

SECOND-PRIZE WINNER

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ON THE APRIL MORNING OF HIS SECOND EX-WIFE'S PASSING

ON THE APRIL MORNING of his second ex-wife's passing, two provinces away, Ronald Kelly walks along Slatterley Road and thinks about health and aging and death, reflecting on the linear direction of mortality. Since Kelly will not learn of the death for several hours more—not until he returns to his two-bedroom townhouse and listens to all three of his telephone messages—these reflections might be taken as more significant than happenstance, but such a conclusion would be a mistake. In truth, Kelly has these same contemplative thoughts every time he trudges his aging body along Slatterley Road.

On the unhappy days that he journeys to the university to teach a class and on the even unhappier days that he must attend a faculty meeting, Kelly must pass by the Briarfinch Retirement Village, the Glensparrow Assisted Living Home, the Valleymartin Long-term Care Facility, the Central Winnipeg Funeral Parlour, and the Lovingly Used Consignment Shop. These businesses appear in succession along Slatterley, a downhill reminder of the route all life eventually follows, and walking past, Kelly cannot help but consider death's stalking.

This morning the questions he puts to himself and the thoughts that linger most are connected to the consignment shop. How profitable can the clothing of the dead be? Who might happily purchase the six place settings of Royal Doulton displayed so prominently in the storefront and not wonder about the elderly woman who collected the individual china pieces? And which, if any, of his own unexceptional belongings and sundry possessions might secure a place of distinction in the shop's front window after his death?

Such considerations follow him along the two blocks to the bus shelter, throughout his journey, and into the end-of-semester faculty meeting. With his mind thus occupied, Kelly does not listen to much of what

his department chair has to say this morning. Something about a redesign of the History Department website and something else about funding for new sessional hires in the autumn, but these hardly matter. Kelly long ago learned that granting such a meeting his full attention led to unpleasant ruminations and questions. How often does the department need to fiddle with its website? How many middle-aged PhDs can the department exploit with dead-end sessional positions? If it weren't for the extended discussion of each agenda item—propositions and movements that are seconded, thirded, and duly recorded by the department's attractive new administrative assistant—he wouldn't believe any of the professors, lecturers or grad students in attendance were actually listening either. Kelly can't understand why people want to prolong their time locked inside the seminar room any longer than necessary—asserting self-importance and jockeying for meaningless position—but he shrugs the mystery away. Human nature was not made to be understood.

As he imagines is true for a great many men, Kelly has always found that boredom and restlessness lead to thoughts of a sexual nature—funny that such an impulse hasn't diminished into his sixth decade—and as the meeting heads into its second hour, he watches the new administrative assistant's movements closely. She is seated directly to the chair's left, allowing Kelly to both stare and feign attention to the meeting. New to the job, she scrambles to record every suggestion and objection released into the room, her brow crumpled tight and her mouth twisted in nervous frustration. She's on the plump side, but in a flattering way, with a soft face and a considerable chest that she hides under a loose-fitting blouse. At this very moment, Kelly is looking at the uppermost buttons of her blouse, where he can just barely make out the shadowed crease of skin where her breasts press together. Who does she remind him of? Not his first wife nor his second, but someone from the interregnum. *A special lady friend*. Kelly remembers the euphemism with which he used to amuse himself, but he cannot connect the memory of arousal to the remembrance of a name.

“All right,” the chair says. “With item four closed, I'll turn the meeting over to committee reports.”

Committee reports are most often the reading of the minutes from various other smaller meetings, the goings-on of the speakers committee, the publications committee, cross-discipline appointment committee and the graduate student society, and it amuses Kelly to think how these minutes will

later be minutes-within-minutes. Fortunately, the reports also mean that the meeting is more than half over. With rejuvenated magnanimousness, Kelly re-focuses and listens intently to the names of guest lecturers who may or may not visit the school in the autumn, to the date and location of the launch party for volume seven, issue three of *Prairie Odysseus*, and to the requirements for a proposed minor in Classical Studies and Ancient Greek History. Last to speak is the graduate student society president, a gangly young man who not only has the misfortune of being the graduate student society president, but has held this position voluntarily for the past three years.

The presence of graduate students at these meetings has always astounded Kelly. Their attendance is in no way mandatory—or beneficial as far as he can see—and yet there is always a small contingent of these tired, unhealthy-looking young men and women sitting around the edges of the seminar room. Naturally, once or twice over the years, the sight of these budding academics has made Kelly wistful and forced him to think of the opportunities at fatherhood he had dismissed and/or wasted, but, more often, he focuses upon their foolishness. In all likelihood, the student president views these meetings as a form of social networking, a way of cementing a department bursary or guaranteeing some future letter of recommendation, but this enthusiasm makes Kelly want to grab the boy by the shoulders and shake him. He wants to tell him to run off to the bar with friends. Take a road trip to the west coast. Find a summer job teaching learning-disabled kids to kayak.

He says none of this to the boy, of course, and instead stares at the peeling decal ironed on his t-shirt. *The unexamined life is not worth living*. It is a quotation that maddens Kelly, not because it is a slogan for a t-shirt, but because of the two negatives, which always seem to be read as an endorsement of analytical self-reflection or critical examination or some such nonsense. The wording, however, is sloppy. Asserting that the unexamined life is not worth living does not necessarily mean that the examined life is worth living. *I'm not unhappy* does not mean *I'm happy*. The examined life may be equally not worth living. But then, perhaps the translation is poor.

The t-shirt triggers something in his mind. Independent of his will, Kelly finds that his thoughts drag him along an unexpected path and connect to arbitrary associations. These startling runaway trains of thought are happening more often and, in a way, they make sense to Kelly. The volume of memories increases as a mind ages, but the facility to manage these memories decreases. A certain amount of unpredictability is to be expected.

