

MIRANDA HILL

PETITIONS TO SAINT CHRONIC

TWENTY-FOUR STOREYS STRAIGHT DOWN and what else to call it but miracle? Twenty-four storeys and not a scratch on him: that would be a miracle for sure. But twenty-four storeys and massive internal hemorrhage, broken spine, complete loss of consciousness and drugs to sedate him if he ever does come out of it—that's Gibson.

Carlos tells me not to quibble. Says everyone receives God's gifts—some of us just don't recognize them. But Gibson will believe.

Micheline is planning on making Gibson a better man. She tells us he will look fine in a well-cut suit, silk tie, polished shoes. Micheline calls Gibson "pure potential."

Carlos says that's denying what Gibson is already. "He doesn't need to ascend. The last shall be first. He is the least of us, and he is loved."

The cleaner mopping the floor past our orange vinyl chairs out by the elevator bank, down the hall from the ICU, says, "Some people shouldn't be allowed to breed. If this guy doesn't die I'll lose my faith in Darwin."

A nurse in green scrubs comes around the corner, down the long hall and past the sign that says, "ICU. Visitors must be signed in." She nods to another nurse at the reception desk and presses the down button beside the elevator. Her eyes are all apology. "Only next of kin," she says. We've heard that for days, but no family is coming for Gibson. It's just Carlos, Micheline and me. Twenty-four storeys, and we three strangers are all he's got.

Each of us saw Gibson on the all-day news. The reporter had hair that was blowing in the mild summer breeze. He tried to hold our attention. Even before we turned the sound up, his face said, "The world is full of peril, but I will lead you through in my pressed linen shirt." But the camera wanted to follow Gibson, small like a bug in the corner of the screen. It loved him as we loved him. It was hard to tell what the crowd was chanting, but the volume seemed to rise as Gibson stretched his arms out like a conductor. Then he stepped into the air and fell.

The day that Gibson was brought in, a reporter outside Emergency asked Micheline how long she had known Gibson. “I am not his past,” she said. “I am his future.” She spelled her name, but the reporter didn’t write it down. I asked her to spell it again. “It’s French,” she said. “One L.”

By the time Carlos got there, most of Emergency was empty. Just a broken arm and chest pains and a couple of reporters using the pay phones because the nurses wouldn’t let them use their cells. But by then the shifts had changed and Micheline and I weren’t making any trouble. We could have been waiting there for anyone.

Carlos must have come straight from the garage because he was still in coveralls with a Ford insignia and oil down the front, but he was wearing a thick gold cross and carrying a bible. He burst through the swinging doors, then stood in the middle of the waiting room as if he had suddenly lost his way.

“Where can I find the man who fell?” he called out and the nurse closed the little glass partition between her and the rest of us.

“Hey, Father Ford!” said the Floor Guy.

“I am not a priest. I am a supplicant.”

“Yeah? Well you’re standing in my pile.”

Micheline waved her hand in Carlos’s direction as if she were wafting away someone else’s cigarette smoke. But I lifted up my bag and made a spot for him on the seat beside me.

The doctors give their reports to the media. The media relay them. We arrange our morning meeting place—on the bench outside, where the families of the patients go to smoke—and read the reports. The photographs show Gibson to be dark haired with skin like wax paper over veins of seaweed sprawl. We hold the papers on our knees as we drink coffee that I have brought from the all-night diner one block away. It is too early for the cafeteria to be open.

We turn the pages back. Carlos says Gibson is pale so that the light can shine through him. Micheline says he needs a little more sun. She will take him to Florida, she says, when he is well enough to stand the drive. To me, he looks as vulnerable as those girls in high school whose hips jutted up against the pocket rivets of their jeans. The ones everyone always tiptoed around: a fracture waiting to happen. The world pressed in closer on those among us who were cushioned by flesh, as if that offered sufficient protection. Despite the skin and the veins, Gibson has hands that look big and capable.

They look like hands that could have hung on. But there are things you can't know from looking.

