

NICHOLAS RUDDOCK

Fog

IT WAS A BUSY DAY and a lucky one for me, the day we ran over Gerald Stoodley in the fog. We could have killed him but we didn't, just by accident got involved in the event that turned his life. It even gave us a leg up too, as it turned out.

It was a Monday, so Queenie and I and Eunice had to get up early. Eunice had the job—she did the laundry down at the nursing home. There was a lot of drooling there, and worse, so Eunice went in part-time. Turn-around time on the sheets, the towels, the washcloths was critical, according to Mrs. Hann. She could lose her license. So even though the visibility outside was down to zero, off we had to go. The rain was hanging out there like a shroud. Little Queenie materialized out of that mist like a mummer, held her shiny black purse with the gold chain out in front of her. You wouldn't know the ocean was anywhere, it was so quiet.

We drove real slow, had to keep out of trouble. I could barely see the ornament on the hood, and all the wipers did was move the water off till it layered up again. As usual, it was Queenie's job to spot the stop signs. Two years old but she was smart, dependable. If she didn't shout out Stop Sign, I'd drive right through like I was stunned. I had it all figured out, made it perfectly safe. I stared straight ahead, looked out of the side of my eyes without moving them at all. All you got to do if you want to try it sometimes, is raise your eyebrows. We'd all laugh, it made the seventeen miles into town seem like nothing at all. There were only two of those stop signs before the yellow flasher downtown, and when Queenie shouted out Stop Sign, I'd stop right off, say Oh my God thank you Pasquena, if it hadn't been for you we'd have gone through that stop sign. And Eunice would say Good for you Queenie.

We're used to the thick fog. I drove by the feel of the Goodyears, wove my way back and forth ever so slightly from the black-top to the shoulder, felt the gravel kick up under the floorboards, turned back out

again, snaked up and down the right side of the road like a blind man. We kept the radio off so we could hear the sound of the gravel kick-up, ten-miles-an-hour tops.

“Stop sign!”

Sure enough there it was off the right fender. Queenie was quick, even after forty minutes of nothing. Seven more miles, that meant. I put on the brake, came to a nice little stop.

“Oh my God, thank you Pasquena,” I said.

“Queenie good for you,” said Eunice. We started back up again.

“Maybe Eunice, ask for a raise. Seven dollars an hour, we’d at least pay gas.”

“We got to go west, Henry, the tar-sands.”

“I don’t know. There’s the ferry-ride,” I said, “Could make our Queenie sick.”

Once I’d been to St. Pierre on a rough day. There’d been a lot of heavers on that trip, and tell the truth I was queasy myself. A fellow on that boat had berry-pie and carrots stuck in his beard. Never should have stood windward when he threw up his lunch, but sometimes it just happens, catches you unawares.

“Stop sign!”

No sign of let-up in the fog.

“Queenie you’re some sharp. Now watch for the turn-in.”

One hundred yards now to the Fiddler’s Green Rest Home. I relaxed now. It was damn nice in that car, the heater was kicked in, Eunice and Queenie and I were as solid as could be. There was still no sign of the yellow flasher yet, and I was just at a crawl when all of a sudden I felt a thump somewhere near Eunice, and then there was this bump, a kind of soft jar, you could feel it, it came up through the front right tire.

“Jeez what was that?”

I stopped the car dead. The rear wheel hadn’t bumped up yet. Eunice said, “I seen nothing out there.”

“Maybe we hit a moose, a bear.”

“Eunice you hear something?”

“Gerald Stoodley,” Queenie said.

I thought I could hear a moan. I wasn’t sure. There was still no sign of wind, nothing out there to make a sound.

“Jeez.”

“Henry for God’s sake get out of the car.”

It was warm in the car.

“Eunice open your window take a look.”

Eunice rolled the window down.

“Can’t see,” said Eunice and she was leaning halfway out, her jeans right off the vinyl.

A kind of low-pitched groaning sound came from what seemed to be just under the middle of the car. It didn’t sound like a moose at all, too controlled-like. Once I knew a trucker who hit a bull-moose on the Trans-Canada near Gander, got out to investigate and then bang, got skewered through and through by the rack of the moose. Mind you the animal was dead, his neck snapped and broke at impact, but those antlers were still kicking, thrashing, jerked right out of control and struck poor Philip John Gould right through the heart. He bled to death right there and the Mounties had to close the highway, call in the clean-up crew. They had to use Industrial Dust-Bane, is what I heard.

