

# GRAVIDATION

DAVID DENNY



Ransome Gillet Holdredge, *Miner's Camp*.

Lately I've been reading the third chapter of *Ecclesiastes*, which is a poem that encourages us to see the big picture; it says there is a time for everything under heaven, and then the poet catalogues a series of opposites—there is a time to kill, he says, and a time to heal, a time to weep, and a time to laugh, and so on. One of the verses says there is a time to keep silence and a time to speak. The back and forth movement of the poem, like a metronome, soothes me, dulls the pain—well, that and the wine, and Jerry's marvelous journal scribbles, which, frankly, are just as nurturing, in their own way, as *Ecclesiastes*.

**H**ome from another twelve-hour shift at the retirement community, I push open the front door and fumble impatiently with my key in the lock. I drop my purse and grocery bag in the recliner and run to the bathroom. Lately my bladder has become my master. I must serve it before I can do anything else. I've even begun to pee my panties just a bit when I laugh or cough. It's not to the public embarrassment stage yet. From what my sister Peg tells me—she's six years my senior—that's coming.

When I spoke to her on the phone Sunday afternoon, she told me her doctor has recommended surgery. Next week she will have a bladder sling

inserted. The doctor told her that by lifting the bladder and urethra, the sling will relieve the leaks and ease the urgency to go. We laughed together about how gravity is the enemy of women on the outside and on the inside. But our laughter was more of a nervous release than anything else. There is nothing particularly funny about surgery. Still, it felt good to laugh with my Peg. Peg o' My Heart, I call her, after the famous old song. Our father owned the Dean Martin recording, and he used to invite Peg to dance to it whenever the needle came around to that song. That's one of my earliest memories—Peg and our father dancing in the living room with Dean Martin crooning on the Hi-Fi. Even over the telephone, our nervous laughter caused her to squirt some pee into her panties, and that caused her to swear and laugh even more. I had to put my hand over my mouth to stifle my laughter so she could calm down and stop leaking into her panties.

So first I pee, then I come out to the kitchen and pour myself a glass of Pinot Grigio, stand here at the window, sipping. There's my husband Jerry out there on the back patio, doing his daily meditation. He's seated on his little pillow, his back to me, facing the lawn. God, he has such lovely broad shoulders. You can really appreciate a man's shoulders when he controls his waistline. So many men, when they reach middle age, get that paunch that draws your attention away from other features. Here's his journal, on the kitchen counter. He leaves it out for me to read while I'm preparing our dinner. I often prop it open like a cookbook.

My husband has taken a vow of silence. Well, not a vow exactly. He fell silent when he lost his job at the YMCA. It was the third job in three years he'd lost, each one a rung lower in pay, status, and satisfaction. For a dozen years, Jerry worked as a copywriter for Howard & Howard, an advertising agency with several big retail clothing accounts.

But when the firm shifted its leadership from father to son, my Jerry found himself shifted out of a job for the first time since college. Then he worked for two years managing a small fleet of limousines. But that company went bust when the economy tanked and gas prices when through the roof. Also, it was revealed that at least two of the drivers were mobile pimps, using the limos as portable motel rooms for their "ladies."

After six months of searching, Jerry took a job in charge of fundraising and membership recruitment at the Y, a job for which he had no talent and no passion. He came home the day the Y released him and sank into the recliner in our living room. As I approached him, he waved his hands in front of himself as if waving off an airplane from a bad landing. He traced the sign of the cross with his thumb on his lips. That was nine months ago.

Since then, he fills his days with the same five activities:

*One-* He listens to music in a minor key. He likes his Mahler in the morning and his Erik Satie in the afternoon. He'll put on *Gymnopedies*, for example, sit in the recliner, and close his eyes, touching his fingertips one-by-one to his thumbs in rhythm with the music.

*Two-* He practices *zazen* on the back patio. He tosses a small pillow on the pavement, lights some incense, and sits facing south, away from the house. He finds a focal point in the grass and breathes as evenly as a body can—in and out, in and out.

*Three-* He takes long walks in the hills above our home. I have accompanied him on occasion. He hikes at a good pace for a middle-aged guy, marches right up the hill to the promontory, sits on the bench overlooking the valley, and watches the hawks as they surf the thermals.

*Four-* He fills one page—and one page only—in his journal each day. When I arrive home from my shift at the retirement home, the first thing I do is read

that day's journal page. Actually, it's the second or the third thing. Peeing comes first. I pee out the poison of my workday. Then I pour my glorious glass of Pinot Grigio. Then I read his page. It's our way of staying in touch, since only one of us speaks. It's probably enough, though. If you think about it . . . if each of us reserved our daily communication to one carefully written page per day, just think how much worthless chatter would be eliminated from our lives.