The first time my husband hit me, we were in the bathroom, so it was hard to tell whether the darker bruise was from Cy's hand or from the edge of the sink I hit going down. I felt across the floor to see if I would find blood, but the tiles were dry. When I pulled myself up, I held onto the vanity and stood in front of the mirror as long as I could. The red was spreading under my skin, my cheek and my forehead swelling. It looked like it should hurt. I couldn't even remember Cy's fist on me. It was as if something had pushed its way out from the inside like a latent cancer. "This is how I look as a beaten woman," I said. I tried it on like a uniform, and felt it settle on me like something I was always meant to wear.

Micheline says it must have been a woman that crushed Gibson's spirit. Carlos says, "Why does everyone always think that only women hold such power? There are other things that can destroy a man."

Carlos is worried about what will happen if he is at work when Gibson comes to, when they finally allow him a visitor. "Will you tell him God is love?" he asks me. "Will you tell him for me?"

Micheline says that when he wakes up we will give him the choice of the two of us, confident that he will select her. I could play along, tell her I want a man who is already dismantled, so I don't have to do the job myself or stand by and watch it happen. That I plan to buy us matching t-shirts that will announce our condition: Damaged. That when we walk, people will hear what is left of us rattle.

But to each of them I let my smile answer for me. Let them believe what they will. I am not interested in his recovery. You can sew a body up again, but that doesn't make it whole.

Outside Ultrasound no one asks any questions and they have a good TV. While we wait for the press conference to begin, Micheline and I flip through celebrity magazines and she passes on old gossip about washed-up stars. Micheline tells me she has been a child actress, a cartoon voice, a hit songwriter. She makes enough from her songs to never work again, except for licensing the rights to ad agencies for commercials. She tells me I would know these songs if she hummed them, but she doesn't take requests. Now she is more of a scout, she says.

“Take Gibson,” she says. But really, why would you? Nobody would imagine that he could be turned around and become the kind of guy who would buy tickets to Cirque du Soleil, book a holiday on a romantic island, wear a Kiss the Cook apron when he barbecues steak with the neighbours. Nobody except Micheline.

Micheline opens her purse and hands me one of her success stories: a photo of a man with hair greying at the temples. Beside him is a woman with streaked blonde hair pulled into a ponytail, holding a fat-faced baby. An old lover, made into a new man, then released: Micheline’s gift to the world. “From AA to Executive, Silicon Valley,” she says. Micheline is the thirteenth step.

Eight hours, twelve hours, split shifts—all around us, the nurses and doctors move through their rotations. For a week now, we three have also split our vigil into days and nights of waiting. We arrange our meeting places, watch for security, adhere to our schedule. Micheline arrives at six a.m., asking if there are any developments. Just before she comes, I go get the morning papers and new coffee for our breakfast overlap. Then Carlos goes to work, returning to relieve Micheline at eight p.m. We are all together for an hour or so and then Micheline leaves. I pretend to Micheline that I go when she does, but I return with Raisinettes and pretzels from the machine to the place that Carlos and I have decided to wait through the night.

They each think that I sleep when they sleep, I watch when they watch. If they notice that I only wear two different shirts and two pairs of pants, if they see that I don’t change this old sweater, they never say a thing.

In the back of the hospital chapel, Carlos tells me he wants to talk about where we were when we saw him. Carlos says he was standing over the engine of a car that wouldn’t start. It was his first day on a real job, he tells me, a legal one, the first he’d had in this country, and now the car refused to come to life. He tried all his usual cures: something with wires, with belts. “Just trust me, I can get a car going. It’s my talent. But this one was dead,” he says. “Think of the heat that day. Think of no air conditioning.” As he bent over the engine, the crucifix around his neck dangled in front of his eyes, blocking his view. He says he threw it back over his shoulder, so it wouldn’t distract him from the job.

While the other guys in the bay turned up the sound on the 24-hour news and gathered under the TV set, Carlos kept working. The sweat was pouring into his eyes. This is a test, he was thinking. He breathed in the smell

of old engine. Then the guys started hollering: The bastard's going to jump! When Gibson hit the ground, the car started. Carlos watched the jump in repeat, impact after impact.

