

### ***Neighbours from Hell***

*Nine-tenths Unseen: a Psychological Mystery*, Kenneth J. Harvey. Somerville House, 1996.

Kenneth J. Harvey's latest novel chronicles the descent into madness of an unnamed narrator living with his wife in the small coastal community of

Bareneed, Newfoundland. The action takes place against a backdrop of the approaching Christmas season, the visit of the couple's daughter, and a family unit in a state of total meltdown.

The narrator's wife also remains unnamed throughout, as do most of the people we encounter in the novel. The only character whose name is given to us — and the only character who exhibits a complete range of human emotions and whose fate fully engages us — is the couple's daughter Julia.

Early in the narrative we learn that an iceberg has become lodged in the harbour narrows, and the narrator, dolefully observing the iceberg from his kitchen window, obliquely refers to it as a disruptive influence: a presence that invades and poisons his daily existence, much like a rampant contagion, a noxious cloud, or an evil spirit. The iceberg seems to trigger within the narrator a crippling guilt over the many transgressions he has committed in his life, transgressions social, sexual, and paternal. Much of the narrative is a litany of sins, real and imagined.

The dynamic between husband and wife appears adversarial, but even this is not to be taken as a given. At times they seem like co-conspirators driven by shared demons to destroy their own lives. She spits enigmatic accusations his way every chance she gets. She has stripped the house of items that provide the veneer of ordered domesticity — drapes, crockery, kitchen utensils — and buried them in the backyard. Their sexual encounters are fraught with rage, seething with suppressed violence. He is wary of her, yet his tolerance of, and at certain points denial of, his wife's insanity verges on the maniacal. It is she, we learn, who hurled a pot of boiling water at him, disfiguring him for life. Still, he chooses to live with and care for her. And yet, as the novel progresses, it is the wife who begins to appear almost rational while the husband spirals deeper and deeper into the abyss of his tortured psyche.

This family unit has been ravaged once before. Hovering along the fringes of the immediate action, and looming larger as the novel progresses, is the spectre of Tommy, the son who died years earlier by drowning, though the exact circumstances of his death remain obscure. Both parents agonize over this death. The husband assails himself with recriminations, convinced he could have done something to save his son. His grief has turned to bitterness, and the death of the son seems to have stripped him of aspects of his manhood. The wife has allowed the death of her son to infest her like a nest of worms; she sees death everywhere, in the mundane articles she buries and in every person she encounters. She is suspicious of her daughter's pregnancy, terrified it will engender death rather than life. We suspect that it was her son's drowning that tipped her over the edge and into insanity.

Such is the household we encounter in Bareneed. Harvey has crafted a psychodrama worthy of Alfred Hitchcock.

The framework of the story is slight. Julia returns home to visit her parents for Christmas and perhaps to face up to her past. She is pregnant and her mind is overflowing with nuggets of New Age wisdom and pagan neo-philosophy. We learn that there has always been antagonism between Julia and her mother, and there are hints of abuse and a need to forgive. The family goes out together to purchase a Christmas tree (the wife has an eye for perfection in this regard). Christmas comes, but the presents remain unopened. The wife's madness reaches its apex and a horrific climax ensues. In between there are discussions, arguments and encounters, many of which are implicitly or explicitly carnal in nature. But in the end what has actually occurred in this novel remains open to speculation. Much of what we see happen is related in a hallucinatory torrent and only takes place, we suppose (though we could be wrong), in the narrator's febrile imagination.

Harvey does not let his readers off easily. He makes demands of us, demands that some readers may find difficult to indulge. In his quest to depict the human psyche in its raw state, he knocks down barriers and does not allow us to retreat from the action, however sickening or repulsive. The husband provides the voice, the eyes and the ears of the novel. We perceive the world of Bareneed through the corrupting filter of his consciousness. He is a man suffering an agony of self-loathing, yet he cannot curb his sexual fantasies nor tame his desires. He maintains a facade of rationality and to all intents and purposes functions within the community, yet we see him in the house of God becoming aroused as *The Man in the Church* lowers his zipper, and he willingly kneels to take his penance in the mouth. We listen to his voice describing his daughter in terms normally reserved for a potential sexual partner:

My eyes trace Julie's body: female, ample, sexual. I do not deny my attraction. To deny would only create sublimation, the urge eventually resurfacing as something unidentified and violently cruel. She stands in wait, challenging me, watching my face as I study the tight fit of her slacks; the way they neatly hug and cut into the split of her cunt. The forbidden sight as compulsive and invigorating as the primal necessity to pass on the seed, her belly rounded, as if my thoughts have already found accomplishment and been applauded.

