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LETTING GO

David Gorham was finishing up calling the roll in his 7:40 intro to literature class.

“Christine?”

“Here.”

“Robert?”

“Robert, wave your hand a little louder, please.”

“I’m here.”

“Good. Suzanne?”

“Here, sir.”

“I have Gordon, Louise, and Stephanie marked absent. Now lets see I asked you to reread part of William Faulkner’s “The Bear” and read John Cheever’s “The Fourth

Alarm.” Could anyone suggest why I had you read these two pieces of literature together?”

Gorham waited, as he always did now days, for someone to break the silence. When he first started teaching, he had been afraid of the silence and filled it with the material he had been given in graduate school. Later on he realized that for these students reading and learning to respond were more important than hearing sophisticated critical interpretations of the work. The silence didn’t bother him any more.

“Christy.”

“Like in both of them, the characters are, you know, in search of something.”

Gorham wanted to interrupt her and tell them about the summer of 1989. He was at Yale University and was himself in search of something, something he couldn’t define even now. Maybe it had been as simple as a midlife crisis. But if that were the case, at 49, he had been a late bloomer.

He decided try to understand the plight of the homeless in America. The Sterling Library was a stone’s throw from his dormitory. He could have gone there and read any number of solid sociological monographs on homelessness. He could have gone to the offices of Yale professors in several departments and discussed the issue. He didn’t want to read and discuss. He didn’t anymore trust academics. He had been one too long.

Even the phrase “the homeless in America” took on a mock grandeur of the Fox Movietone News; it sounded like the descriptors that follow the colon in a dissertation title. He took the Metro North to New York City on a Thursday afternoon and planned to stay in Bryant Park behind the New York Public Library till the next Tuesday morning.

“Katherine, can you tell us what they are looking for?”

“Well, Ike, in ‘The Bear,’ is looking for the bear, Old Ben. And the guy in ‘The Fourth Alarm—they don’t ever tell you his name—is looking to save his marriage, I think.”

“Does the fact that Cheever doesn’t reveal the character’s name have anything to do with point-of-view?”

He took out his partial plate, his four upper front teeth, took off his glasses, took out his money clip and a handful of change and removed his wallet. All these things he left in his room at Yale. He put his room key in his right sock and his diver’s license in his left sock. Dressed in jeans and a knit shirt with a light jacket tied around his waist, he headed across the scar that was downtown New Haven to the train station. Later, seated on the train, he tucked his return ticket into his sock with his room key.

It was a warm day that Thursday. Bryant Park was full of people when he got there, young women pushing strollers, young people grazing at the bookseller’s tables, kids skateboarding and playing boom boxes, and here and there in the park, behind benches and near the outer walls, lying on cardboard mats, covered with their coats, still asleep, the homeless. Gorham walked over to the wall that divided the park from 42nd Street and sat down with his back to the wall a foot or so from a sleeping man. He was younger than Gorham, maybe thirty-five, white, thin, unshaven, and dirty. Gorham could smell his body odor even at that distance.

“Donald?”

“It’s a first person narrative. So the character really has no reason or opportunity to let us know his name.”

The man next to Gorham woke up and stared at him for some time. “Haven’t seen you here before.”

“Nope.”

“I’m Charlie. You want to go find some lunch?”

“Name’s Dave. Sure, let’s get some food.”

Charlie explained the process as the two of them walked toward the big marble plaza outside the Grace Building a block north of the park.

“Don’t look at the people. Just stare at their food.”

Gorham sat down on the white marble ledge fairly close to two young women sharing a medium pizza from a box. Gorham stared at the pizza and smiled his best toothless grin. He remembered a rheumy-eyed black bum—bum was a word that was still in his vocabulary then—in Battery Park staring at his food once. He was eating a burger and fries. Finally he broke his sandwich in two and left half the hamburger and what were left of his fries for the bum as he headed toward the ferry for Ellis Island. Charlie was right; the trick still worked. When the women finished eating, one of them gathered up their soiled napkins and drink cups and the empty pizza box while the other one slid two slices of mushroom pizza toward Gorham on a fresh napkin.

“How is what Ike McCaslin does different from what the protagonist in “The Fourth Alarm does? Amy?”

