

Preface

These stories are about old women. I wanted to make them about old women's lives *now*, as they live them, and not stories about their pasts as most writers have done, but I found, as I wrote, that inevitably the past interfered, popped up, refused to be batted down, and I had to accept that the past is very much an integral part of the *now* for all old people. If old age is a time of re-ordering the past, often of re-understanding it, of discovery, of trying to draw a clear narrative line through it, of finding, at last, recurring or steady themes, and of summing up – all of which it definitely is, at least among the wise – then reflection, musing, meditating on the past is inevitable, and very much to be desired. The *now*, it turns out, only makes sense in terms of the past.

As one's world draws in, gets smaller and smaller, the inner life grows stronger and deeper. Life becomes thought. The grave danger is letting thought become dream, illusion, delusion, hallucination. This detachment from reality happens (when, of course, it is not caused by a disease) when the old person lives alone, or sees only other, younger, adults who have no respect for the aged person as a human being.

Around mid-September 2016, I woke with an entire short story in my head, or perhaps my 'head' is not where it was at all, but in some space I reach only once in a long while when I'm *not-thinking* about a writing project. This wasn't a dream; I just woke up, went to my computer, and didn't stop writing until the full story was on the page. I'd never written a short story this way before in my life, although I'd written many stories and published three collections of them, and I was, if not exactly surprised by this manifestation of creativity, quite simply in awe of it.

Almost immediately a second short story followed, more or less by the same route. Then in the night I heard the words, "Three Sisters", and I had a third short story that came as easily to me as the other two.

In the fourteen years since my last collection, *Real Life*, I hadn't written a single short story and didn't believe that I would ever write one again. But in my nights when I had been sleeping and the short stories appeared inside me, an idea I had never formulated (at least, not in waking life) had come with them. The first story worked, I thought, as a response to Raymond Carver's famous "What We Talk

About When We Talk About Love.” Immediately after finishing the story, I began looking for a title. I knew the story was about love, and thought at once that it was about another way of looking at love than in Carver’s story, which I had taught not long before. And with a sense of my own audacity, I decided to call my story “What Else We Talk About When We Talk About Love.”

That triggered the thought of writing a series of stories, *each one in response to, or inspired by, or a riff on*, (never a copy of or an attempt to copy) one of the short stories by other, mostly earlier, writers whose work I was taught in the fifties and early sixties at the University of Saskatchewan, which were the ‘great’ stories. This device thrilled me, and a half-dozen of these stories came flooding over me so fast that I had to type each idea quickly and then temporarily abandon it in order to write the next one before I lost it. In three months and a bit, I had ten new short stories in my computer, over forty thousand words. I kept on revising and organizing and one day I sat down to write this explanation.

One of the greatest benefits of my following this inspiration was that I had the immense pleasure of re-reading many of these ‘great’ stories: Carver’s “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,” (published in 1981 many years after I left university), James Joyce’s “The Dead,” Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery,” Willa Cather’s “Paul’s Case” (which, although still relevant, I find almost nobody remembers), John Cheever’s “The Swimmer,” Alan Sillitoe’s “The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner,” Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants,” Tim O’Brien’s “The Things They Carried,” (not published until about 1990), and two that didn’t come from short stories at all, but from Edgar Allan Poe’s poem, “The Raven,” and Chekhov’s play, “Three Sisters.”

This collection of short stories is a soul-felt tribute to those writers, to their immense creativity, wisdom, and art, which has enriched all our lives and helped to carry the species forward just a little. My gratitude to them is unending. The opportunity to explore what I know about being old was as exciting as learning to walk as a small child, or first moving away from my family as a young adult, must have been.

