

FICTION | FALL 2019

RESPIRE

By Dwayne Brenna

I first met Rory Ellison when he was lying in bed, in the cold embrace of a prostate cancer that had spread to his lower spine and had searched with its spongy tentacles for his kidneys. He was remarkably coherent for a man so close to death, sitting propped up against his pillows, wearing a smart set of light blue pajamas and reading the *StarPhoenix*. The pajamas looked immaculate and unwrinkled, like they had been retrieved from the local dry cleaners earlier that day. He folded the newspaper when he saw me entering his bedroom. “Ah,” he said, in that rich voice I’d heard a hundred times on the television, “the respite nurse. Who would have thought that Death could be so beautiful?”

I was standing in the doorway with his wife Barbara, a smartly dressed woman in her late sixties who, anyone could see, had been no slouch in the looks department herself. She turned to me with a grim smile. “He’s incorrigible, even at the ripe age of seventy-five.”

“Don’t tell her my age,” her husband replied. “You’ll scare her away.”

He’d been a politician for thirty years, quite used to the give-and-take on the legislature floor. He had been a particular favourite of my father’s; they shared the same political stripe. My father used to say that Rory Ellison was the only politician he ever trusted. He had almost singlehandedly ramrodded a bill through the legislature that would pave the way for low income housing in our major cities.

“I don’t scare easy,” I said. Even at his advanced age, I could see how someone might fall in love with him.

“Well,” Mrs. Ellison said to me sharply. “You’ve seen the kitchen and the bathroom. Is there anything else I need to show you?”

“She knows everything she needs to know,” Mr. Ellison interjected. He gave me that broad smile I’d seen in the newspapers. He had too many teeth for a man his age, and his grey wavy hair had been parted and combed immaculately.

I turned to Mrs. Ellison. “I’ll be all right,” I said. “Go and enjoy yourself. “ People think that respite is only about a delay before execution. More often than not, it’s about an intercession in the taxing work of the caregiver.

“I’ll have my cell phone with me,” Mrs. Ellison said, “in case there are any problems.”

“I like to give her a hard time,” Mr. Ellison chuckled, “just so she knows I’m still alive.”

“We haven’t been properly introduced,” I said. “My name is Joanna. Joanna McLeod.” I shook his hand. The skin at the tips of his fingers was waxy and yellow, but he still had a hearty handshake.

“A Scottish lass,” he trilled. “There are worse fates left for a man than to be cared for, on his deathbed, by a pretty Scottish lass.” It was flirting, yes, but flirting in the harmless way that old men flirt with younger women.

“It’s been a long time since anybody’s called me a lass,” I told him. “I’m fifty years old.”

“A spring chicken,” he said, still smiling. He didn’t bother to introduce himself. You’d have to live under a rock not to know who he was.

I sat in the chair beside the bed. “So tell me,” I said, “how often do you take your meds?”

His smile evaporated. It was as if he’d forgotten his cancer the moment I’d walked in the door, and now I’d reminded him that he was sick. “As needed,” he said drily. “Usually every three or four hours.”

“I’m sorry if this is not the cheeriest conversation you’ve ever had,” I said, “but I thought we should get it out of the way so that we can move forward.”

His face had lost its animation for a moment. “That’s fine then.”

“I understand you’ve been catheterized,” I said. “Any problems with that?”

Suddenly he was grinning again. “You really cut to the chase, don’t you, sister? No foreplay at all?”

I smiled back at him. “It’s my job.”

“You’re talking about a tube they inserted in my dick,” he said, “so I don’t pee on my shoes.”

“How’s that been going for you?” I asked.

“Peachy.”

You’ve got to be business-like in situations like this. “Any irritation?”

“Just when you remind me of it,” he said, “or when I get an erection. Which hasn’t been too often of late. Can we talk about something else?”

“What do you want to talk about?”

“Let’s talk about love,” he said. “Tell me about your love-life.”

I’m used to this from palliative care patients. They’re commonly treated as diseased flesh, so they demand to be treated as people. “There’s nothing to tell,” I admitted.

He smiled devilishly. “Oh, come on. Beautiful young woman like you?”

I sat there for a moment, weighing the need to be honest against the need to maintain boundaries. What the hell, I decided, I’m a little too old to play everything by the book. “I’m in the middle of a divorce,” I said.

Two thirty in the morning. The phone rang. Benjamin.

