

The Accident



Ellen Jaffe

paperbytes

Other titles in this series

Louis Fréchette. *On the Threshold* (tr. Bernard Kelly)

Cary Fagan. *What I Learned in Florida*

A. Colin Wright. *The Comedy of Doctor Foster*

Michael Bryson. *Light and Silver*

Myles Chilton. *The Local Brew*

Bill MacDonald. *A Summer at La Rochelle*

Catharine Leggett. *The 401*

Lisa Lebedovich. *Stories from a Photograph*

Mary Frances Coady. *Exile*

Uday Prakash. *Duty Officer: Duddoo Tiwari*

Novid Parsi. *How His Little Girl Died*

Forthcoming:

Richard Brown. *Happy Billie! Lucky Nick!*

Dave Hazzan. *The Rise and Fall of Dennis Mitchell*

Robert Lindsey. *Another Opportunity for Personal Development*

Steve Owad. *Going Places*

Li Robbins. *Cowboys*

The Accident



Ellen Jaffe



paperbytes

Copyright © 2000 by Ellen Jaffe.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means – electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording or any information storage and retrieval system – without written permission from the Publisher, except by a reviewer who wishes to quote brief passages for inclusion in a review.

Design: Perkulator {Kommunikation}. Typeset in Minion.

Cover photo: Bernard Kelly

Published by

paperbytes

an imprint of *paperplates books*

19 Kenwood Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M6C 2R8

paperbytes@paperplates.org

www.paperplates.org

The Accident

IT HAPPENED QUICKLY. One minute I was driving along, waiting at the stop sign to turn right onto Mount Pleasant Road. I was almost at the hotel, the end of my trip, and the woman was standing on the dark corner to my right, waiting to cross the street, going home, perhaps, at the end of her day. Then, with a break in traffic to my left, I turned and struck her, just as she began crossing the street, sure that I'd seen her, of course I would stop for her.

It was too late. There was a sickening noise. A thud more than a crash, as metal hit something alive, something human. The woman fell to the street like the packages she was holding. Her heart stopped, the breath knocked out of her.

Actually, her heart did not stop right away. Suddenly – too suddenly – the police and ambulance were there. Sirens and lights flashing on the dark street. They took her to the hospital, but she was bleeding internally. Too much blood lost. Then her heart stopped.

Later, sitting in the police station (my hotel room empty, meeting missed, colleagues wondering where I was), I was aware of the sickening irony. I had killed a woman, taken her life away, made her heart stop beating. And that was the autumn I myself was moving in a fog because of a broken heart.

“Why?” the policewoman asked me over and over. “Why didn’t you see her?” I wanted to tell her that I wasn’t seeing anything clearly, and that I too had an invisible hole in my chest and was bleeding internally, but I knew she wouldn’t buy it. The story sounded phony, unpalatable even to me. If I thought my heart was broken before, over a failed romance, now I had an ache that would never go away, a jarring of my whole being, a sense of shame and despair that covered

me like a cloud ... or a shroud.

"I don't know," I told the policewoman. I was looking at the traffic. I didn't think to look for pedestrians. I didn't think. And because of that one gap, that one moment of not paying attention, a woman was dead.

They didn't tell me much about her, but, out on bail, I listened to the news and read the stories in the newspaper. Her name was Carmen Santori. She was a little younger than me. She had recently immigrated to Canada from El Salvador with her two small children, and worked as a cleaner in a public school. The kind of family I supported with my "Save the Children" contributions. No amount of money could save these children now. I thought about giving them my savings, selling my house, but nothing would be enough. My own son was living with his father, away for the year in Thunder Bay, and I wondered how I could ever face him again. I had killed someone with carelessness. Even though I hadn't meant to. I had meant to be a good person. And the woman was no less dead because I never meant her any harm. I killed

her, not out of malice, but because I was preoccupied with traffic and the petty details of my own life. Clearly, I was an unfit mother and deserved never to see my son again, even though I had never abused him, broken his toys or his bones in anger or neglect. That seemed the real punishment my soul required, above and beyond anything the law might do to me. I was only in jail for one night before my mother bailed me out with a “How could you do this to me?” look on her face. But the incident dragged on, with lawyers, court appearances, delays