—Sharon Butala, Calgary, May 2018

WHAT *ELSE* WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT LOVE

*Inspired by Raymond Carver's "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love",
1981*

WHEN MY SISTER JAIMIE'S HUSBAND WAS CLOSE TO DEATH I WENT TO the city where they lived to see him. My three brothers and two other sisters and I had been emailing each other for some time, occasionally phoning – we are too old, the bunch of us, to text, or tweet or whatever, we find these methods of communication insulting – so when their two diagnoses of cancer finally came, none of us was surprised. A collective silence held across the provinces in our different houses, each of us looking out our windows at our own landscapes – city, ocean, forest – each of us trying desperately to think, as if thinking could solve what wasn't even properly a problem, or that we might thereby enter a new dimension where the news would be ordinary and reasonable, and out of which we could decide how to behave, and what attitude to take that would be natural and obvious.

I said "collective silence," but it isn't quite the right description of what each of us felt. I think to express whatever it was, in our newly truncated conversations, we must have resorted to clichés

like *we were stunned into silence*, because the real words for what we felt were not forthcoming just then, or, more sensibly, we did not yet know what we felt beyond – would it be right to say that we were simply *aghast*? Or is that just another cliché? And it wasn't as if we weren't familiar with cancer; we were all too familiar with it in its various forms, and it was true that on the day the diagnoses finally came more of our family members with cancer – aunts, cousins, our parents, a grandparent – had died than had survived. Only one survived, actually. We had to have hoped that these two who were so close to us would both survive as well, but I think that every one of us knew in our heart of hearts that they weren't going to make it, either. Don't ask me how we knew that. The universe at work, I suppose, the knowledge hanging in the air for the plucking, and us trying to ignore it, stubbornly refusing it.

For a long time I had wanted to be a decent person, actually tried to figure out how one would go about achieving this goal. I suppose that sounds silly as I'm guessing that every liberal, well-educated, good-hearted person knows how to do that. But I don't think it was ever obvious to me. My earliest contact with such an idea just came back to me now – me telling a girl famous for being the nicest person in our high school crowd that I thought being nice was too stupid for words. I was maybe seventeen and had no idea what I was trying to say, but it is clear to me now that I wanted to hurt her, because I could not figure out how anyone could stand to be 'nice.' I couldn't manage it. I recall that I felt too furious when I tried, trying enraged me, and I undermined my own effort immediately by saying or doing something we would have called 'mean.' I think that even as a kid I thought there were more interesting and important things to be than nice (even though I had no idea what they were), and even though being nice was considered to be the most important thing anybody in our teenaged world could be.

Now, knowing our brother-in-law was the sicker of the two and hadn't much time left, and even though I had never liked him much, it seemed clear that decency required that I visit him. Jaimie and her husband Austen had been married for many years, had married so young that they had been married longer than I, the eldest of our seven siblings, had. They had four children and many grandchildren and even a great-grandchild, with another one on the way, even though they were only in their mid-sixties. We knew too, that, as with many long-married couples, they loved each other deeply,

while at the same time hating each other, and would never in life part. In my experience, having been married and divorced twice, all the wretched drama of my marriages and divorces having ended years ago now, and yet still alternately loving and hating each of my husbands (when I think about them at all), I can only suppose these emotions were just like most long-married people's. (But I'm getting whimsical, a growing fault of mine that my aging children, looking at me sideways, clearly connect to dementia.)

We loved our sister, but we didn't love her husband, and some of us, probably unfairly, outright disliked him. Most of us dealt with him by carefully maintaining an even front, while others could barely do that and instead chose to stay away. Our youngest sister's marriage all those years ago had brought the only real breach in our family's long agreeable relations, which, if they weren't exactly love, consisted of mutual loyalty, based no doubt on not much more than our individual need to feel we belonged somewhere, and somewhere that we might think of as a foundation in our lives. But I find it so odd how people don't know what other people think of them, preferring instead to think that if they aren't quite loved, they are at least liked, and their worst faults, which they try to keep hidden even from themselves, haven't been noticed, or have been accepted as harmless. But I am referring to my sister's husband, who didn't love us, didn't even like us much, who must have blamed us for things – whatever things they were – just as we tended to blame him. And yet, I am fairly sure that for all our years together as family, Austen didn't even register the fact that we didn't like him.

