

CITY
LIFE*A Short Story by Marvyn
Jenoff*

There was once a prairie girl who lived happily with her parents until they became ambitious for her. All through her childhood as she walked over the prairie, her heart would rise and she would begin to levitate. She loved to spend her time in the woods, levitating above the young plants on the ground and protecting them. She would levitate high into the treetops, where she herself felt protected. And she loved nothing better than to stretch out over a ripening field, with the tips of the grain just touching her back. But her parents' great dream was for her to better herself by settling in the city. They described to her the jewel-coloured lights, the resounding traffic, great buildings made

of glass. They told her wonderful stories of prairie girls who had gone to the city and never wanted to come back. They placed glossy magazines strategically around the house to tempt her toward the good life. She listened to her parents, and she looked at the magazines. And she understood that the object of city life was to have man-friends and to spend money. Whenever she thought of that, she would escape high above the trees. There she would float with her eyes closed, and listen to the distant whistle of the train to the city, comforted that the train was far away and the city even farther.

At last she came of age — there was no stopping it — and, being a dutiful daughter, she set out eastward along the railway tracks. When she felt determined, she walked with a swinging

stride. But more often she missed her parents and her prairie, and would levitate, suspended in mind and body, along her way. She paid no attention to where she was going, though she managed somehow to avoid cities. Finally she began to notice that the further she got from the prairie, the more difficult it was to levitate. It was difficult to start off with such a heavy heart, and as she went on she seemed to be barely skimming the ground. One late afternoon, ready to admit defeat, she sat down to give in to her despair.

By this time she had reached the Mississauga train station. She sat down on a bench on the platform. She watched the Mississaugans arriving home from Toronto, where they spent their days. They seemed as despairing as she, and she sensed the aching in their

legs and backs — some had had to stand through the whole journey. "I could help them," she said to herself. A man and a woman, who had just got off the train, were sitting on another bench, too weary to go on. She approached them gently, as she would approach a tree, and showed them how to levitate. Grateful and happy, they took her home for dinner, took her to the local college, where she began to teach levitation that very evening, and found her an apartment nearby. She phoned her parents with all her good news, though she carefully avoided mentioning the other aspects of city life, the ones she had not yet dealt with.

At first she was happy. At the college she developed special techniques for teaching the overweight and the lonely. She planned an advanced course in winter levitation, starting off from slippery and irregular surfaces in heavy clothing. She dreamed of a special adaptation for Mississauga — to take particular advantage of the sunshine, and store its effects for the many many days when there was none. Teachers and students all became her friends, for where there is levitation there is also levity. Friends would often take her out with their families. She enjoyed going to parties and picnics. But sometimes they would take her to shopping centres, and there, it never failed, she would be overcome once again by despair. She would levitate home alone in tears, and there she would sit, haunted by her failure. For, while her friends all seemed to have a healthy enthusiasm for spending money, she could never bring herself to spend on anything but the simplest necessities. Her small apartment was furnished quite adequately with items she found and changed to serve new purposes. The few pots of grain and vegetables on her balcony fed her more than amply. Yet it was clear that no matter how happy one was, money was the real thing. And there was the greater part of her salary accumulating in the bank untouched.

Friends were sympathetic. "It is collecting interest," one pointed out. "Look at it this way: it's not getting older, it's getting better."

"That doesn't hold in times of inflation," argued another. "You'd be better off to enjoy it while it's still worth something."

She didn't know what to do. She'd have liked to get rid of her money without having to exchange it for things. Even a carefully considered purchase could commit you to years of living with something unsuitable: it

was clear that money was the one thing you didn't give away lightly. On the other hand, there was nothing in the world she wanted to acquire. Not even if it could absorb more mess than paper towels. Not even if it contained less than 1 mg. tar. Not even if it came in fifty-one flavours with special features each month. Perhaps, she thought, she should look for a man-friend, instead.

On her way to work one warm, sunny morning, a blizzard came up. She took shelter in a doorway. "Unusual weather," she said to the man beside her.

"Do you like my blizzard?" he asked.