"So, where were you?" Carlos asks. But my eyes are closing. Carlos balls up his jacket and makes a nest of it in the corner of the pew and I lay my head against the old tweed. Beside me, Carlos smells like roses. When his fingers press the rosary beads the skin is pink and clean, but at the end of every nail, a rim of grease.

When I was in grade nine I had a friend called Lesley-Anne whose parents were breaking up. Lesley-Anne sat beside me in science class, in those big double desks with the sinks in the middle. The kids on Lesley-Anne's street said there had been screaming and crying, there had been accusations of other lovers, there were battles over the children. But Lesley-Anne only mentioned it once. "Their marriage exploded," she said. She didn't look at me, just doodled in the margins of the science textbook that we shared. That night, I looked at the ink ellipses spinning out like some ever-changing orbit beside a diagram of the Big Bang, electric blue and orange on a black background. From then on I believed that that was how marriages ended, in a storm of meteors, bright and loud enough the neighbours were bound to hear.

So it was never the heat and the bursting that amazed me with Cy, it was the numbness that followed. The leaside of the hitting was like the dark side of the moon.

It was quiet for days, weeks, months. The bigger the explosion, the more time it took to repair, but it happened all the same. Fractures, dislocations, bruises—the torn pieces of me just fused together again like a trap door closing over an empty hole. Sometimes Cy would stay home and tend to me, press a washcloth up against the stitches. Shh, shh, he'd say, and I'd barely even feel them. But other times, the times he would go away, I could feel the longing for him sharper than any of the splits in my skin. I will leave when it gets harder to stay than to go, I told myself. I was waiting for something worse—an injury so severe that it would break us forever, make it impossible to recover. But something in me refused to stay broken. I couldn't escape my ability to heal.

On the tenth day after Gibson's fall, the doctors give a press conference and the elevators to intensive care fill up with reporters on their way to the

media room. I bring up our takeout lunches the back way—through Emergency to Physio, where they have a television we have not watched before.

A dozen frustrated patients try to catch the nurse's attention, hoping to be called. She keeps her eyes on the desk, except when she lifts them to stare at me.

On the television, a middle-aged man and woman are mooning at each other across a breakfast table while three teenagers show increasingly obvious signs of revolt, from rolling their eyes to packing cake and beer in their lunch bags. The couple continues to smile and blush, oblivious. The voice on the television lists side effects and encourages us to talk to our doctor.

"One of mine," says Micheline.

The commercial finishes before I realize that she means the song, a tune about perpetual sunshine, its words just beyond familiar.

"It was playing the afternoon I saw Gibson," Micheline says. She was waiting in a hotel bar for her lunch date—another former lover. Once an army private. "Gifted, but directionless."

And now?

"Harvard. Magna Cum Laude. He was in town for a conference."

At the hotel, she says, the TV over the bar showed the midday news with the volume off, while a medley of old hits played over the sound system. Just as Micheline heard her young voice played back to her, there was Gibson, standing on the window ledge while Micheline sang about beaches forever. The song played right through Gibson's fall. But Micheline asked the bartender to turn up the sound on the TV. When the reporter said Gibson was alive, Micheline threw a twenty on the counter, left a message for her Harvard man and took a cab to the hospital downtown.

The nurse at the desk is staring at me. "You look familiar," she says.

"I was here yesterday," I tell her.

Beside me, Micheline's magazine flutters shut. "This isn't a good place," she says. "Let's go to Same Day Surgery."

She doesn't notice how the nurse watches me as I lift my purse and walk to the elevator.

The media reported the profound effect of Gibson's fall on the people who were there to witness it. A woman cried and fainted. People vomited. Others rushed in before emergency crews arrived to see if they could help. But where are they now, asks Carlos, if he spoke to them so directly? "The

three of us received his call at a distance, and we came. That is what it means to believe,” he says.

