



GERALD LYNCH
CHILD'S PLAY

I was craning about for a parking spot, squinting against the glare and silently cursing the forgotten shades. Sweating as I manoeuvred my wife's boxy little VW Golf through the rush of tourists for the day's opening of the Museum of Science and Technology. Proceeding extra carefully because only the day before I'd driven her car into the cinder-block wall while parking in my underground spot at my hospital, CHEO. I told Monica my foot had slipped off the brake onto the accelerator, but that's not really what happened. After pulling into my space I'd stepped on the gas instead of the brake—some jolt. No real damage to the car, but I'd been shaken. From the shock at how suddenly it had happened. What must a real accident be like?

'There's ...' Shawn's shout died. She was searching the area on the right.

'No, there's not.'

For all their ordered crowding, institutional parking lots make me feel flustered and reduced. Never a good spot. No shade. The longer I cruised the choice lanes the likelier I'd end up parking even farther from the entrance. My eyes hurt already.

Just when I'd decided to give up and head for the Congo of tarmac, I spotted a space on the right. Shawn had missed it, as had the competition, a spot at the very corner closest to the entrance!

I rounded widely in what I hoped would be a neat manoeuvre—and came nose to nose with a jeep. I knew it was a jeep because it had JEEP emblazoned in chrome on its black grill, which was about level with my roof. Its steering wheel was topped by a shaggy black head of beard and hair. Bared teeth in a biting smile. Don't push me, suburban Bawana, I'm up for a stand-off.

Both vehicles rolled forward, both stopped. He broke into an unhinged smile and gestured at the space with his left hand like a guide presenting a litter of lambs at the Experimental Farm (where, given Shawn's love of animals, we'd have gone if not for the heat). He gunned past me dangerously with a silenced laugh, head thrown back and presenting an Adam's apple I wanted to core with a rusty scalpel. The prick, showing me up courteously like that in front of my kid.

It was a spot reserved for the handicapped, of course. I pinched my lips and shook my head at the freshly painted icon, the stick figure in the broken C of a wheelchair, with legs like a half-swastika flopping from its minimal lap. A superstitious sacrifice of valuable space, complete with runic sign. For all our science and technology, we still believe we can coax good fortune. I see it every day in my work, in the desperation of parents who will fly their terminally ill child to Mexico

to be pissed on by goats, or by holy men who claim they can morph into goats. I see it too in the transported spirits of parents when I've healed their child. I've been offered lavish gifts (the deal on my vintage Caddy, which was in for servicing). When it's all just the correct application of procedure and method. That, and a little luck.

Shawn whined, 'You can't park here, Dad. This is for the disadvantaged. Hurry, find us a place!'

'Disadvantaged? Not likely. They always get the best spots and have to walk only a short ways, lucky buggers.'

'*What?* But they can't even ... ' She got it, then giggled her guilt, the delightful Shawn, with her big green eyes and hated fair hair frizzy as a dandelion clock ripe for blowing. Hated by her, that nimbus head, adored by me.

I relaxed some.

By the time we arrived at the entrance, there was a long line-up out the door. A woman in a tight grey pantsuit uniform worked the door from the inside, admitting a few at a time, quickly pulling it shut, revelling in her empowerment. We stood with the other dummies in the morning's mugginess, which thickened even as we waited, with the line slowly extending behind us. Ottawa, Sunday, and an affordable air-conditioned museum.

Though it was early September, we were in yet another heat wave. The temperature was predicted to zoom again. Yet another 'hottest summer on record' was refusing to die with dignity. Air-conditioner use was causing more brown-outs than ever. At my hospital, we were spending over a million on emergency generators instead of the beds and nurses we sorely needed. A female patient had suffered second-degree burns on her abdomen when a rad unit came back in a power surge. There's no malpractice suit so successful as one involving kids.

Shawn was already watching a man and his dog, a Golden Retriever, standing a short distance along the ribbon of lawn that separated all the macadam and walkway cement from the cinder-block building. As I've said, Shawn was at that age when girls adore all animals but their brothers and sisters and mothers, sparing fathers only. Man and man's best friend stood beside one of those spindly institutional trees that grow no bigger than the day they were planted. He wore a Gilligan hat, wrap-around shades, and was dressed too warmly in a long-sleeved white shirt and long black pants, like somebody suffering from skin sensitivity. He stood ramrod straight. The dog—one of the few breeds I can tolerate—slumped on its belly at his feet, panting out its body heat on a tongue like an incision.

