



FICTION

SOFT & EASY, HELLO OR GOODBYE

WADE BELL

THE moment Bowen determined to think no more about Tara was the moment before she called. He was drawing on a piece of cardboard, imagining a face. He hadn't drawn a line since their affair began.

She asked to meet him downtown for a drink. He felt elated, then annoyed at having his evening interrupted, then elated again, though her voice carried within it no hook on which he could legitimately hang an expectation of happiness.

Discman clipped to his waist, his freshly shaved face caressed by the air of the old millennium's final spring, he pedaled his bike south on Centre, free-wheeled down the hill and across the bridge with the lions, then

slowed as he entered the curtain of light. He took a right and rode toward the great indigo pagoda, smiling at the beauty of the oriental street, knees driving to the rhythms of Texas is the Reason.

It was a bar Bowen had not been in before and once inside he knew why. Tawny light from phony Tiffany lamps shone on oiled walnut walls. A waiter and a bartender stood talking together, looking bored. The only customer, a fat man with a red tie and white hair, ate oysters at a table near the back. The pictures on the wall were English fox hunting scenes that looked like framed place mats.

The booths were divided by frosted glass panes with a design of transparent ducks in flight.

Bowen was glad he'd worn shorts. He didn't want to look as if he belonged.

He read a newspaper and drank a beer as he waited for Tara. Pretty soon the man finished his oysters and left. Bowen ordered a second beer and read the newspaper.

A couple came into the bar as Bowen was rereading the comics. The woman was about six feet tall, perhaps 25 years old, with straight, short dark hair and the softly glowing, expertly made-up face of a cover girl. The bar's awful light displayed her perfectly. She wore a blue and white miniskirt, skin tight, striped like a Cinzano umbrella.

The bodies of the waiter and bartender were turned, held as in freeze-frame, their already

Illustration by Lisa Brawn

forgotten conversation halted in mid-thought. The man, whose eyes were at the level of the girl's mouth, wore scuffed black brogues and a dark suit with too much white showing at the sleeves. He was in his forties.

Bowen stared at them as they approached his booth. Then he returned his gaze to the paper. He heard, felt, sensed the woman slide into the booth behind him, smelled perfume that was there and then gone. The man stood for a moment, wondering, Bowen supposed, why she had elected to sit so close to the only other customer in the bar, but finally he sat too, his back to Bowen's back.

The man ordered for both of them: a manhattan and a whiskey sour. Bowen couldn't remember the last time he'd heard anyone ask for either of those drinks. He supposed the bartender would be pleased. It was a manhattan and whiskey sour sort of place.

In a voice that was meant to be low and intimate but that Bowen could hear perfectly well as he studied the empty black and white squares of a crossword puzzle, the man said, "But I want to help you."

"It's no use," the woman replied. Her metallic, piercing voice startled Bowen.

"Just try me," the man said. "Just open up to me. I understand you better than you think."

"It's no use," the woman said. "There's nobody home."

"What do you mean, there's nobody home?"

"Don't bother trying to understand," the woman said.

"It's just me, it's a bad day. Don't bother about me. Go back to work."

It was ten at night. Bowen wondered what sort of work the man did.

"I don't want to go back to work. I love you."

"Oh, shit," the woman said. When the waiter came with drinks on a tray, Bowen took advantage of the moment to turn around and take a look at the woman, but the view through the clear glass of a duck was blocked by the man's shoulder. He twisted around, looking through duck after duck until her face was in view.

In a voice even lower than before the man said, "You know I still love you."

When the waiter glanced at him, Bowen shook his head no, then changed his mind and called him back. He asked to borrow a pencil.

"It's just me," the woman went on in her metallic voice. "I'm owly today. Really owly. Really, really owly. Yesterday I thought it was game over. Game over day, you know? And today it's the day after game over day so I'm not here anymore. You know?"

"No," the man said.

"Like I don't have control anymore. Don't you understand?" "Of course you have control," the man said firmly.

"I'm like a ship on the sea, tossed by the waves, rudderless, you know? Without sails or anything. That's how I am. I'm out of control and the waves are getting higher."

"Relax and drink your drink," the man said. He sounded as if he wished he were back at work. The waiter came with the stub of a pencil. Bowen found an advertisement with a lot of white and began to draw.

"Like, I'd just got home from the airport when you called this morning. And I didn't have any



breakfast and I didn't have any lunch and I should eat but I can't eat. I don't have the energy to heat a can of soup. You know? And no, I don't want to eat here and no, I don't want this drink. What can I say?"

Bowen imagined the man shaking his head. "You were at the airport?"

