

ASKOLD MELNYCZUK

Walk With Us

YOU PUT YOURSELF in a position—you make yourself available—and you really are no longer responsible for your actions, you've given yourself over to a force greater than you, and it's not God, and it's not good. We had the bad luck to see this happen to our child. And now it's too late.

I tried explaining this to Gibbs, but he's not buying it. First he made me speak louder until I was almost yelling. Last night a bug crawled into my husband's ear. I have to raise my voice, to which he turns a confused and slightly panicked face, like he's wondering if the bug's nesting there. We saw a show about houseflies sidling up to crickets and pretending to clean themselves, but what they're really doing is discharging larvae which quickly crawl into the creature then slowly eat it alive from within.

His eyes dilate: it's the look I remember after our first kiss thirty years ago.

When my words finally register, he shakes his head.

He's hung up on individual responsibility, Emersonian self-reliance, and all that Yankee crap I also grew up with and which is of no use today. I tell him while he's making pasta, it's your responsibility to deal with your regret; it's not your job to judge our daughter. In profile his face has that gaunt, hawk-nosed look of those great nineteenth-century moralists. Then he executes the garlic like he was Robespierre, or Jeffrey Dahmer.

My name is Marie. Gibbs and I have lived in the same house, in a small town north of Boston, for over thirty years. One of the many charms of the place is its history: Paul Revere galloped through on his way to Concord; Governor Winthrop briefly farmed a few blocks away; but the thing we're proudest of: Jingle Bells was written here. Almost for sure. There's some dispute with a village of congenital liars in Georgia I won't bother you with.

Gibbs stirs his tomato sauce, adding eight large basil leaves he removes before ladling it over the pasta.

"Looks dee-lish," I cry, all but cupping my hands to be sure he hears.

He wipes his fingers on the stiff red apron I bought him some Christmases ago.

“Think we’ll see Zack tonight?”

Zack’s our second-born. He’s studying at the junior college while working part-time. He moved out a year ago but lately he’s taken to dropping by every few days to rant. I worry.

“I hope not,” I say.

THIS MORNING on my way to the drug store I was confronted by a hundred people in wheel chairs racing down the street. I froze. All ages, colors, shapes, and sizes, they rolled on. A number of them were on the sidewalk. I had to duck into the doorway of the bank to let them pass. An old man with a wagon full of grocery bags behind him glared at me as if I had no business walking here. It took me a minute to remember that Eunice Shriver, who started the Special Olympics, died recently. A memorial march! And you know what I thought? How lucky they were. Their only problem is they can’t walk, whereas I, on the other hand, can no longer breathe. Immediately I felt horrible. Why wasn’t I proud of them?

We were always proud of our daughter, Sheila 2. She’s named for my mother, who’s seventy-three and lives outside Edinburgh. I’ve just finished packing for our trip there, even though we don’t leave for another ten days. We fly out right after we visit our daughter in California.

I say we’re proud of her, then I think: for what? Being our daughter? Must have been an ordeal, for sure.

What will I say to her now, under the circumstances?

BEFORE SITTING DOWN, Gibbs turns on the radio so we won’t have to force the conversation. It’s a repeat of the morning’s roundup of the week’s big news. This time all the chatter is about healthcare, only it’s so loud it’s likely to start a debate with the neighbors.

Suddenly Gibbs begins yelling over the radio.

“Got the DVD of Benny Goodman.”

“For tonight?”

“We’re packed.”

“I have work.”

“I don’t,” he replies, then sticks his little finger in his ear. “But what I wanted to say,” he continues shouting, “Was that as I was checking it out I said to the clerk, who’s all of eighteen, ‘It’s important to stay in touch with the old music.’ Because I was embarrassed—not by the disc but by how old I was. It was a stupid remark and I knew it but the kid came

right back with: 'Yes, sir, it is.' "

On top of everything else, Gibbs is bruised because of his trumpet. Before any of this began, he'd been in a mid-life tailspin which led him to reach for the brass. It was the instrument he'd always wanted to play. For his birthday he went to Osman's in Arlington and returned with a Bach B Flat for three grand. At least it's not a sports car, he pointed out. *Embouchure* became the new vocabulary word around our house. Red slide grease found its way to our sheets. But he couldn't develop his mouth muscles. No matter how hard he tries, his lip trembles. At his last lesson he expressed frustration with his own limits. Naturally, being a teacher himself, he expected his instructor to murmur something conciliatory and inspiring, along the lines of *Good boy, Gibbs, always trying to better yourself*. Instead, Paul looked at him and said, "Gibbs, you're right. You're a nice guy but your mouth . . . it's not gonna to happen."

