

Good to a Fault

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 WINDMILL BOOKS

for Peter

*You that are in love and charity
with your neighbours,
and intend to lead
a new life*

1

Left turn

Thinking about herself and the state of her soul, Clara Purdy drove to the bank one hot Friday in July. The other car came from nowhere, speeding through on the yellow, going so fast it was almost safely past when Clara's car caught it. She was pushing on the brake, a ballet move, graceful – pulling back on the wheel with both arms as she rose, her foot standing on the brake – and then a terrible crash, a painful extended rending sound, when the metals met. The sound kept on longer than you'd expect, Clara thought, having time to think as the cars scraped sides and changed each other's direction, as the metal ripped open and bent and assumed new shapes.

They stopped. The motion stopped. Then the people from the other car came spilling out. The doors opened and like milk boiling over on the stove, bursting to the boil, they all frothed out onto the pavement. It seemed they came out the windows, but it was only the doors.

An old woman was last, prying herself out stiffly. Her lap was covered with redness, roses growing there and swelling downwards, and she began to screech on one note. The man, the driver, was already shouting. The line of curses streaming out of his mouth hung visible in the heavy air. Their car was the colour of butterscotch pudding, burnt pudding crusted on it in rust. The whole driver's side had crumpled inward, like pudding-skin when it is disturbed.

Clara's ears were not working properly. There was a vacuum around her where no sound could ring. She could see all the mouths moving. She swallowed to clear her ears, but pressure was not the problem. What had she done? All of this.

The membrane of silence burst. There was the noise – Clara felt it hit. Her body vibrated like a tuning fork. She kept her mouth shut. She put her hands up to her lips and held them closed with her fingers.

The man was flailing his arms in big circles, his head jutted forward to threaten her. 'What kind of a driver are you?' he was yelling, for the benefit of everyone nearby. 'My fucking *kids* can drive better than that! My *kids*!'

The little girl sitting on the pavement looked almost happy, as if her pinched face had relaxed now that some dangerous thing had actually happened. Clara sat down beside her. Strange to be sitting down right on the street, she thought. The road was warm. Cars whipped by, their wheels huge from this low down.

The man strode over, almost prancing. 'You fucking *hit* us! What were you doing?'

'I'm sorry,' Clara said.

It was out, the whole thing was her fault. In the case of a

disputed left-hand turn, the turning party is always at fault. The man's face was blotched with red stuff. His hair was dusty. He might be thirty, or forty. She should be getting his insurance information, giving him hers.

She got up, trembling knees making her slow. The women kept wailing. The younger one, a baby clutched to her breast, came rushing at Clara – to strike her, Clara thought, flinching away.

'My baby! You could of killed us!' The woman's shirt flapped open, Clara saw her pale breast, there in the middle of the street. And then her eyes, glaring dark in her shocked face. Shreds of skin stuck to her shirt. Whose – the baby's? He lolled in her arms, maybe unconscious, his blue sleeper stained with matter, redness. Clara reached out to touch the poor little creature's forehead, but the mother leaped back, crying, 'Get away! Get away from us!'

The old woman was stupidly plucking her bloody skirt away from her body, bits of flesh falling. Wherever Clara turned there were more. A boy, bleeding, holding his head. His clothes were dirty, he must have been knocked out onto the road. Where was the other one? Clara caught at the girl's shirt and hauled her back from the other lane of traffic.

'Get your hands off her,' the mother shouted. 'What are you trying to do now?' There was no way to speak, to tell what she had meant. She had been driving to the bank on her lunch hour. The bank would be going on without her – how tenderly she longed for the line-up, and herself standing there, safe.

The younger child sat down on the road, feeling his head. He seemed to be poking into his skull, his finger buried in blood. Clara was afraid that this was hell, that she had died when the cars hit; that maybe there was no such thing as death, that she would

be living this way from now on, in hell. Then the police came, and there was a siren winding closer, so the ambulance was coming.

Clara knelt down on the black street beside the boy and took his hand, pulling it gently away from his scalp. 'I think you've got a cut there,' she whispered. 'Give me your hand. Let the doctors look at it, you don't want to make it worse.'

He stared up at her, eyes flickering over her face, trying to read her like a book, it seemed.

'They'll be here to help us in a minute,' she said. 'I'm sorry, I'm so sorry.'

A paramedic, clean and young, leaned in the window to say they were taking the grandmother away, and the nursing mother. The police officer nodded, signalling something, so that the paramedic grunted and stood upright. He banged once on the door to say goodbye. Another ambulance arrived. The children and the man were packed into it. In the cramped back seat of the police cruiser, Clara was left to the last. The paramedics insisted that she go too, although she said she was all right. The second tow-truck was there already, taking her car.

