

FIRST AID



Nell came home one day just before dinnertime and found the front door open. The car was gone. There was a trail of blood splotches on the steps, and once she was inside the house, she followed it along the hall carpet and into the kitchen. There was a knife on the cutting board, one of Tig's favourites, Japanese steel, very sharp—and beside it, a blood-stained carrot, one end severed. Their daughter, nine at the time, was nowhere to be found.

What were the possible scenarios? Desperadoes had broken in. Tig had tried to defend himself against them, using the knife (though how to explain the carrot?), and had been wounded. The desperadoes had made off with him, their daughter, and their car. Nell should call the police.

Or else Tig had been cooking, had sliced himself with the knife, had judged that he needed stitches, and had driven himself to the hospital, taking their daughter with him to avoid leaving her by herself. This was more likely. He must have been in too much of a hurry to leave a note.

Nell got out the bottle of carpet cleaner and sprayed the blood spots: they would be much harder to get out once they'd dried.

Then she wiped the blood off the kitchen floor and, after a pause, off the carrot. It was a perfectly good carrot; no need for it to go to waste.

Time passed. Suspense built. She was at the point of phoning all the hospitals in the vicinity to see if Tig was there when he came back, hand bandaged. He was in a jovial mood, as was their daughter. What an adventure they'd had! The blood was just pouring out, they reported. The tea towel Tig had used for wrapping the cut had been soaked! Yes, driving had been a challenge, said Tig—he didn't say dangerous—but who could wait for a taxi, and he'd managed all right with basically just one hand since he'd needed to keep the other one raised, and the blood was trickling off his elbow, and they'd sewn him up quickly at the hospital because he was dripping all over everything, and anyway, here they were! Luckily not an artery, or it would be a different story. (It was indeed a different story when Tig told it a little later, to Nell: his bravado had been an act—he hadn't wanted to frighten their daughter—and he'd been worried that he would pass out if the blood loss got out of control, and then what?)

"I need a drink," said Tig.

"So do I," said Nell. "We can have scrambled eggs." Whatever Tig had been planning to do with the carrot was no longer on the agenda.

The tea towel had been brought back in a plastic bag. It was bright red but beginning to brown at the edges. Nell put it to soak in cold water, which was the best way to deal with bloodstained fabrics.

But what would I have done if I'd been here? she wondered. Not a Band-Aid: insufficient. A tourniquet? She'd had perfunctory instruction in those at Girl Guides. They'd done wrist sprains too. Minor emergencies were her domain, but not major ones. Major ones were Tig's.

That was some time ago. Early autumn, as she recalls, a year in the later 1980s. There were personal computers then, of a lumbering kind. And printers: the paper for them came with the pages joined together at top and bottom, and had holes along the sides, in perforated strips that you had to tear off. No cellphones though, which was why Nell hadn't been able to text or call Tig and ask him where he was, and also what had caused the blood?

How much waiting we used to do, she thinks. Waiting without knowing. So many blanks we couldn't fill in, so many mysteries. So little information. Now it's the first decade of the twenty-first century, space-time is denser, it's crowded, you can barely move because the air is so packed with this and that. You can't get away from people: they're in touch, they're touching, they're only a touch away. Is that better, or worse?

She switches her attention to the room the two of them are in right at this moment. It's in a nondescript high-rise on Bloor Street, near the viaduct. She and Tig are sitting in chairs that are something like schoolroom chairs—there is in fact a whiteboard at the front—and a man called Mr. Foote is talking. The people in the other chairs, who are also listening to Mr. Foote, are at least thirty years younger than Tig and Nell; some of them perhaps forty years younger. Just kids.

"If it's a motorcycle crash," says Mr. Foote, "you don't want to take off the helmet, do ya. Because you don't know what's gonna be in there, eh?" He moves his hand in front of him, circularly, as if cleaning a window.

Good point, thinks Nell. She imagines the glass of a helmet, smeared. Inside, a face that is no longer a face. A face of mush.

Mr. Foote has a talent for conjuring up such images. He has a graphic way of speaking, being from Newfoundland. He doesn't

tiptoe around. He's built on a square plan: wide torso, thick legs, a short distance between ear and shoulder. It's a balanced shape, with a low centre of gravity. Mr. Foote would not be easy to upend. Nell expects that's been tried, in bars—he looks as if he'd know his way around a bar fight, but also as if he wouldn't get into any of those he couldn't win. If pushed too hard he'd throw the challenger through a window, calmly—"You needs to keep calm," he has already said twice—then check to make sure there were no bones broken. If there were, he'd splint them, and treat the victim for cuts and abrasions. Mr. Foote is an all-in-one package. In fact, he's a paramedic, but that does not come out until later in the day.