The queue had stalled, and I felt Shawn pulling toward the dog. I knew what she wanted: to kneel beside it, massage the scruff of its neck, learn its name, create a private space of play.

'Can I—'

'Yes, but keep an eye on me. I'm near the door, you hustle back. Don't make me come over there and lose our spot. That happens, we go home.'

She skipped off. I couldn't hear how she greeted the smiling man, but soon she was doing precisely as I'd predicted: on her knees and confiding to the dog. The

man was grinning and talking straight ahead of himself like a blind man (I wanted his shades). He seemed to be looking at me, though he must have been speaking to Shawn or the dog, yet neither glanced at him. He held a white plastic Loeb bag bunched at his side. You see a lot of that, decent suburbanites walking dogs on retractable leashes and carrying plastic bags of shit. They're like some sub-species of human evolved to link a dog to its colostomy sack.

As the line inched forward I turned sideways to keep my eye on them. Shawn glanced at me a few times, good girl, and each time I tapped my watch and wagged a finger at her.

I thought of my wife, Monica, of her growing refusal to understand my devotion to work. Of how she's been turning away from me, in conversation, in bed, in our life altogether. She repeatedly jokes to our friends that *oncology* is the science of being *on call, all the time*. Some joke. And it's Paediatrics Oncology.

I was at the door.

Panting Shawn cut it close: 'His name is Towser and he's dying of—'

'Mr. Towser to you, young lady.' How lovely cool it was inside, like slipping into a whole other dimension.

'Da-ad.' She slapped my shoulder. (You're taller, I thought.) 'Poor Towser, he can't keep his tongue in his head he's so hot. *So thirsty*. The man said he needs a drink bad—'

'He shouldn't be bothering you with his alcohol problem.'

'Da-ad.' But no slap. 'He *can't* get Towser a drink 'cause they're waiting for *his* daughter who had to go to the bathroom. She's ten just like me.'

'That would make her *how* old in dog years?'

'You just won't listen. You never listen. You make everything a joke.' She pinched her lips and exhaled noisily through her nose, half-humming her disgust. That was her mother's new voice.

'Sorry, I wasn't listening. What'd you say? Did I miss a joke?'

No deal.

I needed to get her off the dog. She was emptying her account of compassion on that mutt, I knew the symptoms. Her older brother, Owen, could walk into the family room missing an arm at the shoulder, squirting blood like a Supersoaker, and she'd scream at him to stop blocking the TV. But a dog needing water, that was major cause for concern.

'*Can't* I bring him a drink, Dad, *please?*'

I was negotiating the tickets: 'No, Shawn, not now, as you can see, I'm ...'

When I turned from retrieving the Am-Ex receipt she wasn't there. I conducted a mildly heart-thumping visual search, same as the day before inspecting the front end of Monica's Golf. Milling children, lots of girls who resembled Shawn. No big deal, I told myself. It happened at least once per outing, Monica had forewarned me. Take it easy, I settled myself. Don't panic. Keep your wits about you. These things don't really happen, it's all media scare-mongering, such crimes are actually down, it's just about always a family member or friend. *Purple tank-top, pink shorts, purple tank-top, pink shorts* ... She's already at the concession counter? I moved

towards her, temper rising because we'd lost our place in the herd heading into the spacious interior.

I stopped. Took a deep breath. Monica had also instructed me not to hurry on this, my one day off. I was to squire Shawn to lunch at Wendy's, her preferred fast-food eatery, supposedly. I was not to call the hospital. Monica had made me hand over my cell like a cop confiscating a weapon, performing for the kids. A standing joke with her nowadays, my devotion to my vocation.

Shawn was almost skipping towards me, swinging a large white Styrofoam cup upside-down like a bell at her side. She was beaming her most irresistible smile of silver braces. I felt a minor constellation twirl through my chest. I'd need to brace myself to refuse her again.