They bundled her up onto the bench in the back, and she sat down on the edge.

'What will they do with the Dart?' the girl asked. 'All our stuff is in it.'

'We were living in our car,' the man said, accusing Clara.

The paramedic asked him to be quiet, so he could check his pulse, or to stop the quarrel. They were all silent, after that.

It was cherry juice on the grandmother. Mrs. Pell, she was called. She'd been eating a big bag of Okanagan cherries. There was a little blood, from the children, but most of the frightening mess was juice and pulp. The baby was all right. The little boy, Trevor, had a bandage on his head, but it was only a scalp wound, no concussion; instead of using stitches they had glued it shut with blue space-age glue. The girl's scraped arm had been cleaned. The father was fine.

But the mother was not well. She had a fever, and there were clusters of tiny bruises. Not from the accident. The emergency nurse stared at them, touching with her fingers.

The father roamed the halls. The mother was put into a room, the baby lying beside her on the narrow hospital bed. The children sat silent beside their mother. Not knowing what else to do, Clara arranged for the TV to be connected, whenever the technician next came round.

Clara Purdy had been drifting for some time in a state of mild despair, forty-three and nothing to show for it. Her racing heart woke her from dreams at three each morning to fling the covers away, angry with herself for this sadness, this terror. Six billion people were worse off. She had all the money she needed, no burdens – she was nothing, a comfortable speck in the universe. She felt smothered, or buried alive, or already dead.

Her mother had died two years before, leaving her the plain bungalow in a quiet area of town. Whether she wanted it or not. There she lived, like someone's widow, all alone. She worked in insurance, at the same firm for – it would be twenty years next

winter. The time seemed too gauzy to bear the weight of twenty years.

Clara imagined that people saw her as pleasant enough, intelligent, kind. A bit stuck-up, she got that from her mother. But sad, that she'd never had children; never gotten over her short, stupid marriage; never travelled or gone back to school and made something of herself.

Her self was an abandoned sampler, half the letters unstitched, the picture in the middle still vague. Looking after elderly parents had made her elderly. The eight months of her stillborn marriage might have been her whole life. She had returned home to care for her father as he died, and then stayed for her mother's long illness, and nothing had pried her out again. She was too reserved, maybe; she'd made a mess of her few brief attachments since the divorce.

Instead of the heavy work of being with people, she gardened, read books on spirituality, and kept the house trim. She missed her beautiful, exasperating mother. When she was sad, she bought expensive clothes, or went to a movie by herself – two movies in a row sometimes. Anyway, she had no excuse for sadness. A grown woman doesn't pine away because her difficult mother died, because her father had died long before – or because she'd trickled her life away on an old tragedy that now seemed overblown.

She went to the Anglican church, to the early service, Book of Common Prayer first and third Sundays. Not *in the church* the way her mother had been, managing and holding court. Clara was not on the coffee list, and did not read the lesson: she was shy in a certain way, not to make an issue of it, and did not find it easy

to speak in public loudly enough to be heard, even with that high-tech tiny microphone on the long black stalk. She did the flowers when her turn came round in the rotation, but after church, and in the dark when she awoke at 3 a.m., she thought continually about how useless she was in the world.

One Saturday a twisted woman stood in line ahead of her at the grocery store. Old but undaunted, this woman had complicated aluminum crutches and a large backpack. All business. The clerk helped load her grocery bags into the backpack, and eased it up onto her back – they must have done this before. Driving home, Clara saw the old woman moving along, spiderly with her crutches and pack. Clara slowed down, wanting to offer her a lift, but she had seemed very proud in the grocery store. It would be miserable to be rebuffed. Clara let her foot fall more firmly on the accelerator. The radio was spouting some story about a mother who had drowned her two children in the bathtub. The neighbour, on the radio, was saying she had heard the children crying, and that at the time she'd been grateful when the crying had stopped, but now she wished she'd – Clara snapped it off.

The world was full of people struggling along with heavy suitcases, poor men dawdling in doorways until they could get their eyes to focus on the sidewalk, children with bloody noses darting past on skateboards – it was laughable, when you began to watch for who needed help. She saw an elderly gentleman fall painfully to his knees, getting off a bus, and that time she almost made herself take action; but a boy got there before her. He helped the old man up and dusted off his trousers, shaking his head at the state of the streets. A native boy, skinny and bruised, fit for care himself.