He's carrying a black leather binder and wearing a long-sleeved zip-fronted sweatshirt with the St. John Ambulance logo on it, as if he's a team coach, which in a way he is: he's teaching them first aid. At the end of the day there will be a test and they will each get a certificate. All of them are in this room because they need this certificate: their companies have sent them. Nell and Tig are the same. Thanks to a family connection of Tig's, they're giving talks on a nature-tour cruise ship, birds for him, butterflies for her: their hobbies. So they are technically staff, and all staff on this ship have to get the certificate. It's mandatory, their ship contact has told them.

What hasn't been said is that the majority of the passengers—the guests—the clientele—will not be young, to put it mildly. Some of them will be older than Nell and Tig. Truly ancient. Such people can be expected to topple over at any minute, and then it will be certificates to the rescue.

Nell and Tig are unlikely to be doing any actual rescuing: younger people will leap in, Nell's counting on that. In a pinch, Nell will dither and claim she's forgotten what to do, which will be

true. What will Tig do? He will say, Stand back, give them room. Something like that.

It's known—it's been rumoured—that these ships have extra freezers on them, just in case. Nell pictures the distress of a server who opens the wrong freezer by mistake, to be confronted by the appalled, congealed stare of some unlucky passenger for whom the certificate has not proved sufficient.

Mr. Foote stands at the front of the room, running his gaze over today's crop of students. His expression is possibly neutral, or faintly amused. Bunch of know-nothing softies, he's most likely thinking. City people. "There's what to do, and there's what not to do," he says. "I'll be telling you both. First, ya don't go screaming around like a headless chicken. Even if buddy's minus his own head."

But headless chickens can't scream, Nell thinks. Or she assumes they can't. But she takes the meaning. Keep your head in an emergency, they say. Mr. Foote would add, "If ya can." He would definitely want them to keep their heads.

"You can fix a lot of things," Mr. Foote is saying. "But not if there's no head. That's one thing I can't teach ya." It's a joke, Nell guesses, but Mr. Foote does not signal jokes. He's deadpan.

"Say you're in a restaurant." Mr. Foote, having dealt with motorcycle crashes, has moved on to asphyxiation. "And buddy starts choking. The question you needs to ask is: Can they talk? Ask them if you can hit them on the back. If they say yes in words, it's not too bad because they can still breathe, eh? But what's likely—a lot of people are embarrassed, they stand up, and what do they do? They go to the washroom, because they don't want to be making a fuss. Calling attention. But you got to go in there with them,

you got to follow them, because they can die. Right on the floor, before you even notice they're gone." He gives a meaningful nod. He has known instances, the nod says. He's been there. He's seen it happen. But he got there too late.

Mr. Foote knows his stuff, Nell thinks. The exact same thing has almost happened to her. The choking, the going to the washroom, the not wanting to make a fuss. Embarrassment can be lethal, she sees now. Mr. Foote has nailed it.

"Then you got to bend them forward," Mr. Foote continues. "Five whacks on the back—the glob of meat or the dumpling or the fish bone or whatever can shoot out of them right then and there. But if not, you got to do the Heimlich manoeuvre. Thing is, if they can't talk, they can't exactly give you permission, plus they might be turning blue and passing out. You just got to do it. Maybe you'll break a rib, but at least they'll be alive, eh?" He grins a little, or Nell assumes it's a grin. A sort of mouth twitch. "That's the endgame, eh? Alive!"

They run through the Heimlich manoeuvre and the right way of hitting someone on the back. According to Mr. Foote, the combination of these two things would almost always work, but you had to get in there soon enough: in first aid, timing is everything. "That's why it's called first, eh? It's not the effing tax department, excuse my French, they can take all day, but you got maybe four minutes."

Now, he says, they will have a coffee break, and after that, they will do drowning and mouth-to-mouth, followed by hypothermia; and, after lunch, heart attacks and defibrillators. It's a lot for one day.

Drowning is fairly simple. "First, you need to get the water out. It'll pour out if you let gravity be your friend, eh? Turn 'em on the

side, empty 'em out, but fast.” Mr. Foote has dealt with numerous drownings: he’s lived near water all his life. “Turn 'em on their back to clear the airways, check for breathing, check for pulse, make sure someone calls 911. If there’s no breathing, you needs to do the mouth-to-mouth. Now this gadget I’m showing you, it’s a CPR barrier guard, it’s for the mouth-to-mouth, 'cause sometimes they’ll throw up, like, and you don’t need to have that in your own mouth. Anyways, there’s the germs, eh? You should carry one a these on you at all times.” Mr. Foote has a supply of them. They can be purchased at the end of the day.

Nell makes a mental note to get one. How has she managed to live without a mouth barrier guard until now? How feckless.