'It'll only take a sec, Dad! The bathroom's right there,' she pointed. 'Please, Dad. Towser's gonna suffer heat stroke! The man said he had one last week and his daughter had to save him by taking him into the bath!'

'What? Who? ... No.' My scalp tingled.

I took her by the frailest of upper arms—no biceps to speak of, just bone and ropy sinew, skin still hot—and began moving her towards the interior.

She resisted strongly: 'No!'

Mothers and fathers glanced at me in irritation. *You cannot discipline your child in public, Sir. That begins at home.* To them I was a display labelled *Hurried Sunday Morning Outing for Another Deadbeat Dad Eager to Get to the Sizzling Links*. I even caught a few suspicious looks: *Who is that man forcing the little girl to go with him?* Foolishly I wanted to declare myself: *She's my daughter! I'm happily married to her mother! We're as normal a family as your next-door neighbours!*

I took her firmly by the shoulders, stooped and spoke as reasonably as I could with clenched jaw: 'Look, sweetheart, we're not here to water the dog, okay? The dog will be fine. We're inside now and we don't want to waste time going back out.'

'I do.'

'That man *and* his daughter have got the dog a drink already. Okay?'

We were far from okay. Her lower lip protruded, fat as a well-fed earthworm. She looked down at her tight tank-topped chest, where breasts had recently begun to bud, signalling gain and loss, hers and mine. No time to lose. With arm gently round her shoulders I ushered her onwards. I reached for the Styrofoam cup, she snatched it away with that same ferocious inwardness that would have let her brother pump out his life on the family room floor, away from the TV.

I tried to jolly her along. 'This place is as cold as a meat locker, and we, my little lamb chop, are the meat.'

She broke free and with fists clenched at her sides glared. 'Towser is so still out there and he's *dying* of thirst! The man *can't* get him a drink 'cause they are *still* waiting for his daughter! Sister Marlene at school says if we don't love *all* our fellow creatures we can't love anyone including ourselves!'

Indeed, is that what the good nun says? Then perhaps she'd welcome an introduction to Brother Tsetse Fly! ... Instead I took a deep breath. If she kept this

up the day was ruined for me anyway, we may as well go home. My one day away from work in weeks. I'd lost a leukemia patient that week, a nine-year-old girl. I had assured the parents—older parents, patient and remarkably self-possessed Asians—of a cure. That was stupid, but I'd never lost a child who was routine acute. I didn't think they'd sue. But I guess I did need this day out with Shawn more than she did with me. Or so Monica had convinced me.

I again squatted in front of Shawn. She jerked her face away like snagged hair the odd time I'd been left to brush it.

Look, sweetheart, I'll make you a deal. After we've seen the chick hatchery we'll go back, and if the dog is still there we'll bring him a drink—complete with swizzle stick! Okay? Deal?

She pinched her lips, but she'd already brought her face around. 'Promise? No joke?'

'No joke. Did you forget the hatchery already, the chicks? I thought they were the *only thing* you wanted to see today, I mean now that you're such a big girl and all?' A flicker of smile for my mockery. 'And let me know if you spot any bigger chicks for Dad.'

'Da-ad, you are *so* gross!'

But deal. She took my hand and pulled me along. I was in daddy heaven on our leash.

Every display and interactive amusement was now ignored: the Crazy Kitchen that we couldn't get her to leave the other times we'd brought her and her brother to my favourite museum; the magenta lightning that comes to your finger on the bell jar, which she always had to be told not to hog from the other kids; the static energy show where the demonstrator makes your hair look worse than Don King's (somewhat redundant in Shawn's case). All of it just an obstacle now to the chick hatchery and her return to the thirsty ... Towser.

Children can be so single-minded. Though I would never admit as much to my Head, Foster, I sometimes believed that my patients decided whether to recover or not. I touched my belt, the absence of my cell. I should be checking in. The healthy, the comfortable, the well off, we so seldom acknowledge how lucky we are. And we should always be minding our good fortune, daily, like a prayer to that heathen god. We shouldn't be so stingy with our gratitude as to need the relief of catastrophe to know how blessed we are in our life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. On this part of the globe, anyway, this narrowest wedge of the pie where all the choice fruit is packed.