*Five-* He watches his daily episode of *The Joy of Painting*, a show that has been rerunning on PBS for umpteen years. The fuzzy and soft-spoken artist paints a brand new picture every episode in just thirty minutes. Peg o' My Heart says

she tried to watch this show but found it cloying and monotonous. The painter says the same things episode after episode, and all he paints are landscapes. But Jerry watches this painter the way some people watch the Pope or the Dalai Lama.

Near as I can tell, unless he's got a secret stash of calories somewhere, Jerry eats about the same amount of food as the robins and jays that flit upon the lawn as he sits cross-legged on his little pillow in the backyard. I, however, have taken food as my lover, since Jerry is not only silent but celibate, too. Every evening, while Jerry breathes and breathes, staring at his patch of our back lawn while his thoughts drift by like a lazy stream, I

cook and drink, cook and drink. And so, in the past nine months, I have grown fat, while he, my own little Jack Sprat, has grown thin.

In fact, about six months into this, a rumor started at work that I was pregnant. One day a new resident beamed at my belly and innocently asked, "When are you due?"

"I'm not pregnant," I answered, "just fat."

Peg thinks I should complain to Jerry about my lot. I suppose most wives would complain bitterly if they faced what I face at work and then came home to the perpetual silent treatment. And under more ordinary circumstances I might be one of those wives. But Jerry's silence isn't aimed at me; he speaks to no one. And his silence, it turns out, is a kind of antidote to a toxin that has come into my work life.

The name of this particular toxin is Anna Gustafson, a resident whose creeping dementia is causing her great bitterness. She can't shut up. She blathers on and on. As we say in the nurse's break room, she's lost her edit button. Whatever vile thought enters her mind comes bubbling out like a sulphurous verbal geyser. The best we can do is keep our more vulnerable residents out of her path.

Springer Retirement Community is a two-tiered facility. Most residents reside in the independent living wing, in which they occupy their own little apartments, gather in the commons for activities, and eat together in the dining hall. The second tier is a nursing facility, in which the residents are really patients who live in double-occupancy rooms watched over by a round-the-clock nursing staff. That's where I work. The other nurses in our facility have given me charge of Anna Gustafson because I have the most experience with dementia patients. If a patient gets a full-blown Alzheimer's diagnosis, they move on to another facility, but in that gray area after

they are able to live independently but before they become a possible danger to themselves or others, they stay with us. In the break room, we affectionately refer to our wing as the loony bin.

My own mother drifted in and out of lucidity in her last two years. One day she'd be fine, and the next she'd pop back and forth in time. Time is a slippery thing to the aged. One moment she'd be a little girl on a farm in west Texas, the next moment a bored housewife obsessed with 1970s soap operas, and the next a young woman awaiting the return of her new husband from the war in the Pacific. My ability to manage these shifts and soothe the patients as they fight against their own confusion is what gained me the dubious honor of "expert."

This morning, as I went in to strip the sheets from her bed, the lovely Mrs. Gustafson let out with a stream of profanity that would shame any sailor. "Get your flabby ass out of here," she yelled, "you *blankety-blank* slant-eyed *blankety-blank*. Quick now, before I call the Sheriff and have him *blank* you with his *blankety-blank* billy club. Go back to China, why don't you, you *blankety-blank* daughter of a chain gang whore!"

I think maybe what triggered this particular fit was that she had soiled her sheets again. Deep down, she was embarrassed over the mess she had made and angry at her body's regular betrayals. What I do when she flips on that particular switch—the one with the random racial slurs and the sexual insults—is I switch my mind off. I hear her (they can hear her in San Diego), but I don't register what she's saying. I've trained my mind to just let the sounds roll by, like a muddy stream. Maybe I picked this up from Jerry's zazen practice. I don't fish for anything in that ugly, murky stream; I just watch it bubble and gurgle on by.

In this case I hummed a little tune to myself while she ranted. I hummed the little complex melody of Satie's



Anders Christian Lunde, *Landscape with a Small Cabin in a Forest*, 1858.

*Gymnopedies* while I gathered the stinky sheets and put them into the hamper, opened her window, and sprayed the room with Fabreze.

Peg o' My Heart wonders aloud if I am a healer or an enabler. My supervisor at Springer, Franny, says this is an issue every caretaker must address. Every healer, says Franny, is wounded herself, and needs healing herself. We are all walking wounded. We all participate in the world's great sadness. No one is immune, though some are in denial. So says Franny. So say I. Peg thinks I should get right up into Anna Gustafson's face and yell right back. She thinks I might just shout her into polite silence. As my Jerry used to say before his vow of silence, "That's not how I roll."