In order to practise the mouth-to-mouth, the room is divided into pairs. Each pair is given a red plastic torso with a bald white tip-back head and a yoga mat for kneeling on while they bring their shared torso back to life. Pinch the nose shut, cover the mouth with yours, give five rescue breaths, letting the chest rise each time, then perform five chest compressions. Repeat. Meanwhile, the other person calls 911, after which they take over with the chest compressions. These can get tiring, it’s hard on the wrists. Mr. Foote stalks the room, checking everyone’s technique. “You’re gettin’ there,” he says.

Tig says now that he’s down on the mat, Nell will have to call 911 to get someone to lift him back up again, considering the state of his knees. Nell giggles into the plastic mouth, sabotaging her rescue breath. “I just hope nobody drowns on our watch,” she says. “Because they’ll probably stay drowned.” Tig says he understands it’s a relatively painless way to go. You are said to hear bells.

When they’ve all brought their plastic torsos back to life, they move on to hypothermia and shock. Both involve blankets. Mr. Foote tells an amazing story about a man on a ski trip who went out the door of a cabin to take a leak, without a flashlight, through

deep snow, and fell into a melt well around the base of a tree, and couldn't get out, and wasn't found until morning. He was stiff as a board and cold as a mackerel, said Mr. Foote, not a breath in him, and as for his heart, it was silent as the tomb. But someone else in that cabin had taken the CPR course, and they worked on the possibly dead person for six hours—six hours!—and brought him back.

“You keep going. You don't give up,” says Mr. Foote. “Because you never know.”

They break for lunch. Nell and Tig find a little Italian restaurant tucked into one of the soulless high-rise buildings, and order a glass of red wine each, and eat quite good pizza. Nell says she's going to have a wallet card made that says “In Case of Accident Call Mr. Foote,” and Tig says they should run Mr. Foote for prime minister, he could give the whole country mouth-to-mouth. He thinks Mr. Foote has been in the navy. Nell says no, he's a spy. Tig says maybe he's been a pirate, and Nell says no, he's definitely an alien from outer space, and being a first-aid instructor called Mr. Foote is a perfect front.

They're both feeling silly, and also incompetent. Nell is sure that if confronted with any of these emergencies—the drowning person, the one in shock, the frozen one—she will panic, and everything Mr. Foote has taught them will go right out of her head.

“I might do snakebites, though,” she says. “I learned a little about that in Girl Guides.”

“I don't think Mr. Foote does snakebites,” says Tig.

“Bet he does. But only in private sessions. It's niche.”

The afternoon is exciting. Real defibrillators are handed out, and their paddles are applied with precision to the red plastic torsos. Everyone gets a turn. Mr. Foote tells them how to avoid

defibrillating themselves by accident—your heart could get confused and decide to stop. Nell murmurs to Tig that death by self-defibrillation would be very undignified. Not as undignified as sticking a fork in a wall socket, Tig murmurs back. True, Nell thinks. You had to beware of that with small children.

Then comes the test. Mr. Foote ensures they all pass: he broadly hints at the answers, and instructs them to raise their hands if they don't understand a question. They will receive their certificates in the mail, he says, closing his black leather binder, with relief, Nell expects. One more batch of no-hopers off his hands, and pray to God none of them is ever involved in a real emergency.

Nell purchases one of the CPR mouth barrier guards. She wants to tell Mr. Foote that she's enjoyed his stories, but that might sound frivolous, as if this was merely entertainment, as if she doesn't take him seriously. He might be insulted. So she says a simple thank you, and he nods.

Once she and Tig are home—once it's the next day, or possibly the day after that—she totals up all the life-threatening experiences the two of them have had, or experiences she'd feared might have been life-threatening. How prepared had she been for any of them?

The time the metal chimney set fire to the inside of the roof, and Tig climbed up into the crawl space in clouds of choking smoke and poured buckets of water on the fire. What if he'd blacked out in there, from smoke inhalation? After that incident, Tig bought a fire blanket, and every floor of any house they were living in had to have a fire extinguisher. He worried about hotels too, and always checked to make sure he knew where the stairs were, just in case. Also the windows: Did they open? Increasingly, windows in hotels were sealed shut, but you could break the glass, maybe,

by wrapping your arm in a towel first. That would be no use if the window was too high up.

The time Tig set off all the fire alarms in a thirty-storey hotel by smoking a cigar in the hall underneath one of the sensors, and the two of them climbed down all the flights of stairs and exited through a lobby filled with firemen, pretending they hadn't done it. That event wasn't life-threatening. It wasn't even very embarrassing, since they hadn't got caught.

The time a lumber truck ahead of them on the highway lost its load: wooden boards peeled off it, flying through the air and bouncing all over the asphalt, narrowly missing them. On top of that, it was in a blizzard. Knowing CPR wouldn't have helped.