"Seeing off friends. And I'm thinking I'd like to go somewhere, too. I always feel that way at airports. But I don't want to be alone in some strange city. Like sometimes I love that, you know, being alone somewhere I've never been before. I used to love that, right? But now I couldn't handle it. I'd just be lonely not knowing anybody. I'd go crazy. So I come home, right? And I'm sitting there like I'm lost at sea and I want to cry because I can't control my thoughts but I can't even cry. You know?"

The man was silent. Bowen imagined him staring into his drink, whichever one it was. The manhattan, he guessed. He stopped drawing and looked back at the crossword puzzle.

"I couldn't even write a cheque to pay my phone bill,"

the woman went on. "Do you understand?"

One of them lit a cigarette.

Seven across was "maggie."

"There's nobody home. I don't know how else to say it."

"Just a minute," the man said. "I have to go to the bathroom."

"I'll talk to myself," the girl said.

"I'll be right back. Don't worry."

As the man walked away, the woman said, "What do I care if he understands or not? I mean, really, who cares?"

Bowen looked over his shoulder. Through the duck's head he locked eyes with the woman. "What am I to him anyway?" the woman asked. "What's he to me?"

Bowen looked away. When her companion returned she began even before he sat down. "It's like I can't think straight. It's like it's been years since I've felt normal, like a human, since I've cared about anything. And when I think about it, it's only been a couple of weeks. I remember laughing, I remember thinking I'd like to have a cat, I remember thinking the green of

the new leaves was the most beautiful colour I'd ever seen, but today, now, yesterday... well, yesterday was game over day and today's the day after game over day and I'm not here anymore. I'm terminated. Finished. Do you understand?"

The man took a deep breath and sighed. "No," he said.

"If I had a cat it'd starve," the woman said.

The man was silent.

"Maybe I should eat. And do exercises. I should stop watching TV."

"Are you sure you don't want that drink?"

"No," the woman said. "I'll just sit here and cry. But I can't cry. Isn't that funny?"

"Double rye," the man said to the waiter. "Neat."

The waiter looked at Bowen. Again Bowen shook his head no.

"Like I'm in pain but I don't feel pain because I don't feel anything."

They were both silent until the waiter came back with the double rye. He set it on the table and the man said thanks.

"Like I can't feel!" the woman burst out as the waiter turned away.

“Gotta go,” the man said. Bowen heard a glass bang down on the table.

“And I’m broke,” the woman continued, “and I want to spend a thousand dollars. I need a thousand dollars because I need new clothes. I need five hundred dollars worth of clothes and some other things. Do you understand?”

The man said, “Clothes?”

“Something to hide my ugliness.”

“Do you want to go?” the man said. “I have to go.”

“I’m an empty, ugly shell,” the woman said. “There’s nobody home. I’m sorry. I wish there were. For you and for me.”

“I have to go,” he said.

“I’m going away!”

“What?”

“I’m going away. I’m going to the airport and I’m going to catch a plane and just go!”

“What do you mean? Go where?”

“It doesn’t matter. That’s the point.”

“Of course it matters. When will you be back? When will I see you again?”

Her voice became even higher, thinner. “You don’t understand a thing!”

“Obviously not.”

“Will you lend me the money?”

“No.”

“Yes. I promise I’ll be a better person when I get back. I promise I’ll be alive again. I promise you I won’t just sit and stare out windows like a zombie. Will you?”

The man got up. The woman jumped up after him. Bowen watched them walk toward the door, still talking.

The man stepped aside to let Tara pass.

TARA made no apologies for being late. She slipped into the booth in the seat across from Bowen. No, she didn’t want a drink. She couldn’t stay.

Her hair was cropped. No more the thousand tiny curls that trapped the sunlight, trapped his eyes and helped trap his heart. It was a shock to Bowen, this nun’s head. He found it strangely erotic. When he reached to touch it she backed away.

The woman in the miniskirt came back and sat down in the booth she had just left.