So my days are spent knee-deep in physical and verbal shit. Despite my attempts to deflect them, some days the things Anna Gustafson says have a way of bypassing my coping strategy. Some days her poison enters my bloodstream, sickening me in body and in spirit. On those days I awaken in the middle of the night with her vile comments ringing in my ears. When that happens, I get up and pour myself a glass of wine and flip through the back pages of Jerry's daily journal. I read his journal

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the way some people read poetry. Or I open my bible, trolling for wisdom. Lately I've been reading the third chapter of *Ecclesiastes*, which is a poem that encourages us to see the big picture; it says there is a time for everything under heaven, and then the poet catalogues a series of opposites—there is a time to kill, he says, and a

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Up late one night last week I turned on the television to a PBS production of *Hamlet*. I've never read the play, so I'm afraid much of it was lost on me. It was pleasant enough to look at, with richly-textured period costumes and beautiful actors. And the language—who knows what most of it means?—just poured over me, like I was standing under a shower of words. At one point Hamlet turned to the camera and proclaimed, "Lately, I have lost all my mirth." And this was exactly what Jerry had written that day in his journal. My dear, sweet, unemployed husband has lost his joy. Everyone who knows him knows this. Unlike Hamlet, however, he is not considering suicide. There is no "to be or not to be" in his pages. If it weren't for his journal, I wouldn't know this. In fact, I've learned more about my husband in these months of silence than I ever knew—or would ever have known.

In his journal, he records his encounters with nature in heartbreaking detail. On his walks in the hills, he observes birds, animals, plants, trees, clouds. My Jerry knows the names of all these things. He imagines that he communes with them. Who was it—St. Francis, I believe—who preached to the birds? My Jerry has



Vilhelm von Gegerfelt, *Winter Picture with a Cabin at the River*.

no gospel to preach, but he and those animals are communicating on a deep level. His journal has become to him his priest, psychologist, friend, confidant. Also, maybe, wife. Part of me longs to hear his spoken voice; however, I'm a little afraid that if he begins to speak again, he will cease to write. Selfishly, I wish to hear him. But if I could be more unselfish—more like St. Francis—I would wish for him continued silence.

I stand at the kitchen window, unloading groceries, staring at his broad back as he sits on his cushion, gazing vaguely at his patch of lawn. He sneezes, wipes his nose on his sleeve. He rings the little bell next to his cushion, crosses himself, bows to the setting sun. The smoke from his incense trails into the air and is caught by the breeze.

The interesting thing about Jerry is he went from having no religion to embracing all of them at once. He goes to mass at the little church around the corner, he does his Zen thing, and he's reading up on Native American shamanism, as well as the Hindu *Vedas*. It's like he's catching up for all his years of getting and spending. I wonder now if he'll ever go back to work. One thing we've discovered over the past nine months is that we can live on my salary alone. It's not easy, but it's possible.

My sister Peg asks me if I resent Jerry, now that I am the breadwinner. I answer her that not only am I the breadwinner, I'm also the bread baker and the bread eater, since Jerry consumes so little. I don't believe he has used his ATM card in the past nine months. He will need a

new pair of hiking boots soon, since he's nearly worn out his current pair. In his journal he has written that Henry David Thoreau pared down life to its essentials: food, clothing, shelter. I've never read *Walden*, but I'll bet Jerry matches him for austerity of lifestyle. And my Jerry's a writer, too, even if I am his only reader. Do I resent him? No. He may be depressed and listless, but he's got this personal discipline going that I really respect. And then there are those broad shoulders.

Peg o'My Heart would never understand me if I told

*"Remember where your light source is," he says. "Always know where the light is coming from. That way you know where your shadows live."*

her how much inspiration I draw from him. She once whispered the word "deadbeat" during one of our weekly phone conversations. I pretended like I didn't hear it. After a pause, we went on to talk about the strange weather that's been hitting the Midwest this year, the way the quick snowmelt has raised so many rivers to flood stage. On days like today, I'd like to retreat into Jerry's daily routine, or discover my own. My routine would have to include cooking, cleaning, and paying the bills. I might replace Mahler with Schubert. I might take up yoga. My supervisor, Franny, swears by it. She goes to the yoga center two nights a week and on Saturday mornings. She talks a lot about centering, Franny does, how yoga centers her. I'm due for some centering, that's for sure.

