

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

a new tape. He tested the new tape. "One, two, three, four, five, testing," he said. The wife watched and listened. She felt professional and secure.

That night she went up to the attic. She knew she would not sleep and could re-read the author's books. Also sneak out in the morning without waking her husband.

In the morning she did none of her usual morning things. She did not eat hot whole grain cereal with bran on top. She drank lots of coffee.

She did unusual things. She put bath oil in her bath, eyeshadow on her eyelids, lipstick on her mouth. She looked at herself in the mirror and wiped all the stuff off. She put on an old dress she liked. A bright dress but comfortable. She was nearly ready to go when he came down.

"Thank God," she said. "I thought you'd never get up. What took you so long?"

"I was waiting because I know you like to be alone in the morning. You're always mad when I get up."

"Today I need to talk to you. I have to know if it's all right to put the tape recorder in my briefcase. Could anything bad happen to it in there?"

"Not a chance."

"How do I look?"

"O.K."

"One more thing. About those questions, you know? Do you think I should just scrap them?"

"Yeah, wing it. It'll sound more spontaneous."

"That's what I've thought all along."

She put on her old orange poncho and kissed her husband. He's going to make a crack about the poncho, she thought.

"Are you sure I look O.K.?"

"You look fine."

"And you really think I should scrap all the questions?"

"Yep."

She took a deep breath. "Good-bye."

"Good luck," he said. She dropped her briefcase and moaned.

"Now it'll be awful and it's all your fault. You're supposed to say 'Break a leg.'"

"I was only trying to be supportive. So go break a leg, then."

"It's too late for that now," she said.

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She rode on the bus to the fancy hotel. She was afraid of big buildings because she'd grown up in a small town. But today she had her briefcase.

She went up to a couple of security

guards at an information desk.

"Where is the press hospitality room for the Harbourfront International Writers' Festival?" They looked at her briefcase, at her poncho, at each other. One of them spoke. "There's nothing like that here, nossir."

"But I'm late! It's got to be here! The readings are here!" Shrugs. The woman walked away, down a long slippery hallway. She saw a girl behind another information desk. She went up to her.

"I'm looking for the press hospitality room for the Harbourfront International Writers' Festival," she said. "See, here's the phone number."

"Want me to call?"

"Please." The girl telephoned. "Wrong hotel," she said. Pointing, "Down the street."

The woman ran across the marble floor to the exit with her briefcase. She tripped and fell. She got up. "Dear God!" she said.

It was raining. She ran through the rain to the right hotel. She entered but re-emerged in a parking lot. Another entrance. I hope no one saw me, she thought.

In the lobby were chesterfields, lamps, lots of people, and an information desk.

"Could you please direct me to the elevator that goes to the press hospitality room for the Harbourfront International Writers' Festival?"

A girl looked at a chart. "Down that way — across to the very end, then up to room 871."

"Thank you." Across the lobby to the elevator and up to the eighth floor. And to room 871. Inside was a table full of coffee and soft drinks and a table full of different kinds of booze.

A girl came up to her. "Hello," she said.

"I'm the interviewer from *Canadian Books*? I've an interview with the famous author at 11?"

"He's in another interview now. Would you like a coffee?"

"No thanks."

The woman looked around and recognized various other famous authors. Golly, she thought. A tall skinny guy in leather gave her and her briefcase a dirty look and turned to one of the famous authors. "*Canadian Books* isn't worth bothering about," he said. The famous author looked and nodded.

Then another girl came in with a big man. Her famous author. She reached out and shook his hand.

Where in God's name will I interview him? she thought. All those mean guys.

"Would you like some coffee?" the new girl asked.

"No."

"Would *you* like something?" This to the famous author.

"Coke." He smiled at the woman while the girl got his Coke. The woman smiled back. He took the Coke, said, "Come this way. My room's right around the corner. It'll be quiet."

"Fine." She darted past, nearly spilling his Coke while he held the door.

"Thank God I'm out of there," she said. "Those kind of people make me nervous."

"Me, too," he said.

"But I'm not afraid of you, even though you're a famous author. We're both Westerners and from the working class."

"Well, well," he said. There was a juggling of briefcases, Coke, keys. They entered his room.

She took off her poncho and threw it on a chair, pulled another chair up close to a low table. The famous author was leaning back in an easy chair drinking Coke. She opened her briefcase and took out her tape recorder and put the tape recorder on the table's very edge. She pushed it smack up against his knees.

She pushed the *record* button and cleared her throat. "What do you think Chekov would say about your writing?"

"Wow!" said the famous author but never missed a beat. He went on about Chekov for some time. Then he leaned over and looked at the tape recorder.

"It's not working," he said. "I think you're supposed to push that little black thing on top."

"Of course," she said. "My husband forgot about that." Goddamn him! She pushed the little black thing.

She cleared her throat. "What do you think Chekov would say about your work?"