The time they were canoeing on one of the Great Lakes and their canoe was tipped by a freak wave from a passing ocean steamer. Not life-threatening: they were close to shore, the water was warm. They'd got wet, that was all.

The time Tig came roaring up on the ATV towing a trailerful of wood he'd been cutting with his chainsaw, blood pouring down his face from a scalp wound he didn't know he had. That wasn't life-threatening: he hadn't even noticed.

"There's blood pouring down his face," Nell said to the children, as if they couldn't see.

"There's always blood pouring down his face," one of them replied with a shrug. As far as they were concerned, he was indestructible.

"I must have a lot of blood," Tig said, grinning away. What had he skinned his head on? Something unimportant. Next minute he was unloading the wood, the minute after that he was splitting it: it was already dry, he'd been harvesting dead trees. Then bang, he was filling up the woodbox. In those days they'd lived in fast-forward.

The hikes they used to take, before there were cellphones: they hadn't considered them risky. Had they even packed a first-aid kit? Maybe some moleskin for blisters, antibiotic ointment, a couple of painkillers. What would have happened if one of them had sprained an ankle, broken a leg? Had they even told anyone where they were going?

One autumn, for instance, in a national park. Rough weather: early snow and ice.

Marching along through the yellow and gold beech forest with their enormous packsacks, poking iced-over ponds with their hiking poles, consulting trail maps and having differences of opinion about them. Eating squares of chocolate, then pausing for lunches: parking themselves on logs, devouring mini-cheeses, hard-boiled eggs, nuts and crackers. Rum in a flask.

Tig was already having trouble with his knees, but he went on the hikes anyway. He tied his knees up with bandanas, one above, one below. "Why are you still walking?" a doctor asked him. "Basically, you don't have a knee." But that was much later.

That year there was an urban legend about hiking danger making the rounds, to the effect that male moose in season—the fall season, the one they were in—were sexually attracted to Volkswagen Beetles. They'd taken to leaping off cliffs on top of them, squashing both car and driver. Nell and Tig thought this was BS, but they'd added "probably" because strange things could happen.

They set up their tent in a likely spot, made supper with their WhisperLite single-element gas burner, slung their food packs into a tree at some distance in case of bears, and crawled into their gelid sleeping bags.

Nell lay awake, reflecting on the fact that their dome-shaped tent strongly resembled a Volkswagen Beetle. Would a male moose come along in the middle of the night and jump on top of them?

And once it had discovered its mistake, would it become enraged? Male moose were notorious for becoming enraged in mating season. They could be a serious hazard.

In the clear light of morning, the moose-squashing possibility seemed remote. Not a life-threatening experience, therefore, except in Nell's head.

The next year, a couple taking the exact same trail they'd been on had been killed in their tent by a bear, and partly eaten. Tig liked to think of this as a narrow escape. He took to reading out loud to Nell, at night, from a book called *Bear Attacks*. There were two kinds of attacking bears, it claimed: bears who were hungry, and mother bears protecting their young. The way you should react was different for each, but there was no immediate method for telling the difference. When to play dead, when to ease away sideways, when to fight back? And with what kind of bear: black or grizzly? The instructions were complex.

"I'm not sure we should be reading about this just before going to sleep," said Nell. They'd come to a story about a woman who got her arm chewed off, though she'd finally managed to deter the bear by hitting it on the nose.

"She must've had nerves of steel," said Tig.

"She must've been in shock," said Nell. "It can give you super-human powers."

"She survived, anyway," said Tig.

"Just barely," said Nell. "No pun intended."

Did any of this stop them from going on more of their under-equipped hikes? It did not. Tig bought some bear spray, however. Most of the time they remembered to pack it.

Revisiting all of this—because revisiting sets in, after a time, after many times—Nell is now wondering, Would the instructions of

Mr. Foote have made a difference in these situations, if push had come to shove? Maybe with the chimney fire: if Nell had been able to haul an unconscious Tig out of the crawl space, she could have given him some rescue breaths while the house was burning down. But eaten by a bear or squashed by a moose? No salvation there.

Mr. Foote was right: no one can guess. No one knows the final outcome, though why is it called an outcome? No one comes out, eventually. "We aren't going to make it out of here alive," Tig used to say as a joke, although it wasn't one. And if you did guess, if you could foresee, would that be better? No: you'd live in grief all the time, you'd be mourning things that hadn't happened yet.

Better to preserve the illusion of safety. Better to improvise. Better to march along through the golden autumn woods, not very well prepared, poking icy ponds with your hiking pole, snacking on chocolate, sitting on frozen logs, peeling hard-boiled eggs with cold fingers as the early snow sifts down and the day darkens. No one knows where you are.

Had they really been that careless, that oblivious? They had. Obliviousness had served them well.