THIS WILL BE MY FIRST time in a prison. Gibbs used to volunteer at Walpole through the university where he teaches as an adjunct. He's tried preparing me, but I suspect this will be different.

As a girl, I hated uniforms. In Catholic school (we weren't Catholic but the school was better than the public one) I envied the kids in the neighborhood who wore jeans and minis and halter tops. Not that I wanted to go that far—though who knows?

Even today my instinct on seeing someone disguised in official garb is to yank out their shirt tail. In the high school where I teach sociology to juniors, I'm partial to the slobs.

THERE'S A KNOCK at the door as Gibbs scrapes the dishes. Almost immediately it opens and Zack marches in, waves of rage radiating from the red hair whose coiled filaments bristle and float like he's buffed it with a balloon.

Gibbs and I both walk quickly toward the living room, as though there's a chance we might keep him from invading our evening.

"Seen this?" He hisses, tossing the newspaper on the couch.

We have. It's an editorial about our daughter in a national newspaper calling her crime "monstrous."

The crime is now more than a year old but they just moved her to California to get ready for the trial. It's the first time we'll be allowed to see her. The upcoming proceedings have, predictably, rekindled interest among journalists and pundits.

What she did is indeed monstrous; I don't live in denial. Neither do I wallow, as is Zack's way. What began as a tendency to sympathize with the suffering has blossomed into a professional surrogate martyrdom which keeps him from shaping his own life. He even compared himself to one of those medieval sin-eaters: supposedly holy people who took the transgressions of their neighbors onto themselves. Self-serving BS; he's livid neither of us will buy into it.

"It's time you made a statement," he says in his nasal whine.

I look at Gibbs, who doesn't have to raise an eyebrow for me to know how he plans to handle this.

Zack was a beautiful boy. His orange curls dangled over his shoulders until kindergarten—my father was a red-head. We treated him like a prince. Yet the minute we sent him out into the world, we started losing him. There's clearly something we did not provide he needed. His adolescence was passed in obsessive pursuit of causes, from Cobain to Kabbala to PETA.

It's not enough that Gibbs agrees with him—though he does it Gibbs' style, quietly, with an easy dignity. Zack wants to hear me say it, too. Is it sibling rivalry still?

"After we see her," Gibbs says. "That will be the time for a statement."

"You have any idea what people are saying?" His voice is shrill.

"We know."

"I had a man I hardly know say to me at work," (our son's the part-time counter guy at Boloco—the only non-Spanish speaking employee they have, I think) "Your sister's a hero."

He gazes at us in disbelief. His wide-eyed stare reminds me of a photograph I once saw of Lenin after his stroke, when he could no longer speak and had to watch what he began change to a nightmare right in front of him.

"We've waited a year. Another week won't matter to anyone. Except maybe to her. And to us."

Zack's right, though—one of the shocks around this tragedy is how many people support what Sheila did, saying she should have gone further. I share my son's dismay at this.

"Don't," I snap when he moves to light a cigarette.

"Are you for real?" He scowls.

It's a good question, one I've asked myself a lot lately.

"I'll let you know when we get back from California," I say, taking off the gloves.

It's just a matter of minutes before some inane remark sends him scurrying back to JP where he'll regale his roommates with tales of our awfulness.

And, for this to be happening to us, I'm starting to think he must be right. Honestly, I'd like to light a cigarette myself.

OUR DAUGHTER Sheila helped torture three people, two of whom died as a result. One of the victims was a woman. A woman. Dogs, electrodes, and whatever they use when they water-board. I have a nightmare image of her riding a surfboard on a girl's head.

AFTER DINNER, and the relief of Zack's departure, while Gibbs finishes the dishes, I sit down to check my email. As a volunteer at the local nursing home this summer, I want to make sure Robin, my sub, understands the schedule.

Yesterday, entering the Stop and Shop, my back seized up. I froze just inside the door, blocking the entrance for a moment. The woman behind me barked like she was channeling Rin Tin Tin and suddenly I felt old. She brushed past without an apology, muttering. The way we treat the elderly—as though we can't grasp they are us, in a minute or two.

I turn on the computer. "Virgos love tequila"—the catchy non-sequitur welcomes me as I log on. Do they? Virgos, I mean. If so, what's the corollary? Are all Virgos alkie? I imagine millions of Virgos who've never had a drink in their lives mixing up batches of margaritas and saying, *Yes, this is what's been missing.*

You forget why you logged on in the first place.

Gibbs plods in to say I should get to bed, we're leaving early.