I thought about that for a second or two and then I said, “Eunice, Queenie, I’m getting out.”

For safekeeping, I popped out the keys, gave them to Eunice. I left on the headlights just in case. Didn’t want to get blinded so I went around in the red glow of the back fender, felt my way alongside the car, sidled through the fog like I was Sherlock Holmes, careful as possible up the passenger side. Then my boots hit something soft and it moaned out.

“Henry,” it said.

“Oh Jeez Gerald Stoodley. You’re no moose.”

He was lying there at right-angles to the car, just about under where Eunice sat. His skinny legs were half-under the car and in the backwash from the lights you could see the tire-prints on his overalls round about the knees. We’d run him over sure enough but missed his head and vitals. Eunice opened up her door.

“Hey Eunice,” I heard him say.

I bent down. He must have been lying there for some time before we bumped over him. His wool coat was sodden right through.

Eunice then stepped out her door, and still blinded by the mix of fog and lights she brought her boot down by accident on Gerald’s lower stomach.

“Oh my,” he said and his legs bent up all of a sudden till they were stopped by the bottom of the car.

“Look Eunice he’s moving them legs just fine!”

I was encouraged by this, to tell the truth, things were beginning to look up.

“Let’s pull him out from under, careful-like,” she said, “Queenie don’t you go too far.”

Queenie had got out too, was bent down playing in the ditch grass. Seemed to be putting pebbles in her purse.

Eunice and I took an armpit each and pulled Gerald Stoodley out from under the car. We were careful. Then we bent him up ninety degrees at the waist and we watched him work his legs real slow. There was no blood anywhere so we figured it was safe and half-pushed and half-leaned him up against the back door. His head was kind of lolling around like one of those rear-window travelling dogs.

“Stand up Gerald Stoodley!” That was Eunice. She’d had enough, and now she was late for work.

“Put him in the back Henry, sort of fold him up.”

We bent him double and Eunice got the back door open and we slid him in.

“Queenie! Get in the car,” said Eunice.

I got the keys back from Eunice, revved her up and eased down on the accelerator and then it was finally through the yellow flasher and then we were at the Fiddler’s Green. Eunice got out with her pony tail, and though I couldn’t see it for the fog, I knew that Verna Hann would be right there to say hello. First few times, when Eunice first went to work, Verna Hann’d wait by the frosted doors, say Miss Cluett it’s ten seconds to eight o’clock. Now they were friends.

So there we were, Queenie and I and the run-over Gerald Stoodley. He needed to be warmed up so we went to the Dew Drop for a cup of tea. Gerald was like a zombie up the steps but we were able to land him safe and sound at the first table. I ordered green Jello for Queenie, made her happy right off. Gerald’s coat we hung on a hook, watched the coat start puddles on the floor.

“Gerald that was the first time ever I run someone over.” He had a sip of his tea, shook his head.

“Henry I lost it all. Lost all of my money. Ten thousand dollars.”

“Ran over your legs Gerald. Quick and smooth and near-painless.”

“Ten thousand dollars cash.”

I gave Queenie’s Jello a squirt of extra TopWhip. This was good Jello, real firm.

“All wrapped in one of them fat elastic bands, Henry. Gone out there.”

“I drive three feet to the right, I flatten your head out.”

“Henry, I must have pulled that wad of bills out by mistake. Got my gloves out of my pocket is my guess and the money came along with it. Fell out. Oh my God. I pat my empty coat pocket and where’s the money to? Down I go on my hands and knees. All night long in the bloody fog

I'm feeling for the money. Hopeless. Finally I'm played right out. Top it all off, you runs me over."

Gerald was making no sense. He never had money.

"Thousand dollar reward I'd give, get ahold of that money again."

Talking to Gerald's like squeezing the bottom of a tube of Pepsodent. There's toothpaste there somewhere. It took a full half-hour to drag his story out in some kind of sequence.