If the pathos of this new situation didn't escape any of us, it also didn't escape the doctors or the nurses, or anyone else who came in contact with Jaimie and Austen during the long period of their dying. So there was much kindness from strangers, whether medical or not, and a dearth of talk among the rest of us because this situation was too unfathomably diabolical to find words for. Not even we – well-educated, well-read, sympathetic white liberals with the requisite good hearts, and proper attitudes – could speak about it beyond platitudes and what medical jargon we were privy to and sometimes puzzled over with each other.

I longed to see my sister, and to hold her as our mother would have done had she been alive (our mother's was the first cancer death – no, sorry, it was the second), but Jaimie was surrounded by her own family to whom she was wife, mother, grandmother, and

they were a private, closed bunch who didn't want to allow a sister any right to be intimately involved in her dying. My sister's family and my siblings all knew that I wouldn't attempt intimacy in the dying of her husband, so that was never an issue; in fact, nobody paid any attention to my visit where he was concerned, and this even though I had come to see him, to say what I had no doubt would be good-bye forever. You might wonder why I would bother.

But what could I say to a dying man I didn't love, mostly didn't even like, who had been a part of my life, albeit at a distance, all my adulthood, who was related to me, whose children had my blood in their veins, and who, in a hugely complicated ball of feelings was hated but mostly loved by my sister who was herself dying? How could I be fully honest, genuine in my sympathy? Or should I be thinking of empathy? Or, heaven forgive me, their lofty relation, compassion? (Let's just say I took it for granted he didn't like me, although he didn't actively dislike me, but frankly, I'm sure he couldn't care less if I lived or died.) I could truly say, as I sat crowded into the centre seat on the plane, that I wanted to be fully touched by his dying, that I wanted to understand at the deepest level that his life had not been an easy one, that bad things had happened to him, as they happen to all of us, which had helped to make him who he was; that I knew he had some very good qualities, and that I knew I had to recognize that he deserved every bit of sympathy, empathy, or compassion that I could muster. That, finally, in the end – and this was the end – whether I liked him or not or he me just plain didn't matter anymore.

And, of course, I had to consider my sister. To hurt him in this situation would deal a blow to her that she might be unable to bear. So I knew, absolutely, that I had to find a way to be with him that would hurt no one and yet would feel genuine to me. And also knowing all the while that if I tried to tell anyone what I was feeling and thinking about this visit, they would simply decide that I'd lost my mind, or that, as usual, I was being a selfish pig who thought only of myself. This point is where I always lose the sense of the worthwhileness of thinking about one's responsibility or one's guilt – that it is worth the effort. It isn't worth the effort, there is no end, there is no bloody end to it, just the infamous rabbit hole that you, I, everyone, ends up disappearing down. So, should I fake it? Just what would that consist of? Pretending that I cared? But I wouldn't be pretending; I did care. Just not the way a person who

loved him would care.

The truth is, I am not a person who is any good at loving. Although I try, I am famously cold. I don't hug people when I meet them or say good-bye to them, not even people I like very much. I don't watch movies about love – shudder at the very thought – or sing any of those appalling love songs, or admire lovesickness or think it is cute or touching. I don't ever talk about love, I don't even fully believe that there is such a thing as love. (I exclude from that belief parent-child love. I do believe in that. And I guess that I have to admit that apparently I believe siblings can love each other, at least now and then, for a while.)

My strange inability to love may have begun when I was a small child in catechism class, where I was taught it was a terrible sin not to love God, and I knew I was condemned to hell forever because I couldn't love God, who seemed to me – not that I ever dared at the time to even think it – a monster of the most terrifying, indeed, unimaginable proportions. No, it was more the result of finally, as a young woman, admitting that I alone of my brothers and sisters was not loved by my mother. But I will not bore you with that; nowadays, having thought it through, it bores me to death, too. I'm trying, as an old woman, to shift my sympathy, empathy, compassion, from me to her, who had her own difficulties that had warped her and who, I see now, was suffering terribly while we were living through our childhoods.

No one met me at the airport, which was a relief to me (I am also something of a loner), and I went straight to my hotel, having refused all offers from family members of a bed because I knew their households were crowded enough as they were, and that they were also full of pity, confusion, and concern, without having to deal with me, too. It didn't surprise me either that no one protested my decision, or protested it only in a strictly *pro forma* way. That was a relief too.

