

TOO LATE THE HUNTER

Barry Grills

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The trouble with you, Peter, is you think destiny is our friend, that fate is on our side, that it will ultimately give us what we want. But I know better. Destiny is perfidious. It seduces us, for the most part, when we choose to be alone, when we step outside the boundaries of the world where we belong. As a psychiatrist I am paid very well to know this essential truth. But this knowledge of what can betray us is more than just my business. It's what keeps me safe from harm. It's what keeps me from taking the path that you, Peter, may have already selected through a careless emotional indifference.

Time will tell. You and I, patient and doctor, are only just beginning. There is a shared knowledge in our future together, a gathering of events, then your moment on the tightrope before a jury of your peers. It's *all* perfidy, Peter. It's just which perfidy you prefer. That's the struggle of life, as I'm sure you will shortly learn.

You are on your way to your second appointment. It's fitting that it's spring. Rebirth, you see. You arrive early, wanting to take possession of each minute you have with me. But I am running late because I am a tolerant man, because I let my other patients finish whatever idea, whatever sentence they have begun and need to finish.

You park your car in the underground dungeon connected to the hospital, between a *Cadillac* and rusting *Honda Civic*. This time of year the lot is dank with silt and seepage, candy wrappers and cigarette butts, soft drink cans rattling in a breeze originating nowhere or everywhere. The entire structure echoes like the sound of strangled souls squeezed through some failing, faltering filter.

You glance at your watch as you reach the doorway to the tunnel stretching

laconically under the street. You glance at the sign indicating the passageway is under audio surveillance, then walk with a gingerly haste through the echo towards the door at the opposite end. After this, in the hospital, it's down a long corridor past *endoscopy* to the elevators, then up to the fourth floor, through the door marked *psychiatry*. To let her know you've arrived, you wave into an open doorway at my plump receptionist Dorothy who is always on the telephone or typing recorded words she translates through a gray headphone set. You glance briefly at the bronze plaque into which is carved my name, Dr. Michael Bannister, my claim to perpetuity. You select a chair in the hallway and pick up the nearest magazine, a fresh *Maclean's* if you are lucky, an old issue of *Owl* if you are not. Then you put it back, remembering the letter you received this morning.

You reach inside your corduroy jacket and take the letter out again, perhaps for the third time today. It's a plain white envelope, business size, number ten. Inside are several sheets of yellow foolscap folded into quarters. The handwriting dances crookedly along the lines, the work of a trembling hand, but the words are easy to read, the preciseness of the letters incongruous with the drunkenness in the lines.

You glance at your watch to make sure you have time, then you begin to read:

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Dear Peter:

I'm not going to bother to introduce myself. I trust you to remember me, although it probably doesn't matter much -- and it won't surprise me, as you shall see -- if you do not. It's just that at last I feel I have to talk. I'm hoping you'll listen to me. So I'll just let it all come out, over time, the way I feel it should. I've selected you for this task. I hope you won't let me down. And my medical conspirator in this enterprise thinks it will be good for me.

I think the problem is there's no true explanation for the way things happen or why they're done the way they're done. The world doesn't always run like a top;

sometimes it barely runs at all. We're not all engineers, nor was it intended that we be. Besides, engineers make mistakes. Roads develop dangerous curves, bridges collapse, buildings tremble when the Earth -- our sleeping giant home -- clenches its fist, yawns or reaches out to stretch. I suppose everything we build is weak compared to the unforgiving might and rightness of nature. When you get right down to it, there's only one seriously legitimate engineering mistake where human beings are concerned, and that's the tendency to believe there are no engineering mistakes at all, that engineering represents the strength or weakness in everything we do.

I've become a stubborn man, a byproduct of being crazy. If you believe in perfect engineering, I say tell it to God or the Devil. Tell it to someone's dancing, bleeding soul when the dancing has ended too soon, when the bleeding just won't stop. In fact, tell it to a child when the sky turns black on him, when he feels the coming storm. Tell it to anyone who feels the wolfishness of his teeth, the power of his fists and the fury in his running legs. Go ahead, say it's engineering to someone who has ever felt the feeling, the *real* beJesus feeling that this morning he's *alive*. I don't mean to babble, Peter, but I've learned my lessons well. Hyperbole or not, I've endured the circumstances and had the time to think these things through. Bottom line, if you're stupid enough to believe the world is just engineering, then whatever happens to you is just what you deserve.