IT HAPPENED QUICKLY, I remember. I was waiting at the stop sign for an opening in traffic, waiting to turn right onto Mount Pleasant Road toward the hotel. It had been a long drive into Toronto from my home, a couple of hours away. It was Friday, raining, and I had left too late, well after 3:00, so I was sure to hit rush hour, which was dark this time of year. According to CBC Radio, the roads had been unusually bad all day long. Trying to avoid the worst, I took a slightly different route

into the city, then got lost and turned off the highway too soon, getting stuck in Mississauga. I veered around the airport, more bumper-to-bumper traffic, back onto the 401 and then off again, winding south through dark, unfamiliar streets, cars pulling in and out in front of me. Several times I thought I was lucky not to get sideswiped.

Near Yonge Street, I saw the building complex that housed the television studio where my conference was being held. I was already late, but I thought I'd go to the hotel first, park and check in, then walk to the meeting. I was tired, hungry, and headachy – but all that was below the surface. I just knew I had to keep going, not even stop for a coffee.

The date was November 11, Remembrance Day, time to remember those who died in war. I thought about how this holiday falls shortly after November 2, All Soul's Day, what the Spanish call "Día de los Muertos." Day of the Dead, when the bridge between worlds is narrow, almost transparent, and the dead can walk among us. Only a coincidence?

And two nights earlier comes Halloween, All Hallows Eve, trick or treat. That year I'd gone to a Halloween party whose theme was *The Wizard of Oz*. I'd dressed up as Glinda, the Good Witch, in a pink strapless organza creation that reminded me of a prom gown I had worn in 12th grade. The costume was completed by a home-made magic wand, gauzy shawl, and blond wig held in place by a rhinestone tiara. The only thing missing was Glinda's magic floating bubble.

I'd spent the evening talking with a man dressed as the Tin Woodsman, wearing sheets of cardboard spray-painted silver, with elastic for joints and a huge cardboard funnel on his head. We'd met briefly before, but this was the first time we had really talked, and I began to feel the hole in my heart close a little. Maybe I was absorbing some of the Tin Man's heart, the goodness and love he had all along, although he didn't know it. He was hoping to get it from the Wizard, who could only give him a testimonial. He had painted a red Valentine heart on the front of his costume, with the zig-zag lines indicating a break running

through it. He was a paradox, a tin man with feelings, just like the courageous/cowardly lion and the scarecrow with brains.

Glinda herself was another paradox, an anomaly, a good witch. “I thought witches were old and ugly,” says Dorothy in the movie, repeating what she had learned from stories, the image of the Wicked Witch of the West. Glinda only smiles. This witch is young, beautiful, nice, not even bitchy. But then can she be a witch? A contradiction in terms. Maybe being a witch just means she has special powers, of one kind or another ... being old, ugly and mean doesn’t have anything to do with it. And could there be a “good” witch who was also old and unattractive?

“Cognitive dissonance,” as my philosophy professor used to say. You know something or do something that clashes with everything else you know, but you find a way to live with both things at the same time. Perhaps in separate compartments.

A FEW MONTHS BEFORE, I had come face to face with the knowledge that I, too, was living out a contradiction, being someone I didn't think I was. Maybe that's why Glinda appealed to me, apart from the pretty dress – a small size I could just squeeze into. I had started a romance with an old friend from university. He had married young and stayed married, while I married later, a marriage that finally burst apart at the seams. We had talked occasionally over the years, then more often after my divorce. He lived out west now, so we saw each other rarely, touching each other with care, the precautions of people trying not to get too close. Sometimes our talks began, "If only ...", then took another direction. I did not tell him how I imagined other, more passionate meetings on the dim threshold of falling asleep.