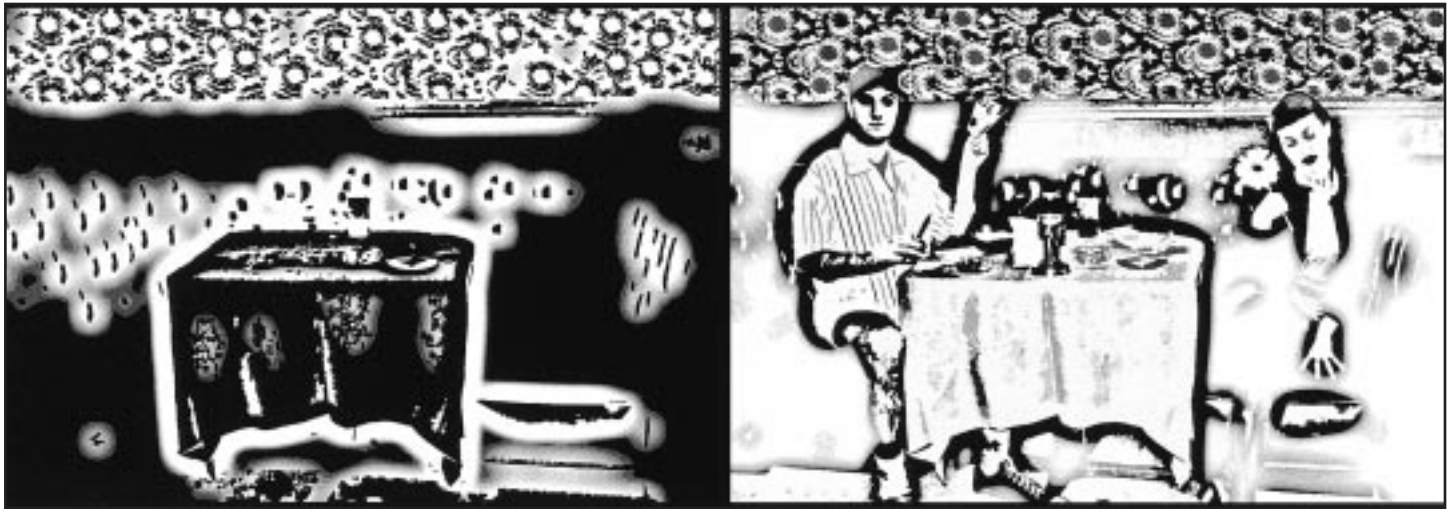
Tara told Bowen about her struggles of the past few weeks.

Her voice was matter of fact. Did she want to live with her husband, did she want to live with Bowen or did she want to be by herself and see no one for a while? Bowen waited patiently for her decision. She said she’d decided on her husband.

“When we see each other socially,” she said, looking him in the eye, “you will behave as a gentleman and say or do nothing to remind Teddy or anyone of our affair.”

If her instructions in manners lacked compassion he could forgive her for it, though he knew he would not retake his position in that circle of friends. The friends were all engineers working in oil company towers. Though none of them were over 30 they revealed their upward mobility with world class cars and worldwide vacations. Bowen was their token artist, though he took jobs as a draftsman when he could get them.

Tara looked ill, Bowen thought, although it might have been the insipid light on the oiled walls or it might have been that he wanted to see her that way, that he wanted to punish her by



diminishing her beauty in his mind. She had lost weight. She was too thin. The cropped head did not help.

The label inside her tidy outfit read Jones New York. He knew because they bought it together during a weekend in San Francisco. Underneath would be Vassarette, colour shark. She sighed, sank down in her seat, the pressure of informing Bowen of her decision now off her conscience. Signaling the waiter, she ordered a pina colada.

They didn't speak. There was nothing left to say. Then her drink came. After drinking half of it in a hurry she discovered she did have something to say.

She talked of her future, of the mistakes of the past—not that Bowen was a mistake, she assured him—and of her resolve to make her marriage work. The alcohol gave her strength and with it came a certain coldness. She wouldn't look at him. Bowen supposed he understood the need for coldness now. He wondered if she chose that bar because no one they knew could possibly have been there to see them together, or whether it was because she would never have to

go there again and be reminded of that evening.

She finished her drink and stood to leave. Bowen stood with her. At last their eyes met. She put her hands on his arms and reached up to kiss him. The kiss was soft and easy, the kind that served for either hello or goodbye.

He sat back down, thinking he would stay until he could stand neither the bar nor himself any longer.

He looked at the comics again and surprised himself by finding a couple of them funny this time. Leaning back, he felt a sense of release and relief. He could laugh. It was over.

Behind him the woman laughed too. He'd forgotten all about her.

He looked through the duck. She said: "You know? I feel like I've lost the lottery. By just this much."

In a moment she was sliding into the seat across from him, smiling. "Did you lose the lottery too?"

Bowen smiled back.

"Are you going to let me see what you were drawing?"

"How did you know I was drawing?"

"I notice things. I'm not as dumb as I sound."

Bowen chuckled. "That's good to hear."

He showed her the drawing.

"It's me." She smiled again. "You're good. I'll bet you're a real artist."

"I am," Bowen said. "Starting tonight, starting with you."

"Well, if you want a model..." Bowen grinned. "I started your face before I ever saw you. I had just one line on a piece of cardboard at home but I knew what the rest of you would look like."

"From just one line? Before you knew me?"

"Uh huh."

"It must have been a very good line. Are all your lines that good?"

"You tell me," he said.

"I'll bet they are. Well, you know what they say. If you lose one lottery, you have to buy a ticket on the next. Otherwise, you won't win anything."

She paused then asked brightly, "Would you want me nude?" ☹️

Wade Bell is the author of The North Saskatchewan River Book, a collection of fiction set in Edmonton and the Rockies. His writing has appeared in magazines and anthologies in Canada, the US and Japan.