He went on about Chekov. Then she asked about obsessions, influences, etc., just as she'd done with her husband. At one point the famous author spoke of artists 'sailing with a special compass.' He stopped, surprised. "Gosh, I'm talking in metaphors!"

"Beautiful," she said. "You sound just like a poet." Then thought, Oh my God, he is a poet. He ignored her comment and moved into more metaphors.

There was a knock. The man got up to answer the door. The woman pressed *stop* on the tape recorder. I've got it all down pat, she thought.

"It's the maid," he said. "We have to move into the next room." The woman picked up her poncho, briefcase, and the

author's Coke. He picked up the tape recorder. "I think I'd better take this," he said.

"Thanks," she said. They went through the problems with keys and all the stuff they were carrying.

When they got inside the author put her tape recorder on the table, and sat in an easy chair. The woman threw her poncho on a couch, set her briefcase down, put his Coke on the coffee table.

"You've got a soft voice," she said, and pushed the tape recorder close to him. His Coke spilt.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry!"

With her poncho she mopped up the Coke.

"It's O.K. Just leave it alone," he said.

"My husband hates this poncho anyway."

The famous author waited. He lit another cigarette.

When they were finally settled she remembered how he had told her to push the little black knob. She pushed it. The tape flew back to zero.

"We'll play forward for a while. I'd just asked how you felt about italics," she said.

The famous author drew on his cigarette. "I remember." The tape whirled. She pushed *stop*, then *on*. No voices.

"Perhaps if you turned the sound up," he said. She turned the sound up. Nothing. The author picked up the machine. She had turned the sound down. He turned it up.

"There," he said. Still nothing.

"Don't you know what to do?" she said.

"No. I don't know how to work these damned things either."

"I could phone my husband..."

"Do that," he said.

She dialed and got the hotel's valet service. "There's something wrong with your phone, too," she said. "It must be this room."

"Dial 9 first."

"Of course." She dialed 9, then her number. He bloody better be home! she thought.

"Hello dear. I need some help with the tape recorder. We had to change rooms. I

pushed *stop*, then the little black thing, then *forward*, but we're not getting any sound."

"Did you remember to push *record* the first time?" he said.

"Of course."

"Twiddle those little wheels at the side. You just need to turn the sound up."

"We did that," she said. She did not add 'dope'.

"Who's 'we'? Is he there?"

"Yes," she said. "We were half way through..."

"I'll fix it when you come home. If you haven't lost the first half."

"Thanks," she said. "Thanks a lot." She hung up. "He says it's O.K. He says he can fix it when I get home."

"Well, well," the author started to fool around with the tape recorder. Then he set it down.

"Just give it another go," he said. "It'll be fine."

"But your metaphors," she said. "What if we lost all your metaphors?" She was leaning over her knees, holding her head in her hands.

"Look," he said. "If it's gone, it's gone."

She didn't move, "Oh my God, oh my God."

"Come on," said the author. "It'll be fine."

She cleared her throat. She breathed deeply. "What do you think of magic realism?" They continued until he mentioned Chekov again. Full circle. Is he trying to end the interview? she wondered.

"Well, I shouldn't take up any more of your time. Thank you. But if I've lost your metaphors I'll just die."

"Now look. If it's lost, make it up. Invent." She turned the machine off and put it in her briefcase. Then she put on her poncho. As she was about to leave she slumped against the door. "I'll need a miracle to re-create your metaphors."

"I believe in miracles," he said.

"I'm so glad. So do I," she said, holding onto the door knob.

"I hope you'll enjoy the reading tonight."

"Good-bye."

All the way home on the streetcar, she prayed.

Her husband said, "You look like hell. What happened to your poncho? Now it's really ready for the rummage sale. Let me see that machine." The woman waited. The sound came on. "What do you think of magic realism?"

"That's the middle."

"Then you really blew it. You've lost the first half."

"But that was the best part! How will I remember all those metaphors?"

"I think I better go for a walk while you transcribe this," said the husband. "I'll leave you alone with your work."

"Thanks a lot." She turned on the tape recorder and played the tape from the middle to the end. She smiled as she heard the famous author's voice, "Now look, if it's lost, just make it up. Invent."

I can do that. The editor will never know. As she reached out to turn it off she heard, "What would Chekov say about your writing?" She listened. The whole first half! It must have been turned on in her briefcase. She'd started somewhere in the middle. The first time. When they changed rooms they had started again at the beginning. She phoned the nice girl at the Harbourfront International Writers' Festival to thank her for arranging the interview. She asked her to tell the famous author that his voice recorded very well. She phoned the editor and told him the interview was fantastic.

She played her husband the whole interview.

"You're some expert. It was all your fault. You told me nothing could happen to the tape recorder in the briefcase, but it must have been turned on."

"And you never lost a line," he said. "It's a bloody miracle."

He took her out to dinner. He kept muttering "I can't believe it."

Before the reading the woman ran up to the famous author. "They're all there! All your metaphors," she said. "My husband says it's a miracle."

"Well, well," the famous author said.

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