It seems that about three weeks ago Gerald got a letter with two names he never heard of at the top corner. It was from some lawyers in Halifax, and they wanted to give Mr. Gerald Stoodley ten thousand dollars. Some relatives of his had died over there, on the mainland, and somehow the left-over money came down to him. The distant relations had all died from botulism, their food was full of poison and down they went, all at once in a heap. Gerald kept mum about the lawyer-letter in case it was a prank. Two years ago, his cousin Tommy had fooled him on the phone, told him he'd won the 749 and without thinking about it at all, out went Gerald and he ran up debts in every store up and down the coast before the truth came out. He was more careful now, he drove all the way to St. John's, to the bank, to see if it could possibly be true.

To his eternal wonderment and surprise, it was. He was handed the money by a lady in a suit, some kind of cheque with red numbers, but Gerald asked for it, if you please, in cash. No problem Mr. Stoodley, here you go, and there was a big elastic band around it, cinched at the waist. Down Water Street he walked like a merchant prince.

For her second helping, Queenie switched to the red-cube Jello. She's quiet, she is, "still waters" Eunice says and she's no trouble at all. Now and then she'd dip her hand in her purse, count up the pebbles.

"Despite the money, Henry," Gerald says, "I was suffering sore at heart. How'd you feel if your relatives up and died like that, so many at once?"

He didn't spend a penny in St. John's, came right back last night just as the fog was rolling in solid, but damned if he didn't decide right then and there to walk out of town. He was headed for Ed's Convenience Store, a sort of Shangri-La for Gerald Stoodley. The store had been for sale non-stop for seven years, and no way could he go by it without a turn of melancholy. He wanted to buy it. He wanted to buy it despite the fact that ten or maybe twenty cars a day go by. Once he tried to buy it on credit.

"No money no way," is what Ed said to him then, "You already owes me two hundred dollars on the red liquorice. Some fool am I. Some sorry sort of 749 bogus winner you are, Gerald Stoodley, there's the door."

That was because when Gerald won the so-called lottery, he'd run up a debt with Ed, mostly on cartons of the red liquorice. He had a bad time to pay the money all back. So now, when suddenly he had the funds, he walked out of town into the fog. The chill set in and he turned up his collar, pulled out his gloves, put them on, slapped his palms together in a surge of happiness and stepped out into the night so pleased. It was not until he'd gone twenty steps that he tapped his coat pocket, tapped it to feel the reassuring great chunk of money that was his. It was gone. The road-bed slanted hard into the ditch, the grass was thick, matted, invisible. For ten hours he crawled every inch of the path he'd taken, hands and knees, rolling gravel under his fingertips, raking through the puddles, cursing his foolishness. Then we ran him over.

"I'd give a thousand dollars Henry, to find it."

Wishful thinking on his part, I thought, but then Queenie reached into her purse and this time she pulled out a roll of paper money as big as her hand, maybe bigger, a big bank elastic on it tight as a miser.

"Jeez Queenie Jeez Queenie Jeez Queenie," was all we could say. We sounded like two accordions tuning up.

Gerald was a good as his word, he gave the reward money to Queenie right there. He smacked his lips, peeled off a thousand dollars from the money-roll, handed it back to her. That's how Eunice and I and Queenie got our nest-egg for the tar-sands. It's in the bank. That's how Gerald Stoodley went out and made an offer on the convenience store. That's how Eunice and I, we ended up owing our little girl Pasquena one thousand dollars. We took it from her, but she didn't care. We'll pay her back when she's sixteen, or maybe twenty-one.

"Lucky we bought that purse," I said to Eunice later, when we were in bed, "instead of that cheap little locket."

She knew what I meant. At K-Mart, Eunice wanted to buy the locket. I liked the purse. Queenie didn't care one way or the other but what did I know about girls, about presents?

"I'm trying to figure out how Queenie could have jammed all that money into that cheap little locket. The one with the clasp, looked like it would break right off? Remember that cheap little locket Eunice?"

There was no answer. She was asleep.

Fact is, if we'd gone and bought that locket, we'd be just as happy, we'd just have a different story to tell. And Gerald Stoodley wouldn't really care either. The money's spent. He got run over and lived to tell about it, and that's all we remember now.