Carlos tells me about Saint Clare of Assisi, the patron saint of television, a noblewoman who heard Francis of Assisi speak and founded the order of Poor Clares, women who lived an ascetic existence, surviving on alms. When she was old and too ill to go to mass, the mass would appear on the wall of her little cell. When he prays for Gibson, Carlos prays to Saint Clare, he prays to St. Jude for desperate causes, he prays to the Virgin too.

Micheline is tired of his sermons. She shoves her chair back from the cafeteria table and our cups tremble, coffee spilling over the sides. We watch her push through the doors and out to the hall.

I ask Carlos: who is the saint for causes almost lost, for causes of the ultimate draw, the endless overtimes, who is the patron saint of those who can't lose themselves no matter how hard they try?

“Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God,” Carlos says.

The Floor Guy mops silently around our feet, then pushes his cart into the kitchen. His voice echoes off the stainless steel as the door swings closed: “Blessed are the self-destructive, for they shall save the rest of us the trouble.”

Micheline meets us in the lobby with a pie she has made herself. “Practice: for Gibson,” she says. The Floor Guy sneers as he wrings out his mop. “He'll never give up the liquid lunch,” he says.

“Self-improvement only requires inner movement,” she says. Then she cuts him the first slice. “You should try it.”

Micheline says there are skills every woman should master. She says she can tell I am the kind of woman who knows this. She asks me to think of my greatest talent. I laugh. She doesn't understand that this is my answer. An easy laugh reveals my one true talent: I have the gift of acquiescence.

I am better versed in the things that a woman should not do. Keep your chin up and your skirt down. I have remembered the saying, but confused the order. Of all the instructions I have ever been given, it seems I have done the opposite of everything but floss. When the dentist on call saw my teeth in the little dish, he complimented my hygiene. “If it were up to you, these would have been biting into apples until you were one hundred.” As if I had nothing to do with it. As if the place I'd put myself in had nothing to do with where I was now. As if this weren't just another of my animal defenses I'd surrendered.

The pie is lemon and the pastry flakes away in sheets. Micheline accepts our compliments and tells us she is self-taught. Carlos says the crust reminds him of the layers of stone in the quarry in the town he grew up in. “Rock Bottom?” asks the Floor Guy, but he holds his plate out for more.

After two weeks, the press conferences are less frequent. The statements shorter. I have stopped trying to identify the specialists. But Micheline watches, trying to read between the lines, to determine a more accurate prognosis.

Each day over the intercom there are calls for doctors to dash to patients in various states of trauma. We imagine every call to be for Gibson. If we are near the patient elevators, we wait for the doors to open, in case we can get a glimpse of him while they rush him to another effort to repair one more tear in his river of ruptured functions.

When a patient goes by on a dais of hospital linen, barricaded by nurses that obscure his face, our voices lower; it might be him.

“If he lives, I will tell him we know it was only a cry for help,” says Carlos, collapsing his rosary beads in his hand.

“Just wait till he finds out who answered,” says the Floor Guy and he mops under the television in a place that already looks clean.

Micheline says Gibson has been moved to a step-down unit.

“What does that mean?” I ask. “Does that mean he’s getting better?”

“It means less security,” she says. “Soon they’ll have to let us in.”

She stakes out a place on the new floor, flipping through the same old issues of the magazines that are stacked in every waiting room.

I walk Carlos to the bus stop and then I go back to the disabled bathroom on the first floor and scrub at my extra pair of underwear with an old toothbrush I have dipped into the Floor Guy’s bleach. The smell is all the hospital’s comfort, its promise of someone else in charge—so much control, so little attention. It makes me sleepy. These are the things that keep me here: Gibson and, when I am away from him, bleach.

I sit on the low toilet seat and lean my head against the wall to keep me from tumbling off while my eyes are closed.

The last time I was discharged from the hospital, I bleached the sheets three times to get the stain out, running them through on cold water in the basement of my building, sitting guard at the washer’s glass window. When they came white again, I went to stretch them out over the bed and saw that

the blood had seeped deep into the mattress. Before Gibson, at night I would lie over the stain as if it were an inland sea, trying to draw the baby back up into me like water into a cloud.