I tried to slow her down: 'Remember how you and Owen used to pretend our kitchen was the Crazy Kitchen, reeling around till you knocked something over and Mom had to shout at you to stop?'

She made her frowning-squint face over her shoulder: 'Huh?'

And forged on, dragging the dead weight of Dad and his *memento mori*. Or is that *tempus fugit*? Or *ubi sunt*? In med school we'd learned some catchy Latin. Remember, remember, remember. But reminding kids of what they did only weeks before, let alone years ago, you may as well be discoursing on the hereditary

predisposition to foot tumours among Patagonians. Time endures differently for kids, probably in some ratio of one child summer equalling seven adult years. My heart ached, a growing pain of absence in my chest. I still had her by the hand and wanted so to hold her back. I had to resist the urge to pull her to me, lightly touch her dandelion head, cup it to my chest, because such a display would only have made her mad at me again.

So I let her go. She grinned back at me like a kid allowed into deep water for the first time, then plunged ahead towards the farthest corner of the crowded museum, where the chick hatchery waited. I could just make it out, a plastic-domed affair, like some highly illuminated bathysphere. Shawn couldn't get close, and I was comforted to see she still wanted to. The kids, most now younger than she, were pointing and squealing, three deep in their eagerness to see the chicks in various stages of hatching. One girl was half up on the dome, pasted to the plastic as if hanging on to a rocket. All around us were the wonders of science and technology—the gods I commanded in working my miracles—including an old NASA space capsule bearing the scorch marks of re-entry, yet the display the kids crowded was as common as the nearest farm.

I was the only adult shuffling forward, as hulking as Dorothy among the Munchkins. The other parents kept their distance, forming a gallery in looming shadow. I tried to take Shawn's right hand but she still held the Styrofoam cup. For my entertainment she made an impatient Shirley-Temple face at the girl riding the dome. I smiled, relaxed more. And as we inched toward the hatchery, I found my attention taken wholly by its display. Yes, the real miracle, I had to concede it.

There were a few bedraggled chicks out of their shells, as exposed as the news of a child's death sentence. Unlike the magenta lightning mechanism, these stunned marvels wouldn't come to the kiddy fingers pressed against the dome. Mostly the pathetic things stood catatonic in the shock of post-egg existence, in whatever dawning fowl-consciousness might be, looking as lost as a stillbirth, looking perhaps for something or someone to blame or love, some mother hen to imprint on ... But I was getting sentimental, anthropocentric. After all, we eat these things, from eggs to roasters.

Only one of the chicks, which looked near the end of its stay in the hatchery, was moving confidently about, pecking at the others. That upset the girls, while some boys hooted lamely. Nobody likes a prick. Mostly the dome was occupied by eggs in various stages of cracking. Chicks don't just hatch out instantly as we've been led to expect by cartoons and greeting cards. You can spend forever watching an egg with a small star-shaped crack, or even one with a fair-sized hole, before the unseen beak pecks again. Labour is labour. So no cute yellow Easter chicks leaping fluff-feathered from split shells in a burst of light and cheep-cheeping to beat the clock. Besides which, the light at even the most minuscule crack would be flooding *into* the shell.

I smiled absently down at Shawn, who wasn't there, or anywhere. Gone missing twice in one outing! Too much. We're going home. No Wendy's.

As I waded through the grown swell of kids, I was periscoping that whole

corner of the museum given over to the history of farming. Everything was freshly painted, glaring red and green, metallicly toothed and tentacled, with garishly lit recessed displays as though designed for alien experiments on humans.

I broke through the periphery and stood searching. *Purple tank-top, pink shorts, purple tank-top, pink shorts ...*

She was nowhere.

I moved along the aisle we'd hurried down as the quickest route. No sign. I couldn't conceive that she'd gone back outside without me. But obviously she had.

Already the stupid crowds appeared to be having ludicrous fun, and the kids' screeching laughter was getting horrific.

Sure she had.

My cheekbones needed, I was aware of my oesophagus just past my throat, its constricting meatiness. I realized I was trotting. As a child I'd had a near-drowning experience, and that's what I was reliving, out of my element, sinking helplessness.