I’d been in the apartment for three months, and I still woke up thinking I was in the house on Saskatchewan Crescent. I scrambled for the phone, only to realize that it was on the other side of the bed. Finally, after six or seven rings, I picked up the receiver. “Yes?”

There was a brief pause, and then: “I miss you. I want you back.”

“It’s two thirty in the morning.”

“I miss you,” he said more urgently.

“Don’t call me anymore,” I replied.

“Don’t be like that,” he said. “You know you’re my only girl.”

“No, Benjamin,” I said, “I don’t know that.”

He took a deep breath, audible even over the phone. “I’ll be the first to admit I’ve made a mistake,” he said. “You’re the one I love. Come back home.”

“You knew what I was going through,” I hissed into the phone. “You knew how vulnerable I was, and you did that.”

“I didn’t think,” he replied.

“No. You didn’t.” I threw the phone receiver down on its cradle, went and poured myself a glass of water from the kitchen tap.

Thirty seconds later, the phone rang again. And again. And again. When it appeared he wasn’t giving up, I picked up the receiver.

“Why do you have to be like this?” he said. His voice was harder now.

“Like what?”

“Are you there with someone else?” Suddenly, he’d turned into his lawyerish self, cross-examining me.

“What if I am?” I said.

“Is he there right now?”

“That’s none of your business,” I told him.

“Bitch,” he hissed. “Fucking bitch.”

This time it was his turn to slam down the phone. I placed the receiver on the cradle and muted the volume of the ringtone. Then I went into the bathroom and found a sleeping pill.

A month later, Mr. Ellison’s condition had deteriorated sharply. He was no longer able to digest solid food. We kept him alive with porridge and potatoes and vegetables mashed up like baby food. After getting permission from his doctor, I increased the morphine dosage to one capsule per hour. Even the act of sitting him up in bed was a painful one. He uttered little cries with every adjustment. It was a stage of dying I recognized well: that time of life when the grown man reassumes the habits of a child.

Of course, his catheter tube had not been kept clean in the intervening days since I last visited. There was major inflammation at the site where the catheter had been inserted into the penis. When I attempted to clean the infected area, Mr. Ellison made a brave attempt to deal with the pain. After a moment, I felt him shudder and begin to sob.

“Is this hurting you?” I said loudly, trying to break through the barriers the morphine had set up. “I can give you another pill if you would like.”

He buried his face in his gnarled yellow fingers. “Don’t touch me there!” he cried, as a five-year old might.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Ellison,” I said, “but something has to be done or this inflammation will get much worse.”

“Don’t touch me there!” he repeated.

“Okay,” I said, “we’ll leave it for now. But this catheter has to be managed.” I went into the kitchen and dug up the ingredients for a wheat germ smoothie.

When I returned to the bedroom, Mr. Ellison was lying on his side in a fetal position, facing the wall. “I’m going to sit you up now, Mr. Ellison,” I said. “I’ve made you a nice drink.” After much toing and froing, he was propped up against a pair of sturdy pillows. He drank the smoothie in measured sips. “I’m here for a few more hours,” I said. “Is there anything else you’d like me to do?”

A small voice said, “You could read to me.” He motioned toward the bedside table. “That book there.”

There was a library copy of a novel called *The Moon and Sixpence* on the bedside table. It was bookmarked at chapter thirty, probably where Barbara had left off reading the day before. It was about a woman who had been unfaithful to her husband. “I was not much puzzled by Blanche Stroeve’s action,” I read, “for I saw in that merely the result of a physical appeal.”

As I read further, I found myself remembering the news reports which had circulated, twenty years earlier, insinuating an affair between Rory Ellison and some young assistant in the Legislature. The reports were of an era when newspapermen wrote cryptically about such things, when simply to accuse a prominent politician of having an extramarital fling was not

done. I remembered reading how his wife had stood by him through denial after denial, and I began to understand that her possessiveness was probably rooted in that unseemly twenty year old suggestion, ultimately unproven, of an affair.

Mr. Ellison remained sitting up in bed, his eyes closed as if concentration could ease the pain, moaning softly from time to time. When I got to the part where Blanche killed herself, he lifted his hand tentatively from the bed covers, a gesture that meant I should stop. It was then that I could see tears rolling down his waxen face, and he said to me, again in a child-like voice, "Why do we hurt the people we love?"