I think of it as fundamental mathematics. If the world has too many engineers and engineers make too many mistakes, then it follows that the world has too many engineering mistakes, not to mention too much engineering in the first place. Apply it to lawyers and businessmen too and, well, you see what I mean. Everything just gets a little too *explained*, a little too culturally shallow. Next thing you know, you've lost that incredible mortality you were born to celebrate, the joy and mystery, the courage you feel when you stick your hand into the black to discover the heat or the cold.

Permit me some relevant history. It's important. This is information you should know. Port Frances has two engineering mistakes. The first is the way the city core was

constructed in the late eighteenth century on both sides of the St. Joan River on a limestone flood plain, in defiance of spring's rising waters. Perhaps it was intended that the gray stone buildings could sneer in the face of nature, but ever since, every five years or so, nature has sneered back. Spring break up has seen the St. Joan flood her banks, hurling large chunks of ice through store window displays, ripping parking meters out of the concrete and carrying flotsam for miles until it dumps it into Lake Ontario. Ice dams, the modern engineering solution, have not permanently controlled the problem, which defies explanation. Is it not therefore easier to blame the original settlers for their cockiness, for the sanguine faith they had in their own abilities? I think so. Even then, when this city was small, it overestimated itself. People do that, I think, when they form societies. They don't have such a high opinion of themselves when they're living on their own. Because, living more alone with themselves, they're closer to reality.

In Port Frances, the *other* engineering mistake is nothing more than an embarrassment, a transformation of something aesthetically pleasing into something essentially useless to meet a perceived practical need. It's like planting a garden then, on the eve of harvesting its fruits, covering it with asphalt to park your second car.

The victim in this case is known as Rose Abbey Park. No one goes there much any more in spite of its satisfying beauty, because that beauty just can't be seen. Out of sight is out of mind. It's the way progress always treats history, cutting it off at the knees in the name of essential improvements. Modern men seem to believe you can channel surf through the passage of time the same way they channel surf through a long night of television, as if you can pull time in behind you, then go back and somehow replace it. You can't revise history because time is a one-way tunnel. You can't simulate history the way you can apparently simulate sex.

Originally Rose Abbey Park was a bequest to the city. The Parks Department analyzed the annual operating costs and their impact on the department's budget, then, satisfied with its potential, warmed to the project. Asphalt pathways were added, a trio of

varnished benches were constructed and, at last, the jewel in the crown was installed, a small fountain resembling an inverted umbrella from which water sprayed out of each spindle and, in a floodlit geyser, from the umbrella handle. In summer these seemed subtle improvements because the hundreds of roses already there as part of the bequest splashed rich colour into the sunshine. The day I first saw this splendour, I was left trying to catch my breath.

I know what you're thinking: romance is only romance. Most people never experience it while others discover it eventually must get tired. Dedicated and rare is the tramp who can keep coming back to splendour again and again to marvel at it anew. Such lovers and vagabonds are tolerated, I suppose, because they are briefly amusing and cannot harm us. They rarely break through the engineering with which we protect our lives and hearts.

Briefly Rose Abbey Park enjoyed a minor heyday. A small but steady stream of rose lovers took advantage of the visual feast until Port Frances conceived of its next error in engineering judgment, the Bathscombe Street Overpass, a concrete monolith realigning the Bathscombe Street-Victoria Avenue intersection, widening Bathscombe to four lanes of traffic. The structure, while small by overpass standards, nonetheless sealed off the Rose Abbey Park entrance, rising as it did nearly ten feet above it. The solution to the problem was not a cure but a worsening of the disease. A long tunnel from the other side of the street was constructed to provide pedestrian access to the park. The apparent incongruity of visiting a profoundly spectacular rose garden, complete with prattling fountain, by means of a long, dim tunnel of seeping concrete, sporadically decorated by various renditions of *John Green sucks cocks*, seemingly occurred to only a few. And by the time it did, it was too late -- Rose Abbey Park had been forced inside a geographical cell, condemned to lack of interest.

