see what happened. Harold had declined his suggestion of talking to a professional. Dr. Goldfarb recommended that they keep Harold’s stress to a minimum.

Naturally, Audrey would do everything in her power to keep Harold’s stress to a minimum, even if it meant she had to have a breakdown herself.

In practical terms, that meant that she wouldn't share with him her suspicion that their youngest son James had taken her bank card out of her wallet and cleaned out their joint account. She'd deal with that herself. Secondly, John was out with the car again, and he should have been home ages ago. *It was a school night.* However, this wasn't the time to bring up the problems they were having with John. She'd deal with that too.