

RONALD SPARLING

What Clara Knew

“MR. FELLER HAS disappeared!”
Clara Humphries, widow of the late Corporal Lloyd Humphries, as she informed everyone she met, made her announcement with grim satisfaction—satisfaction because she had news, grim because she did not know the whole story—yet.

Her daughter, Elizabeth, continued ironing as Clara steered her electric wheelchair through the doorway of the small, second-floor apartment she shared with Elizabeth and Elizabeth’s seven-year-old daughter, Jessica. Not actually confined to the wheelchair, Clara depended on it for the mobility she would have otherwise lacked. She tired so easily these days. By coincidence, the missing Mr. Feller had the exact same model, except different, as Clara had explained to Elizabeth.

“What do you mean, disappeared?”

“I mean just that. Disappeared. Gone. He wasn’t in our spot yesterday, and he wasn’t there again today.”

For the past several months Clara and Mr. Feller had parked their chairs across from each other on either side of the square separating their buildings. Although they had never actually spoken, Clara was certain they knew all about each other, or at least Clara felt she knew all that was needed about Mr. Feller.

“Did you ever think maybe he just stayed in his apartment, watching a movie or something? Maybe he needs the rest. He’s awfully old.”

Clara had to agree. Mr. Feller was at least five years older than she. But still, he was not in his spot and no one knew why. Actually, Clara hadn’t yet had the time or the courage to ask anyone.

Clara acquired most of her information concerning Mr. Feller through Millie Tate, who lived on the fourth floor of their building, and whose son played with Mr. Feller's grandson. Millie was an acquaintance of Elizabeth's. Clara would not exactly call them friends, as Millie had yet to include Clara in an invitation for dinner. Millie felt grandmothers were only for baby-sitting. Not that Clara minded. But once in a while it would have been nice to go out, even if Millie's apartment was just upstairs.

In addition, Millie was not the sort Clara wished her daughter to be too close to. She was rather forward and laughed too easily to be proper. Clara was certain Millie must have been a wild child. Perhaps even a bit loose, although Clara would never actually voice that opinion.

Be that as it may, through Millie, Clara knew that Mr. Feller was a recent widower—it had been less than ten years since the death of his wife. She knew he lived with his daughter, her husband, and their two sons in a three-bedroom unit in the same subsidized housing development as Clara. She also knew they paid about six hundred dollars in rent, an amount she thought enormously unfair to Elizabeth, whose own two-bedroom apartment was almost as much.

But aside from the information obtained from Millie, Clara thought she knew a great deal more about Mr. Feller. Sitting each day in the same park, literally yards apart, Clara had developed a relationship between them, a relationship based on the silent bond created by their common situations and by the fence surrounding their park.

She was certain Mr. Feller shared many of her feelings about the world around them. Her dismay at the price of things. Her shock with the apparent immorality of the day's young people. Her fear of the growing violence. And Clara felt that Mr. Feller was as fond of his grandchildren as she was of Jessica.

If they had talked, Clara imagined their conversations would have been full of interesting titbits about their married lives and how both their spouses—may they rest in peace—would be happy for them to have companionship. Clara, however, felt that proper respect for the dead would not allow their relationship to develop past friendship, no matter what Mr. Feller's intentions.

Clara always blushed at this thought, and, her embarrassment increasing, she was certain Mr. Feller would raise his head from the books he constantly read, notice her red face and immediately know the cause. Thus, Clara rarely allowed herself to entertain those thoughts. She had censored them with her Lloyd and she certainly wasn't going to allow them to flourish around another.

And she had censored them with her Lloyd. Lying still and quiet as his body moved gently over her own. Unable to respond to his whispers of love, not because she didn't want to, but because she dared not open her mouth. Could she trust only words to come out? And what if Lloyd knew? Would he think her a wanton woman?

He asked her once, before they got married, "Do you love me?" and she hesitated, out of shyness, not for the reasons he assumed as he turned away. "You will," he said. "In time, you will."

By the time Lloyd was lying in bed, grey ashen skin the colour of driftwood draped over brittle bones, eyes like a trapped bird's, frightened and frantic, it was too late. She couldn't tell him the way she felt. Her Lloyd was gone. And she didn't recognize the withered cast-off he'd left behind. Didn't know how to calm those frightened eyes.

Each afternoon Clara returned to her apartment and reported to Elizabeth what was new in the world of Mr. Feller, as she understood it. For instance, she knew his whole wardrobe, or at least the out-of-doors portion, and from this deciphered his birthday. Mr. Feller had arrived in a brand new sweater on the eleventh of April. But, to be honest, Clara was unsure if his birthday was on the tenth or the eleventh. It really depended on whether his family celebrated birthdays in the morning or at dinner time. They appeared to Clara to be a morning family.

But frequently, what Clara had to report was the product of speculation rather than of fact: Clara was not the sort to let facts get in the way of knowing the truth. More often than not she based her speculation on the reading Mr. Feller did each afternoon. "You can't tell a book by its cover," Clara would tell her daughter, "but you can tell a person by their book."