Dutifully the city continued to maintain the park and its gardens, though few visited it after the overpass was built. The long tunnel perhaps, but something more as

well. It was as if, now that the gardens were hidden away, they encroached on the senses in a deeper, more disturbing way. Lost at the edge of the overpass, lonely and silent, it was as if its beauty now *shrieked*, now cried out in pain. I don't describe it very well; the park's new discomfort is difficult to define. I suppose, for me, it possesses a ghostliness perceived in the deep pitch of night, in the shadows, illusory, noticed in one instant perhaps, then not seen at all.

If people sensed this new aura of mystery about Rose Abbey Park, they kept it to themselves. People don't talk much about sensations that disturb them, that they cannot define. They simply turn to the usual, to what can be understood or related clearly to others. For most of us, life is safety in the numbers, in shared perceptions, opinions, tolerances.

I guess that's what I wanted to tell you all along. Most of us, Peter, do not stand in the eye of the storm -- especially if that storm has a substance we sense but cannot touch, sound we can't quite hear or a taste so delicate to the palette we hardly taste it at all. We are afraid to journey through the storm to get to its subtle centre.

I know what I'm talking about. When you reach for the orchid growing in the cobra pit, the poisonous fangs can tear your flesh. Even as you snatch the orchid away, the venom aches its way along the highway of your bloodstream. Even left with the orchid, there's a cruel irony in its possession -- it's become, on the eve of your dying, just another prisoner of your forbidding fingers.

Signed, Gordon Spaulding

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Just a few yards from my closed office door, you fold the letter, stuff it back into its envelope and put the envelope back into your pocket. Although this session is late getting underway, I make you wait while I sit alone and recall what I learned from you the last time you were here. In its own small way, because there are small differences

about each one of us, I will grant you what you said was probably unique. In the larger sense, though, I know it will ultimately become typical, because we live in a society and the members of society must share their solutions to live cohesively, to coexist coherently.

Almost every patient I see in therapy believes his perception is unique, whether this is acknowledged or not. We psychiatrists think of it as relativism. What does or does not exist relative to your perception, this is the issue we explore. And eventually you realize the majority cannot be wrong. Towing the line, our fathers call it when they are teaching us to grow up. I wrote down something you said last week because it concerned me very much. "I'm trapped into my own view of things," you said. "and I'm trapped in there alone." It's a good place for us to start but a dangerous place to finish your analysis. My job is to bring you back to where you belong, satisfied to live inside the embrace of your peers.

It's just as well we arrived at perception right away. Because sharing perception -- someone else's -- is my particular gift. I wade cautiously into the lives of dozens of people in any given week. My job is to baptize you in the waters of an accommodating world. No kicking against the pricks, as your namesake St. Peter would say. As crude as it may seem, my role is to teach you how to live with the same bubonic plague suffered by everyone else. You don't get to live without the disease. You can, however, learn to live accepting it. Or face the subtler means with which we burn our heretics at the stake.

But all of this is much more complex than what we talked about last week. It's apparent, for the time being at least, that we must focus on your relationships with women, the one ongoing now and the one who got away. You seemed embarrassed to confess your deep angst over failed love. You blushed at the melodrama you heard in the words "romantic despair." It's not as uncommon as you might think, the deep pain of romantic loss. I've seen a number of male patients still wounded twenty-five years later by the young woman who wouldn't date them in high school. I suspect this is just vanity.

Or it's because women do not need men as desperately as men seem to need them. At least in the first half of our lives, until we men learn better balance and apply it to the way we live. Besides, when you tow society's line, you have to carry on its myths. Love isn't necessarily one of these myths but there comes a point in life when one should refuse to be repeatedly gored on the horns of love's dilemma. It's the bubonic plague thing again. You have to learn to live with it.

So now to you, Peter Barnes. You haven't mentioned her yet and I'm not surprised by this. But I can hear the sound of the chewing as some woman in your past lunches on your soul. I've now glimpsed her in the background, making a fool of you. We shall have to deal with her. We shall have to exorcise her devilishness so that you can achieve the measure of peace that follows knowledge and acceptance.

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You prefer to call me Michael and I grant you this harmless boon. What you call me doesn't matter to me the way it does to you.....