There was some barrier between Clara and the world that she couldn't budge. Sometimes she thought she would have to go and work in Calcutta with the Sisters of Charity. Everything was wrong with the world – she could not keep on doing nothing.

In Emergency, Clara was the last to be examined and let go. She phoned her office to say she wouldn't be back that afternoon, then bought magazines and puzzle books and went upstairs to 3C, the multi-purpose ward where the mother had been put. The whole family was huddled around her on the bed closest to the door. Old Mrs. Pell was sitting on the orange leatherette chair. It would recline, Clara knew from the months her father had spent in hospital, but the grandmother was sitting up, staring at the door. She must have seen Clara, but she said nothing, didn't even blink her turtle eyes.

The husband turned his head from where he sat on the bed, then stood abruptly, dislodging the baby from its comfort and startling the older children.

'You've got a nerve coming up here,' he said, sullen rather than aggressive. Clara understood: she should have brought more than magazines. There was a machine in the elevator alcove. But when Clara returned with five cans of juice, only the mother was left in the room.

'They went outside for a smoke,' she said.

'The children too?'

'Well, what was he supposed to do with them? I've got my hands full here.'

The baby lay still beside her, mouth open, in a calm stupor.

Two empty formula bottles on the bed table. Clara added the cans of juice, shifting them around to make room.

‘It wasn’t your fault,’ the mother said. Lying there pale and skinny, she said that. But it wasn’t true. Clara was an insurance adjuster, and knew about fault.

‘My name is Clara,’ she said, as if that was the correct thing to do, introduce yourself to the person you’ve put in hospital.

‘Lorraine Gage.’

‘Purdy, sorry. I’m Clara Purdy.’

‘My husband is Clayton. And the kids are Darlene and Trevor,’ Lorraine said formally. ‘And this is Pearce.’

‘What a nice name, Pearce. Have they – do they know what’s –’ *Wrong* seemed like the wrong word to use. She sat in the orange chair, so Lorraine didn’t have to crane her neck uncomfortably. ‘What’s going on with you?’

‘They’re doing tests. They took some blood already. They’ll be back to get me pretty soon, some scan or other. It won’t hurt.’

‘No, that’s good.’

‘There’s something – I haven’t been too good for a while. The crash just made me notice.’

The baby stirred. Lorraine folded her arm more gently around him where she had been tightening her hold. ‘All right, it’s all right,’ she said to him, softer than Clara had yet heard her. ‘This is one good baby,’ Lorraine said. ‘My others were good too, but this one! So easy! Hardly know he’s there except he holds your hand. Look.’

She lifted a corner of the sheet, showing the baby’s fist wrapped around her thumb. Tiny, even fingers, tiny fingernails.

‘Even in his sleep,’ Clara said, shaking her head as if it was a

miracle. Anything was a miracle, any moment of ordinary time just then.

The husband stuck his head around the corner. 'Found the TV,' he said. 'Lounge down the hall.'

'Okay,' Lorraine said. 'I know where you're at.'

'Yeah. Button up your overcoat,' he said, to Clara's surprise. He let go of the door handle and disappeared.

Lorraine smiled. Her teeth were jumbled and not in good shape, the two eye teeth sharply jabbing over the others, but the smile warmed her face.

'You belong to me,' she said, and it took Clara a minute to realize that she was filling in the line of the song, not telling Clara that her life was no longer her own.

While their dad was buying cigarettes, not paying attention to them, Darlene tugged Trevor's hand and pulled him into the stairwell. Flights of grimy metal steps wheeled endlessly upward and downward, making her dizzy. But they were going to get in trouble if they were always hanging around in the lounge by themselves. If they stayed out of sight they would not be kicked out, they could stay close to their mom.

'You be Peter and I'll be Penny,' she said. 'If anybody asks us.'

This was 3. They climbed up to 7, and then up the single longer flight to a dead end, with one door. That probably led to the roof.

Quiet up there. The stairs were not too dirty. Somebody had tossed a brown paper bag with a banana skin and a whole apple in it. Darlene washed the apple carefully with spit and polished it on her

T-shirt. Trevor's legs were shaking. Darlene pushed up against him, anchoring him to the cool concrete wall so he could calm down. She and Trevor ate the apple, bite for bite, and sat without talking.

Lorraine and Clara were still alone, reading magazines, when an orderly arrived. There was some small inconvenience getting Lorraine onto the gurney. Clara helped by holding the baby's head away from the belt. He had downy hair, and a pale red birthmark almost faded at his nape. His neck was small. The skin was smooth there; her fingers traced the mark.

'You come too,' Lorraine said.

