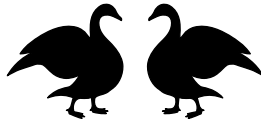


GIFT OF RAIN



The smeared remains of another hot dog and catsup meal lay before me. Our dinners had become increasingly minimalist of late as Diane's depression blanketed our new home like bad weather. It was supposed to be our bigger, happier house. While our two young daughters played in the living room she told me, "Hank I don't love you. I never did. It was all a big mistake. I'm sorry. I didn't know what I wanted. When I got pregnant and you married me, I thought it would all work itself out. When I started climbing the walls, you got me a bigger house and bigger walls to climb. I felt I'd adjust, but I can't. You depress me. You're the reason I'm unhappy. My therapist says I deserve to be happy and that I should divorce you. She says you must be some kind of misogynist. You don't even cook or play board games. All you do is work, watch *Star Trek*, go to bed early, and work. What kind of life is that? Do you think that's what women want? Well, it isn't. You're a nice guy but a loser as a husband. I thought I could deal with it, with you, but I can't," she raced on, coming to a complete stop in front of the kitchen sink overflowing with unwashed plates and pans.

"What?" I replied. I was certain this was just another crazy Diane moment. Another passion-filled litany of what was wrong with life, with me, with the world. She yelled and cried all the time. This was just another pounding I'd have to sit through—not offering opinion or judgment lest I get another fork thrown in my direction.

I dimly suspected that Diane's therapist, Helen Podolski, was behind my wife's new lease on life. A young, recently licensed family and marriage counselor, she was on a crusade to guide lost male souls into marital bliss. Her holistic

fervor was virtually palpable. I'd met Helen a year earlier when Diane and I went in for a few curative sessions. She was a large woman of Polish descent, who wore her blond hair Texas-big. She cited her own life as an example of what hard work could accomplish, "Sure I had to fix Kevin. At first he resisted, couldn't understand how lost he was and what he was missing. But over time, he began to see what a true loving relationship was all about."

I'd met Kevin at a charity dinner a few months earlier. He was a short, bald dentist. A quiet guy married to a vast self-improvement machine. Helen's efforts had shaped him into the perfect blend of strong, romantic, caring partner—the new millennium male—and left him wiggling under her large Polish thumb. He seemed content in his surrender, and there was a part of me that wished the same: a strong woman to love me, tell me what pants to wear, and lead me into the promised land.

"How long have you been feeling this way?" I pushed the question back across the kitchen to Diane.

"About three years. I just never bothered to tell you. You're oblivious. Work, pay the bills, go to the gym, watch *Star Trek*. I could set my watch by your stupid habits. I don't think you have any idea how I'm feeling. I don't know, maybe I'm gay. I'm not sure. I'm not sure about anything. I'm just sure I can't be in the same room with you. You make me sick," she said as she ran out of the kitchen, tossing a final, "You're fucking nuts if you think I'm going to suffer the rest of my life with you," over her shoulder as she left, slamming the front door behind her.

After a moment to regroup and digest this new information, I limped out to our new, spacious back porch. I sat there and examined my own life. My stomach tightened.

Diane didn't come home that night. I tried to talk with her on her cell phone, but she told me to leave her alone or just didn't answer my calls. It was a scorched earth assault. Then she began to disappear for days at a time, leaving me with our daughters, Anne and Mary; my job; the bills; *Star Trek*; and our two cats.

I learned there was another man. His name was Patrick James, PJ for short. He was a spry little guy who thought, after meeting Diane, that he might not be gay after all. Dark haired, unemployed, handsome, with a mustache and soul patch. He believed that Diane's love would set him straight. I wasn't sure if love, even true love, could do that. But his many deficits notwithstanding, he was fun. He was the Peter Pan boy-man that I wasn't. "He makes me laugh. You make me sick," Diane yelled at me over the phone from the disco where she'd

become a regular. My accusing her of cheating on me had no effect on her momentum. In her mind, I had provided sufficient motivation for any woman, not the least of whom was my wife, to seek a lover. “I don’t owe you a fucking apology. You owe me a fucking life,” she’d shot back.