"It's different from a prairie blizzard," she said, "but it is distinctive. Is that what you do, make blizzards? Do you spend a lot of money?"

"My dear, when you live in a house with four children and a wife who doesn't understand you, there's never enough money. Things have changed. Blizzards used to be an important part of the national identity. People used to feel comfortable just knowing there were blizzards, even if they didn't go out in them. But recently people have begun to take blizzards for granted, with so many on TV, and communities don't subscribe as readily any more. Sometimes I feel discouraged."

"That's terrible! Don't say that!" she cried. "It's a beautiful blizzard!" And she wrapped her cloak around them both and made him very, very warm, so that afterwards he could better appreciate the exquisite cold that was swirling around them.

It was wonderful to have a man-friend at last. Whenever he was within a hundred miles of Mississauga without his wife, or when his wife didn't need the car, he'd stop by for brief visits at her apartment. She kept hoping they would go shopping together, but that never seemed to work out. However, between his visits, she spoke gently to her sheep, and spun its fleece, and wove exotic garments for her blizzard-monger. When she phoned her mother on the prairie, she went on at length about blizzards, stressing the necessity of keeping the custom alive. She worried less about her money now, for she was busy. But still she sometimes imagined the stacked dollar bills in the bank getting mouldy and sticking together. Perhaps it would help to have another man-friend.

One day a visitor came to observe her classes to determine whether a knowledge of levitation might help him in his mission. As he accompanied her home, he smiled at her knowingly and

said, "Saskatoon." She felt right at home with him. She served him cabbage rolls and potato pancakes. When they had eaten he leaned back in his chair and said in appreciation, "Medicine Hat." She filled his plate again. "Red River," he whispered, as he broke a pancake into bits to feed to her.

But she pushed his hands away. "Do you ever go shopping?" she asked him.

"Shopping?" he laughed. "Shopping? I have a mission. I travel from place to place, like this, showing governments that the sky is falling not in two pieces, but in three. Tomorrow I'm off to Ottawa. That's the toughest place."

When he was away she kept up his spirits by reading him recipes over the phone. He was very appreciative. Once, he told her, her call had cheered him so much that a woman came up to him and offered to cook his dinner. She was glad her friend was in good company. No sense in a mission being more difficult than it had to be.

When she thought of his return, or of the rising popularity of blizzards, she was filled with happiness. But she still occasionally remembered her untouched money withering in disuse and covered with cobwebs, and she was sad. Perhaps it would help to have another man-friend.

One day she was invited to a college in Toronto to help set up a levitation program there. Afterwards there was a party in her honour. The host was very nice. He kept going from one guest to another putting his arm around them or his fingers down their backs and whispering to them. When it was her turn he whispered, "So sad! What's his name?"

"They're both out of town," she replied in tears.

"Then I'll take you home," he offered magnanimously.

"Couldn't we go shopping?"

"My dear, I'm interested in you."

"How do you spend your money?"

"I ask my, um, accountant how much we have, and I follow my research as far as it takes me. I'm an expert in my field, you know. I research women's problems."

"I have a problem," she began, but he stopped her with a kiss.

When he was away working in the field, she phoned reference libraries all over the country to inquire into the local customs. Whenever it was her turn to see him, she surprised him by identifying from the smells of his breath and clothing exactly where he'd been.

She was so busy with her man-friends, she hardly had time to think

about her money problem. And so she was very surprised when her blizzard-friend, noticing a loose thread on the newest garment she had made for him, gazed into her eyes with a prophecy: "Trust the Post Office! How wonderful for you!" And for the first time, he lingered. When she omitted salt from the dumpling recipe she was reading to her missionary, he was at a loss for place names. Then he whispered, "Trust the Post Office!" And when it was her next turn with her problem friend, he noticed her knee for the first time and

exclaimed, "Scar on navel and knee! Trust the Post Office!" And he kissed her twice.