Then, this past spring, he had to work in Toronto for several months while his wife stayed at home, and we saw each other more often. "Just friends," I thought, "just showing him around the city," The romance was inevitable but it hit us violently, unexpectedly, like a

cyclone spinning us out of ourselves and far away, into the sparkling magic of another world. Even then, “It’s not an affair,” we told ourselves. “Affairs are sordid and ugly. We’re not like that. We don’t want to hurt anyone.” We had known each other for so long ... that was one excuse. And we seemed to know each other perfectly. I’d never experienced this kind of lovemaking before, as if we were entering each other’s souls. We felt “in touch,” even when we were apart, and when we were together our skin sang. Once we went to the ballet, a new production of “Romeo and Juliet,” and though the story ended tragically – as it always does – I saw only the consuming passion, love that melted the dancer’s bodies as they moved across the stage in gorgeous costume.

Spring ended, then summer and his assignment. His wife arranged to meet him; they were going to tour the Maritimes before going back to Vancouver. He and I arranged to see each other at a hotel near the airport the day before she arrived. “No perfume,” he warned me, “no marks, a bed where your cat can’t leave hairs on my clothes.” I could not

believe he had thought of all this ... as if he had worked out all the details. As if he had done this before. The world slipped back from Technicolor to black and white, like Kansas or grainy *film-noir* dramas where everyone comes to a bad end. He had told me about the difficulties of his marriage, how he felt marooned without affection. Somehow, even though we had never discussed the subject, I believed that now we had found each other, he would be able to leave all that. As I had left, even with no one waiting in the wings. But no, "I won't leave Helen," he told me, making plans in the same breath to meet me at some future time. "This way we'll all be okay," he said. "You know that what we have is different, it doesn't matter what else happens in our lives."

I'm sure he said all that, though it sounds like bad dialogue from the soaps. I just heard that he was going home.

In that moment Glinda turned back into her sister, the Witch of the West. I had to choose: become either the wicked witch herself or Dorothy lost and alone. I said I couldn't see him again.

BEFORE THAT TIME, I thought of a broken heart only as a metaphor, but during that long autumn, which now seems swirled in fog, in keys, glasses, and documents misplaced and missing, I knew it was real.

My father had been a heart doctor, a cardiologist, and I knew about broken hearts as a child: *fibrillations, infarcts, coronary thromboses, heart attacks, strokes*. When I was seven, he brought home a plaster model of the heart and I learned all about the left and right atria and ventricles and the valves connecting them. But both he and my mother were scared of broken feelings. He would turn his head away so no one could see his secret tears, while my mother would make hurt into a moral lesson. "You can't expect to win every time," she would say, "You have to learn to do without some things in life." Even today, if my son is upset about losing a ball game, or my cousin's daughter misses a school play because she has the flu, my mother brings out these old precepts. So we stuff the feelings back into our hearts, making them even more liable to break from excess baggage, painful and prickly, tears unshed

and unheard. I don't tell my son what she says about the ball games.

I wondered why I didn't feel my heart break when my marriage ended. But back then, it seemed that the love my husband and I felt had died a natural death; I mourned and let it go. Now, after my hopes ballooned during the spring and summer, I felt love was there – but just out of reach, far away as the moon or the land of Oz, still pulling me into its tides.

Still, I thought I was in control of myself that November night, driving into Toronto, getting through detours, traffic, unfamiliar streets, dark or lit-up by neon. The car radio was on, delivering war memories and weather reports. I was almost there, saw the hotel sign, the end of the journey. Perhaps that was why I didn't look both ways.

I didn't see the woman until it was almost too late – until something, a sudden movement or glimmer or sound from my right made me come to a sharp stop, just missing her body. I felt the seat-belt tighten around me. The woman looked as if she had been hurrying, although

now she had frozen, staring at me. Maybe I had grazed her, though she did not seem hurt. What had made me turn my head and notice her at the very last moment?