Why? The plane's not until 6 pm. We have the whole day.

He's called the cab already. That's Gibbs for you. My greatest error; my unspoken sin.

I tell him I'll be at least another hour. I'll sleep on the plane.

I no longer look forward to sleep the way I once did. Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night with the thought: I've got to explain the origins of evil in the world, and I'm thinking of my own daughter.

What *will* I say to her, really? How can I make her believe I understand, even if I don't?

GIBBS IS IN BED with Benny Goodman, headphones on. Done with work, I sort through photographs, on the computer and in the shoebox,

as I always do for my mother. It's the easiest way of showing her who we are, how we live, and what she's missed. She hasn't been back since I was born here the year they lived in Beverly. Eighteen months after my birth, she was summoned back to Scotland to care for her dying mother. She never returned.

After she left us, my father always spoke about her calmly, while making it perfectly clear he had no intention of seeing her again. He never remarried. He raised me alone. I've visited her every summer since I was seven. Before that, for five years I didn't see her at all.

When my father—*her* husband—died, she sent a card.

Of course, since Sheila 2 signed up with the Marines and left home four years ago, we don't take many pictures. Here's one of Woodrow, our dachshund, now happily sporting with the half dozen other dogs our pet-sitter's putting up. Here's one Sheila sent us for Christmas, showing her in front of a tank somewhere outside Basra. When she reenlisted last spring we couldn't believe it. We're pacifists, Gibbs and I.

We've seen the photos of what she did. I don't know how to talk about it.

And I know I won't pack those for Mother.

BY THE TIME I get to bed, Gibbs is snoring so loud I start wishing a bug would nest in my ear.

I lie straight, hands to the sides, eyes fixed on the ceiling, and count my breaths.

I think back to the last time I saw my daughter, two years ago. Before returning for her second tour of duty, Sheila had a couple of months. One she spent in New York with friends—or that's what she said. And one with us. We noticed nothing unusual. She hadn't done anything incriminating yet—and she was always scarily self-contained. She didn't speak much as a child, and when she went to school she practically stopped talking altogether.

"Selective mutism" they called it. Medications and therapies helped her survive without attending a special school, but just barely. When Sheila was first diagnosed, we were stunned, partly because words were never something Gibbs or I had trouble with. She simply couldn't speak in public.

Her first grade teacher was the one who summoned us. We met in the principal's office and listened while she explained how she'd tried coaxing and cajoling, doling out treats and praise without even winning

a smile from Sheila, never mind an answer. Gibbs and I looked at the teacher apologetically.

What else do I remember that might give a clue? I've done this inventory a thousand times.

As a girl she saw the movie *Twister* and for a long time afterwards she insisted she wanted to be a storm chaser. She herself was anything but tempestuous. Yet she learned to make her presence felt in ways that didn't require speech. She wanted to please. That was her forte. Not the sharpest pencil, but always at hand. Especially for the tedious chores, the ones no one wanted to do, like scrubbing dog pee out of the carpet. Because she rarely talked, you could count on her to be quiet, efficient, and focused. At family gatherings she became the official dishwasher. Even the several times she visited my mother with me, she was first at the sink, first to walk Mother's beagle Walter Scott, the only one offering to make someone else's bed. As I said, she aimed to please.

School was a misery for her. That was the most normal thing about her. She did, in her last years there, find a couple of friends with whom she shared interests, even if they were far from the ones we urged on her. They were the kind of kids I know too well from my own years of teaching: sullen-eyed boys who scorn skateboards, dress ghetto, and occasionally make the local paper for some act of minor vandalism. The girls wear black, with piercings everywhere, and text each other during class. When Sheila convinced Gibbs to let her join the local gun club, we all but celebrated her move toward the mainstream. We never let her buy a gun, of course: would never have one in the house under any circumstances; but she had friends whose parents felt differently and on weekends she went with them for target practice at a range outside town. Like a lot of teenagers, she was a fan of those gross movies showing people—usually young women—being dismembered by madmen in face masks. She handed me one called *Tablesaw* and urged me to watch it. She said it was a very moral film. I couldn't get over the box cover, never mind put it on. Yet millions of kids love this stuff.

This last time, finally home with us after a month of doing who knows what in New York, she rented only comedies. We watched *Meet the Fockers*, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, and an old Marx Brothers film. We went to Plum Island, tramped the Joppa flats, and drove deep into the bird sanctuary. She pointed out it was a late mating season for the red-winged blackbirds.

I could tell she was holding herself close. She wasn't talking much,

even for her. I asked if she was still taking her medication. She nodded absently.