She found it one day inside the door of her apartment, where it had fallen through the mail slot. Too fearful to touch the floor, she levitated about the apartment, eyeing the brown envelope from various angles. Then she sat down beside it and turned it over. A telephone bill. Carefully she opened the envelope and removed its contents. What a magnificent telephone bill! \$314.14!

Ceremoniously she wrote out a

cheque and placed it with the computer card into the smaller envelope. In her best script she wrote her return address. In her best dress she walked slowly and solemnly to the Post Office and mailed her payment. Then she returned home, bathed, and went peacefully to sleep. And she dreamed. She dreamed of her telephone bill, beautifully framed and mounted at the foot of her bed, where it would be the first thing she would see upon rising.

TAPE RECORDER

A Short Story by Helen Pereira

For Raymond Carver

"What are some of the influences on your writing?" *Paris Review* interviewers always ask that, she thought.

"Volleyball. I'm a passionate volleyball player. So much so that my wife resents it..."

"I meant *artistic* influences."

"Oh, we're talking artistic, are we? Well then, Henry Moore and Bartok. I spent a whole year listening to Bartok, in 1982, to celebrate his anniversary..."

The woman frowned. She remembered that year. "You've written about your obsessions," she said. "Could you elaborate?"

"I thought you wanted artistic. O.K. then, the cat. That damn cat decides what time we get up and when we're supposed to go to bed. Even when I'm supposed to work. You could say the cat is an influence and an obsession. My wife's obsession. She's crazy about that bloody cat..."

She cleared her throat. "Chekov is one of your favourites. Was he an influence, so to speak?" she said.

"Chekov is dead, so to speak. So how can he be an influence?"

"I've read that you admire Chekov..."

"Oh, well, sure. Yeah. I suppose you could say I like Chekov. But that's sure one dumb question. Writers only talk about themselves. He won't talk about Chekov."

"This is my first interview for *Canadian Books* and you're not helping

at all, only making things worse. You're just supposed to answer the goddamn questions, dope!"

He went out to the greenhouse to smoke a cigar. She followed him.

"You know I can't stand cigar smoke. Why are you deliberately harassing me?" He did not answer. He never answered her when he smoked cigars. She went to the attic for the afternoon and re-read one of the famous author's books.

After a quiet supper, of a pizza the woman ordered, her husband said, "Do you want to practise some more with the tape recorder? That was fun, this morning."

"You've got to be kidding," she said. "All I need is more practise with the machine. The right buttons to push, that stuff."

"For sure," he said. "You also really needed more lessons with the washer and dryer, the toaster, the cuisinart. All that junk down in the basement."

"Shut up. Just show me how to use the tape recorder."

They put the machine on the coffee table. "This key to record. That one to reverse."

"I won't need that."

"You never know," he said. "Push that one to stop. The orange one to pause. But for God's sake, don't push *record* when you want to reverse or you'll lose the whole damn thing."

"I'd never do that."

All week the woman re-read the author's stories. Every time she read them she had more questions. She had 33 questions, not counting sub-questions 5b and 5c.

Two days before the interview she typed the questions out. More professional. While she was typing, her husband came home.

"We're on strike."

"Dear God," she said, "just what I need. Of all the times..."

He went out to the greenhouse to smoke a cigar. She followed him.

"You should really be out on the picket line, you know."

"I'd rather smoke cigars. Besides I've never been on strike, I wouldn't know what to do."

"You might like it. I know the words to *Solidarity Forever*. I'll write them down for you. I've had experience at demonstrations. You'll make new friends."

"I hate that song."

"The media loves these strikes. You might be interviewed on TV."

"I want to smoke my cigar."

The wife went up to the attic and re-read the author's books.

After a late supper, of Kentucky Fried Chicken brought in by the husband, the wife said, "The interview is tomorrow. If we practise the interview again, would you please try to be serious, please?"

"Sure," he said. "I like being a famous author. It beats being a community college teacher on strike, married to a wife on strike."

"I'll get paid, you know."

"Sure, I can be serious," he said. "Try me."

The night before her important interview at the Harbourfront International Writers' Festival, her husband got a new battery for the tape recorder. He inserted