Toward evening, Gorham found some cardboard in a dumpster in an alley behind a furniture store near the Port Authority and carried it back to Bryant Park. His feet were really sore. Although he sat down here and there from time to time, he had been on them almost all day on the hard concrete sidewalks of New York. At sundown, as the park

began to empty out, Gorham put his cardboard down on the grass behind a bench near the back wall of the New York Public Library. He was tired and despite the traffic that continued to flow across 42nd Street, he fell asleep almost at once. Then he awoke suddenly and in pain. Someone was kicking him in the arms and back.

“This is my place you son of a bitch. Anyone can tell you. This is my place.”

“Take it easy. No problem. I’ll move.”

The kicking stopped. An angry man stood above Gorham breathing heavily. Gorham slid away from him, stood up and pulled his cardboard over near Charlie’s spot by the street.

“That’s Mac. He was in Viet Nam too. He mostly didn’t make it back. He’s crazy. Most of the folks out here are.”

“You were in Viet Nam?”

“Yep. Special Forces. Two tours.”

“Are you crazy?”

“Nope. I just don’t like houses anymore. Seen too many people burned up in them.”

“How do you deal with the crazies?”

“You just have to act crazier than they are. Everybody out here is scared, even the crazies. If you act crazy, people will leave you alone. The ones here aren’t so bad. If you fall out of here, you wind up down on the Bowery. That’s the end.

“The end?”

“That’s where the ones are who don’t care at all anymore.”

“What do you do in the winter?”

“I’ll show you later. Below the subway underneath Grand Central, it never gets cold down there.”

“Is that what you meant, Dr. Gorham?”

“What, Amy?”

“I said, McCaslin put his watch and this compass on the stump and went off into the wilderness in search of the bear. The guy in “The Fourth Alarm” couldn’t put down his keys and his wallet and his watch.”

“That’s right. I wonder if any of you have read ‘Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.’ If you’ve read it raise your hand. Oh, good. Several of you have read it. Jonathan do you see a relationship between Gawain and either of these other characters?”

The next morning Gorham woke up dreaming of Jamaica, although he had never been there or anywhere else outside the United States unless Niagara Falls, Canada counted. The dream was prompted by a steel band that had set up shop just outside the wall by which Gorham slept and was beginning to gather a crowd with its insinuating Caribbean rhythms. Gorham lay there and listened for some time, and soon he heard another music. The street people from the park, drawn by the crowd were circulating with their low insistent patter.

“Change? Some change?”

“Quarter? Quarter? Quarter?”

Gorham went out on the street and watched the panhandlers work the crowd. He decided to give it a try, but his sore ribs reminded him of the problems of territoriality. He moved away from the park west on 42nd Street toward the Port Authority. He learned back

against a porn theater that wasn't open yet and began to work on the commuters heading toward Times Square.

“Quarter. Quarter, please?” he whispered with his eyes aimed somewhere between the necks and knees of the passersby—a poplin jacket, a palm beach suit, a pastel pants suit. Most of the suits just walked on by. Some swerved away from him and walked slightly faster. A few cursed at him or muttered.

“Get a job, asshole.”

One, a clean-cut, young executive, who looked like a copywriter or an art director for an ad agency, a Wall Street type, or a lawyer, turned his head and spit squarely into Gorham's face. He went out of the panhandling business.

“Gawain is more like the guy in ‘The Fourth Alarm.’ He, like, hangs on to the stuff he thinks will save him.”

“The stuff? What ‘stuff?’”

“Well. It says, you know, that it's a girdle, but, like, that makes no sense.”

“Girdles at the time Gawain was written meant long sashes. Women wore them around their waists and often gave them to their favorite knights as keepsakes, tokens, and remembrances; sometimes these gifts were supposed to possess magical powers to protect the knight.

“That was what Gawain thought. That's why he didn't tell the Green Knight about the gir...the sash.”

“Call it ‘the girdle.’”

“It sounds stupid.”

Charlie took Gorham to Grand Central Station. Just past the Oyster Bar, he slipped into a restroom and through a hole in the back of the restroom closet. They were in a room full of pipes.