She was working through something.

“I’m your mother, pumpkin-nose,” I said.

She nodded, forcing a half-smile.

GIBBS IS SUDDENLY so quiet I prod him to make sure he’s still alive. It’s like I pressed a button. The snoring resumes.

I shut my eyes, but that can’t stop my mind from racing. I see Sheila clearly, as though she were projected on my lids. I’m tempted to tell the figment to redo her eye make-up. I used to say that kind of thing, too often. It was one of the few things that made her angry, as though she could intuit what I’d never say.

The beauty gene in our family has been going steadily south for several generations. My grandmother was an actress who performed before Queen Victoria. Judging by photographs my father—an engineer at Polaroid—took of my mother, she was in her day pretty smashing herself. I, alas, took after my father, who was plain as a donut. The children Gibbs and I produced continued this downward trajectory.

Sheila 2 wasn’t cute, which made things harder. She’s big-boned, with a large head, and nose, and big teeth. See her, you think horse. I’m just being honest. It’s one of my flaws.

Her impulse to please was her way of compensating, I’m sure, and, unfortunately it extended to men. She may not have had witty banter and flashing looks to distract them, but I imagine she made any object of her affection feel like a king. That counts for more than we’d like to think. She gave up at least one child that I know of.

They say she probably inherited my anxiety. I was a fretful child, a hormonal adolescent, yet I’m not a nervous adult. Teaching led me out of that trap. Sheila wasn’t so lucky. A part of the brain that processes threats was hyperactive in her. So they said. To which I answer: sirs, the world is full of threats. Sometimes you’re right to be anxious.

But mine didn’t drive me to do what she did.

I GET UP AND GO to the bathroom where the porcelain angel night light illumines my reflection as I pass the mirror. I look away too late. Improbable as it sounds, I realize how much of myself I actually see in her.

I put the toilet seat down.

Suspicion inevitably falls on the parents. It’s what I think when read-

ing such a story in the papers.

People assume it's about sex. Was she abused? Did Gibbs, or I, do something to her when she was an infant? I caught that question in many a neighbor's eye. Only Helen from across the street said she was sorry about Sheila. Others let their thoughts race by unchecked, for all to see.

There was nothing covert going on around our house sexually—unless of course it was so secret I missed it myself. Not impossible, I'll grant. And that's part of the poison: you begin doubting the details of your own daily life, the one you've been living. Like someone else knows better what you've done, and what you haven't.

Washing my hands, I keep my head down so as not to look into the mirror again. When I reach for the towel, I find it on the floor. Gibbs, Gibbs, I think before recalling I'd used the bathroom last.

Besides, sex isn't the only reason people go bad. Sometimes the causes lie elsewhere entirely.

Helen says there's always another side.

But what other side could there be?

They captured them, chained them, stripped them. And that was only the beginning.

Plus they took photos.

The night is so clear, Venus looks nearer than Newark. The giant beech in full summer leaf flippers the air like a school of fish. Any moment it might zip away. I remember once when both the kids were small we took them on a whale watch in a glass-bottom boat where you could see the underwater neighborhoods, each different from the rest. Sheila stretched out on the floor and pressed her face to the glass, losing herself so utterly in that world that when the cry of "whale" came we had to drag her up to the deck so she could see what the rest of us were marveling at, and not just what she dreamed alone. Initially sulky, she watched the whales leap and spew and she began to smile and wave with the rest of the kids. When she smiled at you, the universe felt right. The moment they were gone, she raced back into the glass belly of the boat.

Something stirs in the junipers, then two skunks emerge and waddle toward the compost pile.

The sight of them is strangely comforting.

This time, when I crawl between the sheets, Gibbs is quiet. In minutes I'm asleep.

THE NEXT MORNING, I waken oddly excited and stretch out sideways

on the empty bed, smiling. It almost feels like Christmas. I dreamed the President's wife was coming for lunch. She heard I needed help. It was thrilling. Everyone was there: both my parents, Gibbs, our kids. The problem was cleaning the house, which kept changing as I approached it: one minute it was like our current home, then like the apartment in New York, then my childhood home with the blue shutters. I tried keeping my eyes closed, the better to fondle the dream's details, and didn't notice as, bit by bit, they turned into something else entirely, as my mind drifted to thoughts of what we'd never see—the families of the victims. What were they thinking now, those mothers and daughters of the people our daughter killed? Were they moving ahead with their lives? Could I?

A bolt of inspiration drives me out of bed. I stumble to the bathroom. What if we made it our life's work to help the victims' families? It might not even cost that much, I think, reaching again for the towel. It might help us all.