I made myself walk. I talked aloud: 'This is silly. *You're* being silly.' It helped, hearing it spoken.

Monica had mouthed across the mystery of Shawn's hair: *Watch her*. She'd known I was out of practice. With Shawn ushered out the door, I'd said something like: *Those things don't really happen here, it's all media scare-mongering. Such crimes are actually down. Besides, it's just about always a family member or friend, and we have none of that animal around here.*

I reached for my cell phone and felt its absence as a physical fact—a jolt—like thinking there was another step down when you'd reached the bottom of darkened stairs. I touched my forehead and the fingertips came away wet. Before reaching the door, I'd again felt for my cell.

The hot air outside stunned my lungs, because I'd gasped, because she wasn't there either, and neither were the man and dog.

I shouted her name into the women's washroom. I made a harried mother check all the stalls for me. She'd understood immediately.

Security.

I tried to steel myself as when going in after a tumour behind a child's brain stem, hoping that *my* exploration would prove the MRI wrong, that, miracle of miracles, the growth would be encapsulated after all, not fibroid, so I could get it all, when we never could. But unlike while operating, my heart was thumping. The sweat that had increased outside continued in the cool interior. My shirt kept peeling off my back like burnt skin.

In the end I gasped out the story to the lackadaisical security guard who'd taken forever to come to the front desk, where tickets were still being sold and children still complained for treats and parents tried to ignore them and all played out like nothing was happening. For a moment the normality of it all let me think: *These things just don't happen to me.*

Then the whole scene began to feel and look unreal. The bad movie was about to freeze, the frame crack ... pieces of the bright world would fall and shatter, letting the darkness flood in. And no one else was aware of it, especially not the

stupid guard I was trying to alert. There was something Middle-Eastern about him, dusky-skinned and spicy-smelling, overly precise articulation. I was sure he didn't understand me. I wanted to throttle him: *You're not listening to me!*

But he was. I wasn't listening to him.

The search procedure was as slow as frustration nightmares where everybody is whispering unintelligibly. We first had to look in all the places where little kids had crawled in and fallen asleep—the wheels of old locomotives for boys, the polished wooden boats for girls—and all along the monstrous green velour curtain that hid the endless cinder-block walls.

'She's eleven years old! She wouldn't crawl in anywhere and sleep!'

'Yes, Sir, but we have always been successful following procedure. Relax, please Sir. It always turns out to be just the child's play, Sir. We will find the child in time.'

After an interminable thirty minutes, I had to demand that he call in the police—*now!*

I didn't phone home for another half-hour. I attempted calmly to ask Monica if, by any chance, Shawn had called? She faked composure for about ten seconds.

As I told the missing-person's detective the story of the man and the dog and Shawn's determination to relieve its thirst, his pursed silence again raised needles all over my scalp and face. As I talked he winced intermittently like he was suffering sinus irritation. No good at his job, I decided, especially if you go by the part that involves reassuring the victim, his curbside manner. I needed somebody else, somebody better, a second opinion or something, the very best detective Ottawa can provide! I would throw my weight around. Do you know who I am? Your life, or *your* child's, could be in *my* hands some day! This is not to be treated as routine!

Finally he removed his gaze from the green curtain and said, 'You actually last saw your daughter right here, at the hatchery display?' Only then did I realize he'd walked me back to that far corner. 'And you're certain she was still holding the ...' He checked his notes. 'White Styrofoam cup?'

'For fuck's sake!' I shouted, he winced. 'Are you not listening to me! It was the man with the fucking dog! Get moving on it!'

He looked at me expressionlessly, with the impassive face I use on the raging parents of my unresponsive patients. 'Do you think?'

'Yes, I do think!'

He continued calmly staring. 'I too suspect it was the man with the dog, Doctor. A man and his dog waiting outside a museum but not lining up? A dog wouldn't be admitted anyway. And somehow his daughter had bypassed the crushing crowd you described to use the bathroom?'

'Well, yes, I suspected as ...'