“Steam pipes. In the winter these things keep this whole area warm,” Charlie said as he swung down a flight of circular stairs past a series of metal doors. “These doors are emergency exits from the subway system.” They went through a metal door at the bottom of the stairs. “We are below the subway now.” They were past the light too.

“I can’t see a thing.”

“Wait a second.” Charlie flipped a switch and a string of weak bulbs exposed what appeared to be a reproduction of the sophomore’s room in Gorham’s fraternity house—rows of bunk beds, maybe twenty of them, a hot plate, one of those apartment-sized refrigerators, a small table and four chairs.

“Mostly the same folks show up here night after night in the winter. We all know each other. We are sort of a family.”

“Do the crazies come?”

“Not the real crazies. They don’t like groups of any kind. Say, you know, you ask a lot of questions. You aren’t one of them sociologists are you? Those people are a sincere pain in the ass. Summer is the worst. They don’t work in the summer, and they’re all over us like flies”

“Do I look like some college professor?”

“No you don’t, but those hands of yours have never done much. Who are you, Dave?”

“Professor Gorham?”

“Yes, Mike.”

“What everyone says about Ike McCaslin—how he just strides off without his knife, his gun, his watch and compass—it’s like, you know, Luke Skywalker when he is flying his X-wing fighter down the canyon of the Death Star trying to launch a Proton Torpedo into the ventilation shaft that leads to the main reactor core.”

Mike, who seldom read the assigned material, was super bright—bright enough to pick out enough detail from class discussions to pass quizzes and write reasonable papers without reading the books—and he could always be depended upon to make a link between the assignments and a movie. He seemed to have seen every movie on earth. Gorham found him generally interesting, but this didn’t seem to be going anywhere.

“Your point, Mike?”

“Well, you know, Luke is using his targeting computers and he hears the voice of Obi Wan Kenobi (who by this time is dead) saying ‘Use the Force, Luke. Trust your feelings.’ And Luke turns off his computer and zaps the Death Star with his faith.”

“Do we have to pray or anything?” Gorham asked Charlie as they walked along the 42nd Street side of the Port Authority toward the Little Baptist Mission in Hell’s Kitchen.

“Naw! They sing a few songs. Sometimes there’s a testimonial—you know, somebody gets up and says how they was lost and sinning and got saved. Then we eat. Usually soup and bread. It’s pretty good.”

The soup was a thick split pea and Gorham burned the roof of his mouth where the plastic of his partial plate usually protected. The bread was a rich black bread that reminded him of some of the rye breads that the German neighborhood bakeries in his

hometown made when he was a kid. Some volunteers asked if anyone needed to see a doctor. The man in charge said he would be around after the meal if anyone wanted to talk to him about the saving power of Jesus Christ, but all in all it was very low key for Baptists.

When they got back to the park the pressure increased. There were cops everywhere, and city sanitation workers were going around gathering up all the cardboard and tossing it into garbage trucks.

“What’s going on?”

“We’re going to have to find somewhere else to sleep tonight, Dave. This happens every once in a while. Since the city started to clean up Times Square, they bring the big money people in to look things over. We don’t fit into their picture, so they roust our asses out of the park the night before the tour. Let’s just walk out of here.”

“What if we don’t? What if we stay? I mean, shit! It’s a free country.”

“If you stay, you will spend the night in the Tombs. You ever been in jail, Dave?”

“I think Mike is right, Dr. Gorham. It’s about faith. Gawain didn’t think he was safe in his belief so he kept the girdle. The guy in ‘The Fourth Alarm’ had no faith in himself. This all reminds me of Emerson and Thoreau—self reliance.”

“Faith and Self Reliance are not quite the same thing, Luanne.”

“Well what about *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*? Harrison Ford has to go through a series of tests in order to reach the cave where the Holy Grail is. At one point he has to step over the edge of a cliff, into a canyon, into a void. It is a leap of faith. His eyes and his reason tell him that he will die if he takes the step, but he does it anyway and

there is a path across the void that was invisible—just like when Ike couldn't see the Bear until he took a leap of faith. Cool, right.”

“Yeh, Mike. Cool.”