After cleaning and chopping the veggies, I carry our wine glasses into the back bedroom. Jerry has switched on his television guru; the fuzzy and soft-spoken artist has wet

his canvas with Liquid White and loaded his palette with color. Jerry lays propped on two pillows. The artist dabs his two-inch brush into the Titanium White, mixes in some Phthalo Blue with a swipe of Liquid Black, moving the brush in a swirling motion out of a vanishing point about three-quarters up the canvas.

I hand Jerry his wine and join him on the bed. I set my glass over on the end table and cuddle up to him for the first time in a long while. Normally, I hand him his wine and go cook. But tonight I lie down. He makes room for me, adjusting his legs to allow me to scoot up next to him. I settle my head on his chest just beneath his left arm. He's got some body odor going, my Jerry, because he showers less these days. But it's not an offensive odor, certainly no worse than what I encounter at work everyday; he's just a bit ripe with dried sweat and incense.

The artist dips his brush into some Cadmium Yellow and enlarges the swirls. Then he daubs into a little Yellow Ochre. I can see now what he's doing. It is a sun in a misty mountain sky. Who knew the sky contained so many colors? Come to think of it, when was the last time I looked at the sky?—I mean really looked, not just glanced in order to divine the weather.

The artist speaks in hushed tones, as if he were revealing the secrets of creation, as if he thought that if he spoke too loudly, the little magic spell of his painting would be broken, the harsh TV studio lights would brighten to the point of white out, and he would disappear. Jerry lay next to me perfectly relaxed, his breathing deep and even. He takes a sip of wine. If Jerry were a cat, he'd be purring right now.

The fuzzy, soft-spoken painter takes up another brush and outlines a mountain range just beneath his sun. He dips his knife into the Van Dyke Brown and the Midnight Black, creating a dark bead along the tip of the knife. He scrapes the paint across the canvas to get

the texture right. "Remember where your light source is," he says. "Always know where the light is coming from. That way you know where your shadows live."

He takes up the first brush again and dips it into a pail of thinner, then he shakes it, smacking the brush from side to side against the leg of his easel. He smiles broadly. "Just beat the devil out of that brush," he says, unable to suppress the mischievous grin that shines through his whiskers. Such joy this little game brings him! I can't help but smile along with him. Jerry's tummy shakes a little; I realize he is laughing. It's a muffled little laugh, but it rises from clear down in the belly.

The artist loads his clean brush with Indian Yellow and Bright Red, daubing in highlights around the sunny side of his mountains. He asks, "See how that adds depth? That's what we're after. We want to push those mountains back a bit and make room for what's coming next."

He switches to a #6 fan brush, drags it through the Dark Sienna. Suddenly there are dark evergreens on those mountains. Jerry groans with satisfaction. The world of the picture is emerging from just a few deft strokes, with just a few colors from the edges of his palate: the hazy sun in the distance beyond the mountains, the forest coming down the mountainsides, the mist in the trees.

I feel my body relax and mold itself around Jerry's body; like fetal twins, my legs melt into his legs, my belly rests against his hips, my breasts touch the side of his stomach, where his love handles used to be. I swear our breathing has slipped into perfect sync. The artist slides a dry two-inch brush lightly across the middle of the canvas. "Just two hairs and some air is all you need. There," he whispers, "the sunlight filters through the trees."

The artist straightens his back and looks at his painting. "All right," he says, "now let's have some fun. Let's put a

little cabin in here." He cleans his brush again by dipping it into the thinner, shaking the brush, then slapping it again against the leg of his easel. It sounds like the tail of a beaver thumping against a log. He drags his clean brush through the Sap Green, Van Dyke Brown, and Indian Yellow. "You're going to think I'm crazy," he says, "but look how this cabin just appears when I go like this." He creates a roofline with the tip of the brush, then pulls the brush down in neat, vertical strokes. I swear it looks like wooden planks catching the distant sunlight. Then he loads the edge of his knife with Midnight Black and Phthalo Blue, the same colors that originally brought the sky to life, and creates wood grain. "See how that adds just the right texture?"

You can't help but share in the joy of his creation. Twenty minutes earlier, the fuzzy, soft-spoken man stood before a blank canvas. And now there is a dilapidated cabin in a grassy clearing. With quick, careless strokes he highlights shrubbery in the foreground with the tip of his one-inch brush. He paints a little stream that drops right off the lower edge of the canvas. Your eye goes up and back, from the little cabin to the forested mountains, to the hazy sun just atop their dark peaks. He has made a world that I feel I can walk into. I close my eyes and hear the trickle of the stream, the buzz of insects, the twittering of birds, and the warmth of that sun peeking over the shoulders of those distant mountains. The world of the painting slowly takes over the world of the pudgy, burned-out caregiver and her depressed, unemployed husband lying on a sagging mattress in the twilight of an autumn evening. When I look again, the fuzzy, soft-spoken artist is dragging his largest brush right down through much of the detail he has so artfully created. But when he switches to the fan brush and begins to leaf in branches and then the highlights, I see the wisdom in such a bold move.