Anyway, as I kept telling myself, I've been through so much worse than this situation in my life (I refused to enumerate what these 'worse' situations might be), and if I am ever to figure out what this elusive 'being nice, being decent' thing really is, I have got to do this. I have got to do this right.

About an hour after I'd checked in and left my overnight bag in my hotel room, my taxi pulled up in front of the house which, after years of moving around, my sister and her husband had settled

into. A home-care person was there when I arrived and she made a pot of tea and served it to my sister, still well enough to walk around the house and chat for a while, to me and to a couple of other more distant family members, second cousins, who drank their tea quickly, and left. Alone, our chat consisted of a cursory inventory of her symptoms, a faintly horrified review of the last, worst one, which a new medication had at least temporarily taken care of, and a series of fraught silences, which began with sentences one or the other of us started but chose not to end, or couldn't end, accompanied usually by gazes too profound to be called merely sad, into space, quickly broken by one or the other of us with a new, inconsequential comment in a carefully light tone. For instance, my sister said, "Auntie Daisy and Lily came a few days ago."

"Oh," I said. "I haven't seen either of them in years. How is Lily?" Lily has suffered from severe depression since she was a teenager.

"Beth Billings was here too." They had gone to high school together. "A day or two ago? I think, maybe..."

"Maybe?" I prompted, but my sister didn't seem to hear me.

"Have you seen my box of tissue? Where is it?" The home-care person, who appeared to be busy in the kitchen and paying no attention to us, unobtrusively and silently picked the box off the sideboard and set it on my sister's knees. Jaimie appeared not to notice. She didn't touch the tissues.

"How long has Austen been back from the hospital?"

"Mmm," she said. She turned her head toward the home-care lady who was back in the kitchen.

"A few days," the woman called. "Five days."

We talked about her hospitalization, and the ensuing release, about her and her husband's various medical tests and procedures, and plans as to how to manage what would happen next. But this last was mostly about what would happen next to her husband, who was at this point bedridden, although not yet in the hospital or a hospice, but who could not get up even for the bathroom without a couple of people helping him.

I cannot say what I felt during all of this uneasy, non-communication. We had been taught by our mother to save our tears or any other strong emotion except laughter for when we were alone, that to 'break down' in public was shameful, so mostly none of us did. It was really very odd behavior, I see now, but it came out of, I

think, that British stiff-upper-lip nonsense. Our father's family, Latin all the way, held no such compunction; its members were, if anything, far too emotional for anybody's good, or so our mother had taught us to think. I have personally discovered over the years, and especially since our mother has been long dead, that if you constantly stifle your feelings out of concern for what you have been taught is appropriate behavior, you soon can't feel anything at all. Or at least, you have to dig very deep to figure out what your real feelings are, and that mostly this will not seem worth the trouble of doing.

Eventually, I could see that my sister was having difficulty sitting upright, or smiling naturally, and being engaged in our conversation. I understood that it was time to go, and I could only hope that I would be able to return to see her at least one more time before her illness reduced her to a shell who wouldn't even know me when I visited. I remembered then that I had come to see her husband whose illness was far advanced on hers, a purpose that the moment I saw her in the flesh I had completely forgotten. Now I saw that this had always been a poorly considered undertaking, and thinking of what lay in the moments ahead, I was briefly afraid, and might have left without seeing him.

But she said then, "Don't go without saying good-bye to Austen." I nodded and smiled and the home-care worker and I helped her to her feet and walked her down the hall to the master bedroom where her husband was lying in the queen-sized bed under the stylishly-patterned duvet. My sister always did have wonderful taste, and the design and colour of the duvet fit perfectly into the décor of this handsome, if small, bedroom. My sister made her own way down the left side of the bed and perched on it, her legs curled under her, beside her husband who lay in shadow beside her. Behind us we could hear the home-care worker returning down the hall to the kitchen. I remained standing just inside the doorway while Jaimie settled herself, and until my eyes adjusted to the relative darkness at that end of the room so that I could make out Austen's face. The duvet was pulled up under his chin and he didn't move except to pull one hand slowly out from under the cover.