Gorham spent the night under a bridge in Central Park. He awoke in a light rain and donned the light jacket he had used for a pillow. Then he started the long walk back to the Times Square area in time to see that Charlie had been right. Security was tight all right. The tourists couldn't even get to TKTS, TKTS booth. There were cops everywhere. Gorham had never really been hungry in his life, but he was as close now as he ever wanted to be. He cut down an alley behind a string of restaurants on 44th Street. There were several dumpsters. He climbed up and opened one, hung head down rummaging for something to eat. The smells were overwhelming and there were flies everywhere. He grabbed a slice of cold, soggy, pepperoni pizza and a chunk of iceberg lettuce climbed down from the dumpster. The lettuce was slick on the outside, but when he pulled away the outer leaves it was firm near the heart. He walked along the alley eating the pizza and washing it down with bites of the lettuce. It smelled like garbage, but it tasted all right and the price was excellent for that section of the city. At the end of the alley, Gorham caught sight of a pile of rags out of the corner of his eye. Then he heard a scream and realized that the pile of rags was a man sleeping and that he had just stepped on the man's outstretched hand. The man, dirty with sores all over his face leaped up and bought a knife quickly from somewhere beneath his clothing.

“I'm going to get you now, boy. I'm going to cut you good.”

Gorham turned to face the man. He put his hands in his jacket pockets and tried to remember how Mac's face had looked when he kicked him awake in the park. He put that

face on—especially in his eyes—and smiled his toothless grin. Then he took a step forward toward the knife. That was the hardest part. As he did it, he remembered something he hadn't thought about in twenty-five years—*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Said Gawain, "Strike once more;
I shall neither flinch nor flee;
But if my head falls to the floor
There is no mending me!"

Gorham, looking as crazy as possible, whispered, "It's funny that you would pick today to die." As he said it, he rammed his left index finger forward in the pocket his jacket the way he had as a child playing cops and robbers. The man let the knife drop to the pavement and stepped back against the brick wall of the building.

"Don't shoot. I'm cool. You just startled me when you stepped on my hand. I'm cool."

Gorham turned out of the alley and headed toward the park. His legs were shaking. His lower legs and feet were swelled from the heat and the pounding the concrete gave them. He could smell the sour of his own stink. He was already developing a crotch rash from the heat and the dirt. He had had a headache for two days from straining his eyes trying to read things without his glasses. He felt the impress of his room key on the bottom of his right foot. He wondered if he could throw away the key and his license and his return ticket. He wondered how long it would take him to fall through the cracks here and wind up on the Bowery. He pulled his return ticket out of his sock and held it for a long time in his hand. Although he couldn't read it, he knew what

it was and just knowing made him feel better. He decided to walk to Grand Central and take the Metro North back to New Haven. He wanted a shower more than anything on earth.

“Dr. Gorham?”

“Yes, Christy.”

“You haven’t said much about these stories. Like, usually you, you know, see stuff that none of us ever thought of.”

Gorham wanted to tell them that sometimes holding on meant letting go, that winning was sometimes a matter of learning how to lose, that the Biblical paradox “One must lose his life in order to gain it” made sense, that he had never gone to Bratislava because, although at one time he had a one way ticket there, he had not had a passport. He wanted to tell them, but he didn’t. The things that made him get back on the train and return to Yale—his wife, his two sons, his tenured position at a good liberal arts college—those things were all still there. He knew that if he told them about New York that they would remember nothing else from that day. The marvelous creativity of The Pearl Poet, John Cheever, and William Faulkner would pale before the reality of his foolish experiment. What mattered was that they sometime try to get outside their comfortable lives to discover who they really are. But, he knew, that would only happen to some of them and only when they least expected it.

“I imagine most of us are more like the character in ‘The Fourth Alarm’ than we are like Ike McCaslin, or for that matter, like Emerson or Thoreau. Self Reliance is a tough row to hoe. From what little I know of it, faith may well be harder. I would guess that you’ll come back to these stories again and again as you grow older. And I imagine

they'll change as you grow and develop. This has been a good discussion. Remember to read Faulkner's "Delta Autumn" and "Hills like White Elephants" by Ernest Hemingway for Wednesday. Are there any questions?

"Are we going to have a quiz on Wednesday?"

"No, Christy. No quiz, but remember you do have a paper due at the end of the month. It's always a good idea to start early. Are there any other questions? O.K. then, that will be all."