Benjamin Williams Leader, *February Fill Dyke*, c. 1881.

I thought it was wonderful before. Now I see occur what he'd been talking about all along—with this new addition, a kind of radical depth emerges. “Never paint a lone tree,” he says, putting in another big trunk. “Trees are just like people; they need friends. Always give your tree a friend. Go ahead and mingle their branches,” he says. “Ever notice how trees will grow into each other?” Then he picks up a tiny brush and slips it into Bright Red. “Let’s call this one finished,” he says, signing his name atop a cluster of shadowy shrubs in the corner.

When I awaken it is dark and I am alone on the bed. The news is on the TV, sound muted. The smiling news anchors are reporting another shooting up in Oakland. Another child has been caught in gangster crossfire. The sliding glass door stands wide open. The crickets serenade me. The smiling weather girl takes over, pointing at places on her map where raindrops have been spotted. A

nice breeze cools the bedroom. The wind chimes on our back porch are playing a spirited little tune. I have been dreaming in vivid color, which is rare for me. Whenever I remember my dreams, and I haven’t recalled any lately, they are usually in black and white.

In my dream I was standing at the kitchen sink, as usual. Jerry was seated on his pillow, as usual; however, in my dream he was facing me instead of having his back to me. Suddenly he began to levitate. He lifted slowly into the air to a height of about eight feet and hovered there. Beneath him stood Anna Gustafson and Peg o’My Heart. Anna was hopping on both feet, straining to reach Jerry’s pillow. Peg had a bucket of rocks that she was chucking at him. They both wanted to knock him out of the sky. Jerry seemed impervious. I tried to shout a warning to him but couldn’t make a sound. When I looked at the food I had been chopping on the kitchen

counter, there, among the veggies and the raw meat, lay my tongue. As disturbing as this sounds, when I awaken I am not agitated or afraid. Instead, I feel rested, even though I’ve only been asleep for about an hour.

I have to pee. But I force myself to lie still, holding it in. If I practice this the way Jerry practices zazen, maybe I can hold off the inevitable bladder sling in my future with sheer discipline. The covers next to me are still warm where Jerry had lain. The smiling sports guy on the TV news shakes his head and scolds the Giants’ pitcher for walking too many batters. They have edited together a little comic silent movie of Arizona Diamondbacks walking and walking from base to base while the pitcher wipes and wipes the sweat from his brow. Where has Jerry gone? It is not his usual pattern at all to arise after his art episode. In my Jerry’s daily routine, the fuzzy, soft-spoken artist is always followed by a nap while I watch the night come on from the warmly-lit kitchen.

I give in to my bladder. Then I scuff down the dark hallway towards the light. I stand in the archway to the kitchen, squinting. My Jerry is preparing dinner. He opens the rice cooker; a wave of fragrant steam rises. The timer beeps. He grabs a hot pad and peeks in the oven. I can’t remember the last time he cooked for me. Aside from the five elements of his daily routine, he hasn’t done much of anything lately. I’m still thinking about my dream, and for a moment, I wonder if it’s possible I’m still asleep. But who pees in a dream?

When Jerry sees me leaning against the fridge, yawning and scratching like a man, he pours me a fresh glass of Pinot Grigio. He is humming the happy melody of Beethoven’s *Sixth*. I clumsily get down some plates from the cupboard while he pulls the roaster from the oven. He uses the big, two-pronged fork to hold the chicken in place while he carves it with our only sharp knife. He divides up the pieces between our plates. Taking the slotted spoon, he scoops out some veggies from the

roasting pan—carrots, potatoes, onions, celery, apples. Apples? Where did Jerry get such an idea?

I sit at the breakfast counter. A huge moth comes to rest on the window screen, stretching her wings, bathing in light. I look around for Jerry’s daily journal; it was right here when I came home. Finally I spot it beneath the roasting pan, covered in chicken broth, ruined. Jerry puts a full plate before each of us. He pours some wine into his own glass and lifts it with a flourish. “Let’s call this one finished,” he says. And for a moment I feel I may levitate. I may lift right off the chair I’m sitting on and float recklessly around the room. ❖