And as he turned and walked away: 'Had he come off the main road all the way into the crowded museum just to find a bathroom for his invisible daughter? He wasn't even bothering to speak back across his shoulder, just loudly and dead ahead. 'Or was he leaving already? Waiting for his daughter with a dog, waiting to leave just as the museum was opening for the day? I'll admit: it doesn't look good,

Doctor.'

In a panic that almost disabled me with its ability to keep rising, I followed him back out into the heat to show him the spot where the man and dog had stood.

As we neared it he brushed me back and knelt, careless of his pants. He called commandingly to two other officers, gesturing widely: 'Cordon!'

Then I was disabled. It was his sudden rude efficiency that did me in, his single-mindedness—my own style in the operating room. Time was something else again. And all the while as I was standing there near where the man and dog had waited, the sun was interested only in burning away my thinning hair, melting my scalp and lasering my skull, to see if brain matter exposed could be made to bubble faster. I put two fingers on my wrist pulse. I try to watch my watch. It doesn't make sense. Time by Dali. I look at the identifying lettering on the glass doors of the museum. It makes no sense. I am in Russia. There is no law and order anywhere.

Ongoing searches of the vicinity were turning up nothing. At first I'd actually thought that was good news. The Museum of Science and Technology was quietly closed for the rest of the day. Everyone was questioned before being dismissed, a procedure that took us to late in the day. A dog was brought in, to sniff one of Shawn's unwashed T-shirts brought from home, to sniff about inside the cordon, to tear off into the empty parking lot, to stop and go nuts barking alongside my lonely car's passenger door—*of course, she's sleeping in the car! ... Which I'd locked.* To return and look to his handler for reward.

Monica, careless of her baggy baby-blue sweatsuit, and Owen, looking dressed from a bag of cast-offs, shuffled back to the car they'd borrowed from our neighbours, holding each other like mourners from a grave. They'd hardly spoken a word to me. Monica had whispered to Owen like a prayer: *She might be back home already.*

The detective finally convinced me to leave. He said, 'Go home, Doctor. I'll call as soon as anything turns up. Comfort and give hope to your wife and son, that's your job now.'

It was nightfall by then. Beyond the two mid-size police cruisers and unmarked car at the entrance, the little Golf was the only vehicle remaining, isolated in the expanse of black lot. Walking off into the night I was thinking madly. *Home?* I would drive the streets all night! I would find her, of course. Anything else was impossible. Anything else and I *have* no home! These things do not happen to me!

In the air-conditioned car I waited and stared where Shawn had sat. I looked out the passenger window. Something far off caught my eye. Tiny white snowballing, slow motion, like an asteroid tumbling aimlessly through space. I got out and walked through hot yellowish air like something viscous, simultaneously dead to the world and alert to the moment—my operating consciousness going in. Only it was like entering my own head.

The object soon defined itself as a white Styrofoam cup. No dirt inside, no drowned ants, no stain of cola. Nothing but a few drops of clear liquid caught in a crevice at the bottom. I pushed my finger into the crevice, the Styrofoam squeaking like densely packed snow. Praying for sweetness, 7 Up, praying for the first time in

a very long time, I touched my tongue and tasted nothing.

Owen misses his visits with me more often than he makes them. He'll soon be heading off to Queen's anyway. I spend such disappointing days alone. The time hangs heavy on me.

I'm seriously considering an offer from Philadelphia Children's. An administrative position, a Headship. Something happened to my eyes over the past six months. A response to bombarding UV (I think). They've become painfully photo-sensitive. I have to wear darkly tinted prescription shades. I can't operate.

My life as I'd carefully constructed it has been ruined. Few marriages could survive what happened. What happened happened so ... normally. I go over my 'mistakes' again and again. That story about girls and dogs in bathtubs. I'd *known* there was something perverse in that. And what had been my big hurry, anyway? What was I hurrying towards on my day away from work? Why hadn't I gone back with Shawn and waited with her as she watered the dog? At the chick hatchery, why hadn't I stood back with the other parents and watched? Why did I have to push right up with the kids to see?

And many other questions as unanswerable. Unpreventable mistakes. Because defined as mistakes only in hindsight. When catastrophe strikes, people look for reasons, hoping superstitiously to protect themselves. But I can't see it. There's no reason this should have happened to me.