The nurse in Emergency told me, “If you do not press charges, this will happen again and again.”

It was when I lost the baby that I knew I would always take him back. But this time it was Cy who stayed away. I spoke to him in our silent apartment. I spoke to him as if he were there, “Come home, Cy. I promise I’ll take you back. I will heal and take you back, forever.”

And I would have, before Gibson.

I do not know how long I have been asleep in the bathroom, but when I come back to the new waiting room, Micheline is not in her chair. I sit for a minute, resting a coffee on each knee, waiting. Wondering where she might have gone. Nearby, there is a bathroom for the disabled, but the door is open and no one is inside. I want to ask where the other bathroom is, but there is no nurse at the station. I go down and around the hall. I find the bathroom, but Micheline is not in it.

The hall is quiet. A doctor passes, but doesn’t ask my business. I stand in the new silence and listen. I hear only my own persistent breathing, my own belligerent heart. And an occasional banging.

There is a “Wet Floor” sign around the corner. The Floor Guy moves the mop back and forth, from one wall to the other, raising a damp shine between us. It is a long time before he looks up. Surprised, his face is soft as a chamois.

“Hello. Come to roll away the stone?”

“What happened to Micheline?”

“Packed up and went, I imagine. She must be disappointed. Hardly a return on her investment.”

A woman in a silk cardigan walks down the hall, carrying flowers, then turns the corner.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I say.

The Floor Guy pulls the bucket toward him and leans on the handle of his mop, studying my face. He bends, picks up the sign, and jerks his head so that I will follow. We turn the way the woman went, and then turn again, passing closed doors with little windows at the top that look into rooms. He stops and pushes one open, unfolding the wet floor sign in front of it. He nudges me forward at the shoulder.

Pink curtains are closed around a bed in the middle of the room. I step forward and push my arms through the opening in the fabric, pulling back as if I am diving into deep water.

The sheet is over Gibson's body, covering even his face. Wires and tubes run out from under the sheet, but the machines they connect him to are quiet, their screens dark, the cords disconnected. At a spot halfway up the bed, I lift the sheet to look for something recognizable. His hand is mostly bandaged, the sides of his fingers are purple.

I think of what it was Carlos wanted to say to him, of the songs that Micheline planned to sing in her beckoning voice.

But it's me who is speaking, telling Gibson our story—his and mine—taking it back to the beginning, to the moment I saw him on television, saw him fall. But wait, that doesn't give us enough time. I stretch it out. I tell him about what came before. The cat food commercial, essential nutrients for the senior feline. And then the one for paint that goes straight on over rust, you don't even have to scrub. No. More. Back before that, to the phone ringing, to the voice I thought I'd always be waiting for, back to Cy saying, "Forgive me darling, forgive me. I'm coming home."

My hand curls around Gibson's fingers. For a miracle. He is very cold and still. I warm my palm with my breath and lift his hand to my chest. His arm is heavy and splinted. I tell Gibson that after he fell the TV showed the crowd closing in and the paramedics arriving and the way the reporter announced he was alive by saying: "It's a miracle. What else could you call it?"

I tell Gibson how I packed my bag and called a cab. How I left the TV on in the apartment so that Cy could fill those empty rooms and make them his own. I knew that when Cy got there, the news would probably have changed to arson or stabbings or blowout sales, but by then I would be free.

I shift my hip onto the bed and wedge myself in beside Gibson, next to the metal bed rail, lay my head on the edge of the pillow and whisper it all again: the phone call, the commercial, Gibson falling, packing my suitcase, calling the cab. But my eyes are closing, and the sequence seems confusing. Is it the cat food commercial and then the one for paint? I am so very tired. The phone rings. I see Gibson. I pack. I see Gibson and I am packing. But now I am packing through the cat food, and the rust remover. I am packing through Gibson's fall and even packing through Cy's phone call. And I can see that I am already leaving. I am leaving. I am leaving before I see Gibson and even before the phone rings, so that when Gibson falls I stretch my arms wide too—to catch him, or hold him, or look with him all the way down.