In a weak voice, he said, "I'm sorry I can't get up to...." I think he meant to hug me, or shake my hand as a gentleman would. We were both deeply embarrassed – I believe that's what it was – but, if so, it now seems a peculiar reaction on both our parts.

“Don’t even think of such a thing,” I said. “I don’t want to disturb you. I only came to say hello before I go.”

I could think of no way to say that I hoped he was doing all right, or that he wasn’t in pain, or was managing, or whatever. Perhaps how sorry I was that such a thing was happening, but I knew I could never say that, although I found at that moment that this was more true than anything I had ever said to anyone in my life, or failed to say, but had thought. I could not say a word more than that I had come to say “hi” before I left. But then I thought that this was one time when I needed to hug him, to kiss his cheek – no, that the situation required this.

In the gloom of that room, with my dying sister beside him, lounging tentatively against the pillows that she had pulled up to support her back, as if at any second she might have to leap up and do something or other, smiling nervously at me, and he – could he have been near tears? I couldn’t see well enough to tell – I was about to move down the side of the bed to his head so that I could try to hold him briefly and could kiss him, perhaps, I thought, on his forehead, when swiftly, the room filled up with love.

I knew that although it did not emanate from me as I did not love him, it seemed to be coming through me; I was its conduit. Although I, too, was permeated with it, it was not that I suddenly, personally, now loved him. Also, astonishingly, I could actually see the love that had come and filled the room. The odd thing is that whenever I try to tell people this story – very seldom, I assure you – nobody ever asks me what love looked like. Ahhh. What to say. It was a dusky beige-pink; it had a very fine, soft, pebbly texture; it was very still, there was such beauty in that stillness; it gave the impression of perhaps – I’m being careful here – being maybe alive itself. But I might be adding that last because that is what people would say, of course. God in his goodness, and all that. That, instead, perhaps that exquisitely beautiful stillness, that very *presence*, was enough and the truest thing about it. Its *thing-ness*. An essence in itself.

My sister saw or felt it; she made a kind of inadvertent, gentle-sounding and surprised “ohh,” and her husband did something the same, “mmm” perhaps, close to a mild grunt, so he too felt or saw it, or both. Even in my awe and surprise or whatever it was I was feeling, I kept on moving down the side of the bed, and when I reached his head, bent to hold him and to kiss his forehead. As I was placing my hands gently on each shoulder, he said again, “I’m sorry

I can't get up," again seeming to mean so as to respond courteously. In the midst of this, the love that was not exactly mine remained. But I held his shoulders briefly, lightly, and kissed his forehead as I had planned, murmured a few words that I can't remember, including probably that I was flying back home the next morning. As I left the room, I think, the love had dissipated or had departed. It was all so much; I couldn't – I can't – remember details. I don't think my sister left the bed. I believe I walked out alone. I must have come down the hall so silently that the home-care worker, still in the kitchen, didn't hear me and didn't say good-bye.

Indeed, although I did return several times in order to see my sister as her condition worsened, and although her husband lived weeks longer in a hospice, I never saw him again and, yet again, I did not know how to feel about this. It would be mawkish to say that thinking about it makes my chest ache, that it is as if there is a large burr or something in back of my forehead.

How could it be, I ask myself again and again, that I, who was not good at loving, who had had to teach myself to be decent, and who did not love that man, could have been a channel for some sort of disembodied or disconnected love to come and fill that room so full of the crushing, mindless cruelty that afflicts all human life and that could, for an instant at least, overcome the horror of the world? I am not sure if that is even true – overcoming the horror of the world. No, I cannot allow that thought; it is utterly sentimental.

I think my wonderment was that love had come alone, unasked for, unwilling, unexpected; the wonder was that it could exist in such a way, all by itself. But I've said that. The wonder is that the three of us saw it, felt it, and two of us then died, and only I am left who knows that such a thing can happen, and am trying, in these last few years, to alter my understanding to encompass it.