The attendant seemed to think that was normal. Clara hesitated, but someone would have to hold the baby during the test, and the grandmother had vanished. They wheeled along corridors and into a different elevator, down a few floors, more halls. The orderly left them parked outside an unmarked door and went inside. He came out, and left.

There was a considerable wait.

'Jesus, I could use a cigarette,' Lorraine said, her voice distorted from lying flat.

'I'm afraid you –' Clara stopped, hearing herself sounding like her mother, sweetly domineering.

'Well, I know that! They don't let you smoke in hospitals, I know that. I don't let them smoke around the baby anyways. It's no good for them, second-hand smoke.'

'Smokers in my office building have to go around the back now. There's a dirty overhang where they leave the trash, and you'll see six or seven people huddled under there in a snowstorm.'

‘Got to have their smokes, though.’

‘I smoked myself,’ Clara said. ‘Then my father had cancer, and it was easier to quit.’

Smoke seemed to be winding around them in vapourish tendrils. The possibility of a long drag, breath you could see. Proof of life. Clara had not wanted a cigarette so badly for years. She could feel her fingers falling into place as if they held one.

‘I don’t smoke much any more,’ Lorraine said. ‘Late at night I’ll have one of Clayton’s.’

‘Well, if I could do that, one or two a day, I’d still be smoking,’ Clara said.

‘Yeah, lots of people can’t.’

They fell into silence.

A few minutes later the baby woke. He did not cry, but he moved restlessly, his mouth pursing and his fist searching. He gnawed on his curled fingers till they were wet, until Clara asked if she should run and find another bottle.

‘Don’t go,’ Lorraine said. ‘I can nurse him, it’s okay.’ Her eyes stayed on Clara, rather than straying to the baby. She knew where he was.

‘I’ll stay,’ Clara said to reassure her.

The door finally opened, and a technician in a lead apron came out to steer the gurney through. She gave Clara the baby to hold and said it would be a few minutes.

Clara stood there in the hall, suddenly alone. No nurses, no station. She began to walk back and forth along the windowed hallway near the closed door, jiggling the baby slightly up and down. He liked up and down better than side to side, she found. She found it astonishing that the baby did not cry, or find her

frightening or frustrating. He seemed to have forgotten his hunger. His fist closed around her fingers and he brought her hand close to his mouth and then stared, transfixed, at the size or shape or texture of her skin. The smell, she thought. Probably mostly soap. Different from his mother, at any rate.

At the end of the hall a low windowsill looked like a good place to sit. She let him stare, first at the glass, and then, his focus visibly altering, out at the courtyard garden below. He held on to her blouse with one hand, his perfect miniature fingers clutching the silk into even gathers.

No one came down the hall, no one disturbed them. Far in the distance, Clara could hear machinery rumbling and whirring. She could imagine the scan moving over Lorraine, and Lorraine trying to lie still, trying not to be afraid. Pearce put one hand on the glass, looking at the empty garden.

Darlene left Trevor sleeping on the stairs and went down alone. At each landing shiny linoleum halls ran away in every direction. Picking a floor, she wandered quietly along. Every room she passed held people in flimsy gowns coughing or lying suspiciously still. On TV when they knew people were dead a blue light flashed on and off. *Code Blue*.

She was mostly invisible, but one nurse at a desk asked her, 'Are you lost?'

'No,' Darlene said, not quite stopping. 'My dad is having an operation to his heart, I'm just waiting to see how it turns out.'

The nurse looked at her. 'What's your name?'

'Melody Fairchild,' Darlene said. 'I'll go back and wait with

my mom. She's pretty upset. I was looking for a place to get juice for my baby brother.'

The nurse rolled her chair backwards to the little fridge for a couple of boxes of apple juice and handed them over the counter, then added a pack of cookies from her drawer. A bell rang somewhere so she stopped paying attention to Darlene. Maybe it was a blue light going off.

The lobby? She could check the payphones for quarters and look in the shop. But she should go back for Trevor. She found the stairwell and ran up all those spiralling, echoing metal steps. But the landing was empty, he was gone. Or this was the wrong set of stairs.

A doctor – too young and pretty to be real – arrived to talk to Lorraine. The husband had come back from the lounge with the little boy trailing cautiously after him, wanting to see Lorraine, but when the doctor entered the husband edged toward the door, an awkward beetle trying to scuttle away without being seen.

'Why don't I take the children downstairs for some supper?' Clara asked Lorraine. It was after six.

Lorraine said, 'Clay?'

'I'll give the baby to Mom,' the husband said, taking him, and out he went.