She shook her fist at me, looking into my eyes, swearing (I think) although I couldn't hear her through the window, closed against the chill rain. The radio was still on, talking about traffic or some new item "as it happens." The woman crossed to the other side of the street. Cars honking at me now, I turned carefully but in a trance, drove the block to the hotel, gave my car to the doorman to park, and collapsed in my room. I could still see the woman shaking her fist at me, but I could also see, just as clearly, her crumpled body on the asphalt, grey cloth coat blood-stained, body sprawling, groceries scattered ... coffee, potatoes, broken eggs.

I could feel the police questioning me, see myself in a small investigation room (replica of everything I'd seen on television) and hear the questions with no answer. *Why didn't you see her? What were you*

thinking of? Why? The thought-police did not let up, interrogating me again and again.

The finality of her death, perhaps on the way home to her children after a day of work, was as real to me as my face in the bathroom mirror in the anonymous hotel room. Memory intruded briefly – the room was a mocking reminder of other hotel rooms, the one up north where my friend and I had made happy, exciting love on a May holiday, and the one at the airport where fear and loss had already invaded our bodies. After we talked that last time, we made love like zombies in the film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, no longer the people we thought we were. Sheer instinct, self-preservation, not Sunday-school morality, had made me stop short of going on with the affair (that was the name for it), hurting him and his wife as well as myself. I couldn't live in that gap between truth and a lie, like the crack at the edge of my bed in childhood, with monsters waiting to pull me under. Did his wife ever know how close it had come? Or was

it not close at all? “I’ll never leave,” he’d said. Maybe it was only me who had come close – and stopped.

Staring at myself in the mirror, I knew that through some miracle, no grace or strength of my own, I had just missed killing a woman on the street. A strange woman to whom, for this moment in time, I felt closer than anyone in my family or any lover. As real as rain on my skin, I felt my guilt and fear, the pain and anger of the other woman’s relatives. I imagined her going home that night, telling her family about the crazy woman driver who had nearly hit her. I sighed with relief that she was able to tell her story.

After freshening up, I did go out to my meeting. I started to turn right, walking toward Eglinton Avenue, but then turned back to the scene of the (almost) accident. My driving to the hotel – safe, innocent, guilt-free – felt like a dream; the truth was that the woman lay on the sidewalk, surrounded by police, ambulance, spectators looking for the woman in a blue hatch-back who had driven away, a hit-and-run.

When I got there, the street was empty except for people and cars going about their business. Still, I was not innocent, something dark and terrible had touched me and let me go, dropping me like a cat who suddenly tires of playing with the bird she has caught. Though still, late at night and in dreams, I see that scene and wonder what really happened.

Writing this now, in spring, I think maybe the woman had escaped from El Salvador or Bosnia, or maybe she had not. Maybe her name was Carmen or Magdalene or Jane. Maybe she was happily married, or had left a bad marriage, or was just hanging on, hoping for change. She and I and everyone on that street were going about our lives, looking for love like the Tin Man searching for his heart (make-believe or real) and sometimes barely managing to escape disaster.

But none of that mattered then. I was still shaking. The woman – and I – were alive.

About the Author

ELLEN JAFFE was born and grew up in New York. She spent time in England, and has lived in Ontario since 1979. She studied at Wellesley College, New York University and the Tavistock Clinic in England, where she trained as a psychotherapist. She has also studied Shamanic healing. Most frequently, Ellen works with children as a play therapist and a teacher of writing. She has received three *Artist in Education* grants from the Ontario Arts Council and was a finalist in the CBC's 1996 poetry contest. Ellen's poems have been published in small magazines (including *paperplates*), in books on therapeutic subjects, and in the anthology *Intricate Countries* (artemis, 1996). Her poems have been read on CBC Radio's *Morningside* and *As It Happens*. Ellen has one son, Joe, and enjoys wilderness exploration. She writes to help make sense of the world and also to keep alive a sense of mystery.