A week later, we were sitting in the office of my lawyer, Al Livingstone, chosen for the fact that he was one of the best divorce lawyers in the city and also because my husband detested him.

I'd made a point of buying an expensive new business suit the week before. Benjamin had decided to show up in his usual blazer and tie, looking every inch the stuffed shirt that he's become. He sat across the boardroom table from me.

"Good morning, Benjamin," Al said.

"Let's cut to the chase," Benjamin replied. "She wants the house and the car and the SUV and the cabin at Jackfish. She's not going to get them."

Al looked at me and smiled. "That's no way to start a negotiation," he said. "You know she's going to get the house, Benjamin. The woman always gets the house."

"Not always," Benjamin said. He looked like he was ready to leap out of the chair and attack at any given moment.

Al reached into his briefcase and hauled out a ream of papers. "Okay, let's talk," he said. "I have here a list of all assets, both individual and combined."

"I've sold the house," Benjamin said quietly.

Al placed the papers on the table and stared unblinkingly at Benjamin. "You what?"

"I've sold the house. It's a done deal."

"You know we'll track the money," Al replied. "You can't hide it."

"We'll see," said Benjamin.

Something in me cracked at that moment. There we were, sitting in a plush law office boardroom, behaving like children. *I want this. You can't have that.* It was so far from the way I grew up, from the politics of my father, from my parents' marriage that had lasted fifty-five years. I thought of Rory Ellison, lying on his deathbed. "A hundred thousand dollars," I heard myself say, "and the SUV."

The two men looked at me in disbelief. Finally, Benjamin shook his head. "What are you talking about?" he asked.

I looked at him squarely. "Give me a hundred thousand and the SUV," I said, "and we'll call it even."

Al stared uncomprehendingly. "What are you saying?"

"I'm tired of all this," I replied. "I want out. This is my final offer."

"But you deserve so much more," Al said.

"That's all I want."

The last time I saw Rory Ellison, he was lying in bed, his frail body tensed against the pain. Both he and his wife had insisted that he would die at home, if possible, with no tubes sticking out of him, no intravenous drip-feeding him.

When I arrived that morning, Mrs. Ellison looked almost as miserable as her husband. Her blouse was wrinkled and unwashed, and her hair framed her once pretty face in long stray wisps. “Poor dear,” I said to her. “You should go back to bed.”

Her response was terse. “I’m going to do some grocery shopping. I’ll be back in a couple of hours.”

When she had left, I went into Mr. Ellison’s bedroom and sat down quietly in a chair beside the bed. He was lying on his back, breathing hoarsely. His head had lost its handsomeness over the past month. He lapsed in and out of consciousness, groaning against the pain, mumbling unrelated words. I heard “Barbara” and “God” and “sorry.”

After a few minutes, he came to with a startled jerk. I touched his feeble hand with mine. “It’s all right,” I whispered. “You can go if it’s time to go.”

His eyes were like deep glassy ponds. “Hold me.”

I’m not sure he even knew who I was. “Say that again,” I whispered.

His eyes were pleading with me. “Please hold me.”

It wasn’t the best decision I’ve ever made, but I climbed up on the bed and lay down beside him. The walls of his chest were like sheets of foolscap blowing around a parking lot.

“Hold me,” he said.

I draped my arm across his skeleton of a body. He nestled his head into my neck. “I know how you feel,” I whispered.

“No.”

“Yes, I do.” I took his aged hand and placed it where my left breast used to be.

“Gone?” he murmured.

“Cancer.”

We lay, like two old lovers, for a long time. I’m not sure who was comforting whom. “Barbara,” I thought I heard him murmur, and “Love”. Then he came to with one more startled breathe, exhaled the pain of his existence one last time, and closed his eyes.

Dwayne Brenna is the award-winning author of several books of poetry and fiction. His two books of poetry, *Stealing Home* and *Give My Love to Rose*, were published by Hagios Press in 2012 and 2015 respectively. *Stealing Home*, a poetic celebration of the game of baseball, was subsequently shortlisted for several Saskatchewan Book Awards, including the University of Regina Book of the Year Award. His first novel *New Albion* was published by Coteau Books in autumn 2016. *New Albion* won the 2017 Muslims for Peace and Justice Fiction Award at the Saskatchewan Book Awards. It is one of three English language novels shortlisted for the prestigious MM Bennetts Award for historical fiction. His short stories and poems have been published in an array of journals.

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