After six months, I decided to move out of our house and into an apartment. It was only a few days before PJ and his big, happy sheep dog, Candy Pie, filled the space I’d vacated. Overnight my pristine front lawn was transformed into a dogshit graveyard. The house didn’t fare much better—shoes, socks, clothes, chaos, and a few spontaneous piles of dogshit greeted me as I entered the hallway and waited for Anne and Mary to collect their things for a weekend with dad. I couldn’t help but notice one of their mattresses lay at the bottom of the stairwell, “Hey, Anne, how come your mattress isn’t on your bed, sweetheart?” I asked.

“PJ sleds down the stairs on it. He’s so-o-o funny, Daddy!” Anne replied.

PJ’s creative, fun-loving mind had turned the stairs into a toboggan run. Where I saw steps, he saw snow, and before my eyes, came racing down with Mary holding on tight behind him. They came to a skidding halt at my feet and to the appreciative laughter and applause of my daughters. *How will I ever top that? I’ve never been that much fun, even on a great day,* I thought as I gazed at the effervescent PJ and the spectacle of my unraveling life.

I would wait for Diane to grow up. I figured she’d tire of discos and parties. But she didn’t. She raged on and on. Even Diane’s mother, Pauline, who blamed me for her daughter’s meltdown, said, “I don’t know what’s happened to her. Why is she behaving like this?” followed by her mantra, “All men are pigs!” Despite her ambivalence toward me, Pauline never once considered that Diane’s descent might have something do with her own second husband. A tall, skinny-legged guy who wore his pants high, Diane’s stepfather, Carl, drove a bus for the Brooklyn Department of Transportation. His love of quasi-military attire never shown more brightly than when he wore his bus drivers’ uniform to our wedding, replete with ticket puncher. I should have taken his appearance in full mass-transit regalia as a bad omen. I should have run.

Carl broke Diane’s nose the first time when she was nine years old. It was a punishment for gulping her milk. And if the food was cold, he’d throw plates, scream insults, or if he was in a particularly foul mood, chase Diane or her brother through the house with an ax, threatening to cut off their heads. Of course he wasn’t *really* going to cut their heads off. He was just driving home a

point about respect for one's elders. But none of this unusual behavior troubled Pauline, who turned a blind eye to her abusive husband until she discovered he was having an affair with one of his passengers. *That* was the straw the broke the camel's back, and she left him. I guess we all have our limits.

After two years of waiting, I divorced Diane. I took responsibility for the collapse and began to drink, usually after dropping my daughters off at the dogshit house on Sunday night. I wandered with other lost men. And despite my doubts about therapy, joined a men's support group. I was relieved to discover how many guys were more fucked up than I was. There were twelve men in my group. We met weekly for a three-hour session led by Ron Wilson, a man's man who, after getting out of prison and sobering up, took on the challenge of turning what he called, "feminized mice" into men. He was in his late fifties, wore his full head of gray hair in a long ponytail, and was built like a fullback. He was evangelical about getting men to wake up and take responsibility for their lives.

"Stop making women your best friends and *trust the men*. Women don't want men who cry and share every sniveling little detail of their days. Save your tears for the men. What women want are rocks with manners. They want men who listen to them, cherish them, and give them the best sex of their lives. And that means we give it all away to them *before* we get ours. If you're single, it doesn't matter how you score pussy. But when you're married, never, ever initiate sex. Never let it become a tool through which your wife can control you. Men, don't leave marriages when there are kids involved—*ever*. I don't care how nuts your wife is—when you have kids, you stick it out. If you can't get support at home then get it from the men. Start trusting the men," Ron said at the end of our session. And he was right. We were all pussy hounds of one sort or another. I had nothing to lose, and besides, looking around me at the members of my group, I could see why women might have trouble trusting men; we had a great deal of trouble trusting each other.

Once a week wasn't enough for The Chief, as we called Ron. So he divided us up into small groups who'd meet without his facilitating presence and practice being *present* to each other. Four of us met each week for two additional hours of self-improvement. I enjoyed these sessions. They kept me busy at night and took my mind off Diane. My team was made up of three other guys and me.