Where the young man's t-shirt and decal lead Kelly's mind is the reading room in the Slatterley library branch, where a yellowing poster with peeling scotch tape is mounted to the wall. *Reading Increases Empathy*. Below the wisdom, some contemporary writer Kelly has never bothered to identify is seated in a reading chair holding a burgundy hardcover with no title. Whenever the poster catches his eye, Kelly inwardly nods and agrees that reading may well increase empathy. The educated reading class does tend to be more empathetic. However, a causal relationship isn't certain. Those who naturally possess more empathy may be more drawn to reading than those without.

"Before we close," the chair says, "I want to wish everyone a good summer, whether you're teaching or off somewhere on a break. I will be available at the department until the end of May and by email thereafter."

The administrative assistant sighs, looking as relieved as Kelly feels, and as everyone stands from the conference table, he searches for a passing remark to endear himself—a quip to make her smile and perhaps initiate a conversation—but he can think of nothing. A file folder tucked under her arm, she brushes past, and Kelly is granted one final glance at the uppermost button.

Frances Renault, that's the name he couldn't locate earlier. Frances Renault, a pleasingly round post doc medievalist who was with the department during Kelly's early years. His first marriage was winding up at that point, so Kelly's time with her could hardly have been called infidelity. Besides, neither Kelly nor his first wife was able to keep within the confines of marriage, and so neither of them was really at fault. Special lady friends continued into his second marriage as well, but they were not the cause of its dissolution either. That nearly amicable divorce was about the children he was unwilling to provide. Fortunately, the second ex-wife was able to find a second husband and produce two healthy daughters in a quick span of five years, all before the looming deadline of a fortieth birthday. *Well, good for her*: that has always been Kelly's attitude.

These are the thoughts that cross his mind while the faculty meeting winds down, colleagues breaking off into clusters to share their summer research projects and talk of the pleasure reading they intend to catch up on as Kelly heads to the elevators to steer clear of chit chat. He lets himself drowse on the bus and later his route again takes him along Slatterley past the string of morbid businesses. Seen in the reverse direction—from funeral home to

long-term care to assisted living and a community of the retired—the walk seems less than its two blocks and Kelly feels his spirits lifted.

Indeed, if he were the kind of man to whistle, he would be whistling as he opens the door of his townhouse and sweeps into the foyer, jauntily kicking his overshoes onto their mat and hanging his overcoat on its hook. In the front hall, his obsolete answering machine flashes again and again, a welcoming and digital red 3, 3, 3, 3, 3, 3. The first message is one of those robocalls, a prerecorded voice selling home-delivery subscriptions to the *Winnipeg Free Press*. The now twice-recorded voice is an odd and recent phenomenon, Kelly thinks. Someone else's machine talking to his machine, and his mind connects the message to the meeting-minutes-within-meeting minutes. Recordings of recordings, and in this way, he thinks, history is documented. The second message is also a sales call, and an attractively confident woman's voice offers him cut rates on no-fault car insurance.

And then the third message. His second ex-wife's second husband—now her widower. The identity of the voice doesn't register at first, of course, and the sad new throws him off balance, again triggering an uncontrolled association that Kelly must struggle to reign in. His mind goes to the proposed minor in Classical Studies and Ancient Greek History—such strange works these synapses do—but then the connection comes to him. Off-stage death, that's the damn connection. With the exception of Sophocles' *Ajax*, deaths usually occur off stage in all the extant works of all three tragedians. *Ajax* is also one of the only instances of suicide in Ancient Greek drama, but *Ajax* would not have been the title character in the original production. Like all of the tragedies, the title was added by later editors, and the first audience would have known the work by its opening line. *Odysseus, I have always seen and marked you / Stalking to pounce upon your enemies.*

The confusion lasts no more than a second, and then Kelly focuses and replays to the message from two provinces away. The second husband—now a widower—has an apologetic voice and explains that he's been calling friends, family and loved ones with the when-and-where of the service. Of course, he understands that not everyone will be able to attend. Donations to breast cancer research in lieu of flowers. Near the end of the short message, the second husband's voice will trail off a bit, and Kelly will feel a sudden, unexpected empathy and compassion for the poor man. God willing, one or both of the two now grown daughters are staying at the house with him. They can stand by as he makes these difficult telephone calls, preparing tea

and holding his elbow gently whenever his voice wavers. Kelly will, of course, feel envy along with compassion.

It is envy, because the second husband's mourning this April morning will be lessened by the love of two daughters, children who will inherit and cherish unexceptional belongings. And again, a runaway train of thought takes Kelly by surprise and into a scene from his past.

Near the end of the marriage, in bed after lights out, Kelly and the second wife had been holding one another and talking in the soft voices that they both knew would lead to intercourse, for these were the soft voices that had led them to the same place twice weekly since they'd taken their wedded vows. Thrice on holiday vacations. That night, though, their pillow talk was derailed, and she wound up asking yet again about children. That was not who he was, he explained. That was not who he was, and that was not how he was made. He reminded her that their positions in this debate were long-standing, and it wasn't long before she was out of bed and crying alone in the ensuite, the bathroom lights leaking out into the bedroom. Kelly remained in bed weighing the value of getting up and going to her, but then she returned and stood in the open door to ask him why, why, why. He could not help but notice the way her nightdress revealed the shadowed valley between her breasts. He would miss that sight, he thought. He would leave her because the repetitive, numbing nature of marital disputes made empathy unlikely, and though Kelly knew he should feel compassion, what he felt was not unhappy.