THIS MORNING EVERYTHING is quiet. I'm barely out of bed when my back insists I lie down on the floor. I obey.

Gibbs is already out; all the neighbors are away (it's August); the house is utterly still.

The floor is covered with a thick beige carpet and I stretch out my arms and legs as far as they'll go. This is what it's like to be dead, I think. Once it arrives, the thought refuses to leave. What it's like to be dead! A sneak preview. Coming attractions. You lie there and you don't move and you're aware of everything that's going on around you, but it's not about you anymore. Finally it's just about them.

I shut my eyes and imagine this room without me.

The bed with the brass headboard; the giant spirit-catcher from Santa Fe on one wall; the halogen torchiere; the teak dresser with the row of photographs, including one of Zack and the two Sheilas on the Royal Mile in Edinburgh just below the castle, taken hours before Zack sprained his ankle on the night-time Jekyll and Hyde tour; next to it stands my parents' wedding photo in a double frame with one of Gibbs and me. The two couples eye each other warily, as though half-conscious that they share more than they know.

Nothing left but the stuff, no me to dust or dream.

Not so bad, in the end. That exhausting business of being one's self over. Nothing left to resent or grieve. Just nothing, nothing at all.

I cross my arms over my chest and squeeze my forearms. Gradually

my breathing slows.

Today we fly to San Diego. Tomorrow we rent a car and drive to Miramar, where the prison is. I've never been to California. At the last minute we decided to take a few days in San Francisco. Gibbs found a reasonable place in the Haight. I've wanted to see it ever since junior high, when I first heard about the summer of love. I was a Grateful Dead fan then. We also bought trip insurance, in case we need to cancel Scotland.

In case my daughter needs me.

It's strange to think my mother doesn't. She's glad to see me, yet she gets along just fine alone. I tried ushering her to Skype, Gibbs had a laptop ready, but she refused. Why, she asked? You young people have a mania for staying in touch. We didn't do that in my day. We saw the person we were with. We saw the trees that grew around us. We ate food from our neighbors' fields, the sheep they fattened. And we lived in the house where we were born. This will sound boring to you, but for me there's more variety in a morning's work in the garden than I could imagine seeing on the dearest safari.

Your generation has lost touch with solitude, she says to me often.

I'M TOWELING MYSELF dry in the bedroom, clothes laid out on the quilt, when Gibbs comes in holding a bottle of eardrops. His pained face suggests the colony is growing. He's wearing the hush-puppies I hate and a pink shirt with the collar buttoned. I frown.

"Zack phoned while you were in the shower."

And?

"He apologized. Said he has something he wants us to bring out to Sheila."

"Think we'll be allowed to give her anything?"

"I doubt it."

"Did he say what it was?"

Gibbs shook his head.

It occurs to me that for a couple of talkers Gibbs and I didn't do much of a job communicating what we felt to our kids.

"I went out to get this," he holds up the eardrops.

I nod. I stare at Gibbs for so long he starts to fade until I can hardly tell he's there.

My daughter wanted to please the world. Why? She wanted to be liked because she felt so alone. She needed others' approval because we couldn't offer enough.

Instead, she tried pleasing the President and his awful men. They do what they do and never look back. They plant their ideas in people. Good people, rich soil. Then they water them with words. Big words, luscious words: God, service, country, patriot, hero. Empty words; cheap talk. They know they're lying. The words mean nothing in their mouths. But they pour them like rain on innocent ground. They bewildered my daughter. She grew like a plant groping for light, twisted and turned, as they'd have her, until this. And then the light went out. And they wanted nothing to do with what they had made.

Like houseflies in crickets, they eat us alive.

Where will I, who truth be told, never seemed to please anyone either—except maybe Gibbs—now find comfort? My daughter needs me. What can I say to you, daughter?

I can still pray, and I do. That my father taught me and it's no small thing. Who am I to throw stones? The only thing, I wonder sometimes if prayer doesn't reinforce what it intends to relieve. I mean our solitude, since our joys are invariably shared. Count them with me: birthdays, kisses, real kisses, that first burn of love—I've known that burn, the joy of it, and I want you to know it, daughter. To feel it yourself. Understand me: I accept the blame. For you. I do. I lied—to you, to Gibbs, to myself, to everyone. I was never in love with the good man I married. You must have felt it. But I know what love demands, and I want you to know it too. What you've done is so hard, and real, and some part of it will go on forever. The amends we make we will keep making for just as long. Yet, despite everything, I promise you one day you will be invited to love. Accept that invitation. When the time comes, walk with us.