Joe Schmidt was a successful 45-year-old stockbroker who suffered from obliviousness. He'd amaze me with his useless information. He absorbed

facts—box scores, batting averages, the make and models of cars—the way I was beginning to absorb junk food. Joe loved facts. Yet he couldn't remember his girlfriend's birthday, special anniversaries, or where he put his car keys. But he sure could find pussy. He was the kind of guy women loved to tolerate. It didn't take them long to realize he was a mile wide and an inch thick, but who cared when he was so damn good looking. They'd park their mind at the bedroom door and take their chances. He was smooth as silk. A ladies' man. Like all gifted artists, he suffered for his success; but it was only after his third child from as many women and two divorces that a dim light went on, and he realized something was going awry and sought help.

Nick Watkowski was built like a brick shithouse. Twenty-five years old, he stood six foot four and weighed in at two hundred and sixty pounds. Flat faced from too many fist fights, he had soft blond hair and a small boy's voice that seemed to belong to someone else. He didn't have much to say. He signed up after his wife threatened to leave him. He was losing the battle with his temper. He knew he shouldn't punch his fist through the wall or lift his seven-year-old son up by his shirt collar when his room was a mess, but some days he just couldn't stop himself. Some days he lost control. But he was getting better. He was starting to see the anger coming.

And Bill Williams, who was our addict. I lost count as to how many things he was or had been addicted to. I didn't realize there were so many. But he had hit most of the biggies over his fifty-plus years—sex, drugs, alcohol. He was relatively straight at the moment and just drank beer and exercised three hours a day. Bill worked as a diamond trader and could talk a mile a minute. He was always selling *something*.

We met after work each Tuesday at Oceanside Park and gathered around an old picnic table that overlooked the beach and the ocean below. Our ritual was simple. We'd sit side by side, talk, listen, and not leave until two hours or the case of beer one of us was obligated to bring was finished.

The session began with a series of bear hugs and a commitment to share what was real, to take our masks off and be vulnerable to each other. We'd share time the way men have shared time for centuries—side by side, elbow to elbow, letting alcohol wash over us and ease our protecting boundaries. Slowly we opened up—the same way women do sober. This week it was my turn to be interviewed by the men.

“Okay, before we begin let me make a toast to three great guys,” Bill said, raising his first bottle of beer toward a full moon that was making its slow ascent over the Atlantic. “Pretty nice evening to be spending with three great

men. Here's to you!"

"Shut the fuck up, Bill," Joe said. "Stop before you can't stop yourself. It's Hank's turn to let shit fly. Next week you can talk all night and we have to listen. That is, of course, unless you start peddling that Grade A bullshit of yours. So how they been hanging, Hank?"

"Good. Fine. I'm good. Still feel like I've let my daughters down. Not too much I could have done to avoid it. What the hell did I know about relating to a woman," I said.

"Maybe you're one of the walking wounded they're always talking about. They think we're all wounded. Fuck if I can keep up. I've changed myself so many times for pussy I almost forgot who I am. Pussy will do that to you. *Whatever you want, darling, I'll be anything for you, just as long as I can jump your shorts,*" Joe said.

"Women think I'm nice and then discover the truth—the lights are all on, and nobody's home," I said.

"Well, there is no-fucking-body home, dodo. We all know that," Bill said encouragingly. "You're just a fucking idiot, relax, stop trying, accept your inner unworthiness, and chill. Here, have another beer."

"How about that new lady you're dating?" Joe asked.

"Beth? Not great. Started pretty good. Pretty hot to begin with. She said she saw the inner me I didn't know. But then she found it—the black hole," I said, pausing to take a long pull off my third beer and standing up to better illustrate my point.

"Oh Hank, you're a such a dear little sweetheart, but I'm looking for someone more evolved. Someone who can communicate. You know what that is, *don't you?* You evolved from a monkey to a man, right? Now lets see if you can evolve from a man to a human.' Well, I assured her that with her love and a little practice, I could become a great communicator. But she said she didn't have a lifetime. 'Hank, you're screwed up. I'm not sure if you're here sometimes. Knock, knock, knock. Anyone home?'" I concluded my presentation by tapping on Nick's forehead and saying, "Good luck Hank...you'll figure it out someday . . . if you live long enough," and I sat back down.