They couldn't all leave her, Clara thought, but the doctor must have been used to avoidance. 'We just have a few questions,' she said, making it mild. 'Dr. Porteous will come by too, in a few minutes. He's the consultant.'

Lorraine's eyes were slightly too wide open, the whites of her

eyes showing. But to the little boy she said calmly enough, 'Go get some supper with Clara, that's a great idea. You'll be fine with her.'

The little girl hung at the door, a shadow. She glared at the boy like he'd done something wrong.

Clara did not try to take their hands. She went to the door and let them follow. In the elevator she said, as if she knew what to do with children, 'Darlene, can you push the one marked *L*? Trevor can push the button on the way back up.'

In the cafeteria line-up the little girl snaked out her hand to Clara's wrist. Without volition, Clara's hand pulled back. The girl's eyes rose sidelong, diamond-edged, to check what she was thinking.

'Where did you get this?' she asked, almost accusing. It was a bracelet, six or seven strands of beads in different colours, pretty.

'I got it – oh, in some store, I can't remember which,' Clara said, forcing herself not to turn away, not to be cruel.

'In the Saan store, I bet,' the girl said, triumphant. 'I saw it there!'

Clara wanted to give it to her, but couldn't find a way to do it that would make up for having pulled her hand back. Suddenly everything made her so tired! She must have a vitamin deficiency. Or it was the trauma. She never shopped at Saan. *Shoddy goods* – her mother's voice rang in her ears.

'Yes,' she said. 'I think it was Saan.'

The children ate their French fries. She had to go back to the counter three times for ketchup: twice for Trevor and once, separately, for Darlene. Trevor put mustard on his, too, but he had already filled his pockets with mustard packs himself.

'It's a pity to waste those chicken nuggets,' Clara said.

‘Oh, we won’t *waste* them!’ Trevor said, his voice squeakier than she’d expected.

‘We’ll take them up for Dad and Gran,’ Darlene said, patient with her rich ignorance.

Clara jumped up and went back for roast chicken dinners for the husband and the grandmother. The children loved the stainless steel hats meant to keep the dinners warm. They begged to carry one plate each, so she let them. Trevor dropped his right in front of the elevators.

‘Better than dropping it *in* the elevator,’ Clara said, pleased with how calmly she took it. They told the morose kitchen helper about the spill, and got another dinner.

Upstairs, Lorraine was alone in the room. The lights were out, except a small bulb over the sink. Red from the sun’s low angle streamed in the window.

Clara said, ‘Trevor, will you carry it very carefully?’ He nodded, glad to be given a second chance. ‘Take these down to the lounge to your father and your grandmother, then.’ Darlene walked behind Trevor so he would not be distracted.

Lorraine was lying on her side in a fresh hospital gown, with the bed lowered.

‘The doctor came in,’ she told Clara. Forgetting that Clara had been there, or maybe having no other way to begin telling it. ‘They think, they’re pretty sure, I’ve got cancer.’

She had the fortitude to say it right out like that, no hesitation. What kind, was all Clara could think to ask. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said, instead.

‘It’s not your fault,’ Lorraine said, and almost laughed.

It was the second time she’d said that to Clara.

Down in the lobby the booth selling stuffed animals was closing for the evening. A little cat caught Clara's eye, with a beaded collar like her bracelet, for Darlene, and a small mottled-green pterodactyl for Trevor. She didn't have the gall to go back up and disturb the family again, so she shoved the toys into the bottom of her bag.

At home, Clara called Evie, the office manager. Easier to deal with Evie than Barrett, the Regional Director, whose petty vanity required constant coddling. 'I'm sorry to bother you in the evening like this, but I'm going to be away for a few more days,' she said.

'Are you hurt? Is it worse than you thought?' Evie asked, relishing catastrophe.

'It's not – I'm fine, but –' Rather than explain the whole thing, and have Evie talking it over with Mat and the others, Clara said, 'I am a little shaken up. I think I'll need a few days. The Curloe inspection was put off till the nineteenth anyway, and otherwise...'

'Oh, no, you stay home. You get some good rest. You're no good to us if you're a nervous wreck, are you? What a thing to happen. How are the other people?'

'Oh, they're fine, they're fine, no one was badly hurt.'

'But it could have been. A baby, too, you said?'

Had she said that? Why go into any detail at all? Because she had been buzzing from the accident still, frantic with dreadful possibilities, words spilling over.

'Evie, I've got to go, I'm going to lie down now.'

She lay in bed wakeful, the accident replaying in her mind.

She said her prayers, naming each of them, and prayed that Lorraine's cancer would be healed, as far as she could reach to God, knowing that it would be no use.