She deduced his interest in prehistoric times from his reading of *Life Before Man*. And she told Elizabeth of the trouble Mr.

Feller's daughter was having with her husband when he made his way through *A Maggot*.

After discovering him with a copy of *Hard Times*, she informed Elizabeth that the recent recession had not left Mr. Feller unscathed. She worried until she saw *Big Money* held high before him, which set her mind somewhat at ease and she silently wished him luck.

Clara was especially affected when she had to suffer through Mr. Feller's reading of *In The Heat of the Night*. For several days she found she was blushing more often than she deemed proper.

But Clara was particularly upset by the last few books Mr. Feller read immediately before his disappearance. She felt that he had lost faith in the Lord and was preparing for death in a new and unholy fashion. It began with a book entitled *Of Good and Evil*. Clara attempted to dismiss it as an exploration for interest's sake, but *Heart of Darkness* followed, which led directly to the final book before his vanishing, *The Rebel Angels*.

That, Clara told her daughter, was a perfect example of why she never read anything but the Bible. Mr. Feller was almost certainly a God-fearing man before his mind was swayed by words unfit for human consumption. She knew he was a believer because some time ago she had seen him reading *The Papers of Samuel Middlemarch*, and if Samuel Middlemarch was not the name of a man of the cloth, then Clara didn't know what was.

And now Mr. Feller was gone—vanished—without a word or a trace, and Clara was worried for his soul.

As usual, her daughter did not share Clara's fears, but she agreed to ask Millie what she knew when she came down for her nightly visit, visits Clara suspected Millie used as a means of escaping her husband and children.

"But I wish you'd use your time a little more constructively," Elizabeth said. "Have you cleaned your room like I asked?"

With nothing to do but wait for Millie's arrival, and wanting to ensure her daughter's sympathies, Clara set about cleaning.

By the time Millie arrived, Elizabeth had completely forgotten her mother's concerns, although Clara had purposely mentioned Mr. Feller several more times. So Clara took it upon herself to casually inquire whether Millie had heard anything new about Mr. Feller.

“Still got the hots for him, eh, Clara?” Millie was forever accusing Clara of harbouring a secret desire for Mr. Feller, another reason Clara would not call Millie and Elizabeth friends.

Clara tried to feign indifference and told Millie to stop her foolishness. “I’m merely concerned for his welfare. He hasn’t been outside for the past couple of days.” Clara could feel the blood rising to her face.

“Don’t you go worrying about that, Clara. If something had happened, I’d have heard by now. You wait and see. Your love-bird’ll be back tomorrow. Maybe you’ll even get to meet him.”

Clara turned away, offended by Millie’s disrespectful allusion to Mr. Feller and the laughter her last comment had caused, but she did hope Millie was right.

That night Clara could hardly sleep. What if something had indeed happened to her Mr. Feller? They would never have the chance to meet. She would never have the chance to tell him how she felt about . . .

About what? About him? That was ridiculous. She didn’t even know him.

That would have to change. Decision made. If Mr. Feller showed up the next day, Clara was going to march right up and introduce herself. She had every right to. It was only proper. Wasn’t it, in fact, strange that Mr. Feller had not yet done so himself?

Yes. Clara would make the first move, but she didn’t mention her decision to anyone, just in case.

The following morning Elizabeth greeted Clara with the news of Mr. Feller’s illness. “Millie said it looks serious. You want eggs this morning?”

Clara slumped into a kitchen chair, her elbows landing heavily on the tabletop.

“I’m going to see him.”

“Going to see who?”

“Mr. Feller. I’m going to visit Mr. Feller.”

“Oh, Mom. You don’t even know him. What will you say?”

“I don’t know.”

In the slit of sunlight between the drawn curtains, Clara could see dust particles floating. Dead skin, she thought. Discarded, grey

and useless.

The woman was gently touching Mr. Feller's arm. "Dad. Dad. This is Mrs. Humphries. She's come to say her respects. To say hello. Dad?"

To say goodbye, Clara thought.

Mr. Feller's eyes flickered but remained shut. "I'm afraid he's not very with it. Would you like to sit for a minute? I can open the drapes a bit."

"No. I mean yes, but please, leave the drapes."

Clara looked about the room. It was a boy's room. Posters of hockey players. A model plane hanging above the bureau. Nothing to suggest a grown man lived here. When the kids let you move in, they didn't allow you to bring much. They knew it was temporary. And why should they have to deal with your garbage when you're gone?

When Clara looked back, Mr. Feller was watching her. She couldn't tell if he recognized her, but she recognized the frightened, pleading eyes. Had seen them before.

She reached out and took his hand. It trembled, then suddenly clamped tightly down upon her own. Startled by his strength, Clara almost withdrew her hand. Then she returned the pressure.

Mr. Feller's eyes softened, then closed, leaving Clara seated in the dark, his hand in hers as she listened to the soft rasping of his aged breath.