"So how'd that make you feel?" Joe asked.

"Sad, I guess. I don't know. Shit, what happens, happens. Why? Isn't it time for another beer?"

"Just trying to help get you in touch with some of those feelings Chief is always talking about," Joe said.

"Nick, I think it's time. Do us the honors," Bill said.

Nick leaned his large frame over and grabbed four bottles from the supply stored in a Coleman cooler beneath the table and handed one to each of us. Usually a man of few words, he needed to say something, “Fuck feelings. Forget about ’em. Guys don’t cry. They’re not supposed to. I cried so much as a kid I can’t anymore. I’m done. My dad would come home looking to get it going. Try to find something to pick a fight over. He’d grab me by my wrists and start to shake me like a fucking rug until he’d dislocate my shoulders. What torture chamber do you think he learned that trick in? Maybe he wanted a fucking double-jointed son. He’d drop me on the floor, and I’d lie there screaming my head off. The fuck wouldn’t move an inch until I stopped bawling. And then he’d act like he was doing me a favor, teaching me some lesson, and pop my shoulders back in place like nothing happened. And to him, nothing *had* happened. So I learned. No begging. No tears. Shut the fuck up. It was one sweet day when I beat the crap out of him. I was seventeen. He was way too drunk to keep up. I just kept pounding and kicking his big fat ass. I wanted to kill the fucker. Nearly did. He never touched me after that.” Nick’s small voice grew more distant and then cracked as he raised his bottle, “So here’s to you, Dad—**FUCK YOUR FUCKING ASS TO HELL!**”

We rose from our seats, raised our bottles in a four-gun salute, drained them, and tossed them into the garbage can a few feet away as Nick crossed the line and began to weep. Silently at first and then with loud sobbing agony. He cried until he had no tears left, and only his pain and his whimpers remained. And we did what we always did when a man broke through; we circled him and took turns holding him. We became his mother, his father, his wife and his brothers. We held him and held him for what felt like hours and said nothing. What’s there to say? After six months with our team, Nick’s climb out of the rathole had begun.

It was over forty-five minutes before Nick returned to earth, and we each sat back down. We drank a new round and listened to the ocean and our numb, random thoughts. The silences—they were the sweetest. No words could lead us to a safer harbor than the one in which we were now anchored. The *quiet* of men has no questions or doubts. Sharing it gave us all more air to breathe. Sitting shoulder to shoulder, we stared out over an ocean growing dim with rain clouds and became lost in this moment of effortless union.

“Hank, for fucking sakes will you say something! It’s starting to feel like a funeral around here,” I heard Nick whisper.

“It is a funeral,” I said, and I began where I had left off. “When we started

dating, Beth would cry when she was happy and cry when she was sad and sometimes cry just for the hell of it. It seemed pretty excessive to me, but she said it made her feel better. Anyway, one night after making love, she starts to cry. She's on top of me, and after a few minutes, I have this crazy impulse to catch a few tears on my tongue. Stupid thing to do, but it was like licking a warm salt sea. There we were. Beth's talking and crying, and I'm lying under her with my mouth wide open when she says, 'God damn it, Hank, are you listening to me?' Of course I wasn't but told her I was."

"You're fine." Joe said. "So what if you can't cry. Most guys wouldn't be caught dead catching a woman's tears in their mouths. That's a pretty damn weird thing to do, Hank. You're one scary guy. If I were a woman I'd run from you too, but I'm sure there are plenty of beauty queens who'd go for it. A move sure to make them melt in your mouth," Joe said.

But after Nick's meltdown we could no longer get liftoff. We'd traveled as far as we could go and now slipped back to our silences. The beer was gone. Our two hours were up. We said our good-byes—awkwardly hugging and slapping each other on the back—and returned to our lives.

The rain began to fall heavily as I walked home to my apartment. I slowed and then stopped, allowing the night to cover me in its warm, damp embrace. I lifted my face toward the sky, and I permitted my tears to fall invisibly and silently to the pavement below.