But Harvey's technique does not allow us to sequester ourselves from what seems to be taking place. Because the narrator speaks to us directly from the bottom of his soul, the customary distance between reader and narrator has been reduced to nil and we become accessories in each humiliating ritual, partners in debauchery. It makes at times for a disturbing and claustrophobic reading experience.

In many respects the narrator is an ogre, a pervert, a social and sexual miscreant. His behaviour is shameful and destructive and at times incomprehensible. When Julie chastises him for not taking his wife to St. John's where she would receive treatment, he puts her off with platitudes and then tells himself, "Find the cure and the disease simply changes. No physical way of stopping what ails us. It is the spirit that must be healed." Such incoherent rationalizations are his way of telling us that he cannot explain why he wishes to keep his wife in the house with him when she is clearly unbalanced and, as it turns out, a danger to those around her. It almost seems a calculation on his part, a plot to keep the threat of danger, and thus himself, alive. To the reader, it appears as though this most severely incapacitating of his problems has a relatively simple solution. However, the fact that he is unable or unwilling to accept that a solution exists neither draws us to him nor makes him sympathetic. It is merely perplexing.

Still, the narrator's anguish is so all-encompassing and diffuse that there may be no way for him to save himself. His internal monologues often read like confused and desperate yowls for deliverance. Many of these laments are addressed to a shadowy figure he christens My Lady of Exquisite Agony, and this figure pervades the novel, assuming a profusion of shapes and guises. He detects Her in the snow-covered landscape, in his wife and daughter, in the face of a woman he encounters in church, and most of all in the iceberg trapped in the harbour. Assuming the role of both saviour and seductress, she seems at once to soothe and to provoke his suffering. He fears Her presence every bit as intensely as he fears Her absence, as if he believes that it is only his anguish that gives his existence meaning. His connection to the iceberg and the Lady, though paradoxical and often confounding, is for him both perilous and redemptive. His convoluted thought processes, which we behold in exhaustive detail, are in large part an account of this relationship, his attempts to escape and substantiate it.

I trudge down the slope of our backyard, clumsily hurrying toward the iceberg. I fear for its departure. What will remain of me should it remove all my pain and memories?

The iceberg is, after all, a convenient symbol, standing in for its own hidden depths while mirroring those of the human psyche. If the iceberg floats away, then it is possible our narrator will lose both his tormentor and his crutch, and with these the last vestige of his humanity that remains: his tortured subconscious.

This is a novel in which perversity is the norm, in which the people we encounter are living a nightmare from which there is no awakening. Harvey presents us with an intimate portrait of a human mind in the final stages of collapse, yet he also manages to keep his narrator at a cool

remove. For all the psychic closeness generated by the narrative style, we cannot even begin to sympathize with this unnamed husband and father whose thoughts and actions attain such bestial depths. Neither can we generate any morsels of compassion for his wife, lost as she is in her labyrinth of suspicion and unreasoning fury.

In the end, what does all this agonizing add up to? Harvey has yanked open all the stops and taken many risks in this novel, but the result is a story that remains emotionally inert, that is hard to warm up to and exceedingly difficult to enjoy in the conventional sense. When the violence boils over in the novel's closing scenes, the reader has by and large become deadened to its consequences. Any suspense that has been generated is focused upon Julia; it is she, at the novel's close, for whom we care, primarily because she is the one character whose motives are recognizable and sane, the one character who is generous and trusting and whose fate, as a result, has come to matter.

And still, Harvey has created a compelling voice for his cataclysmic tale of domestic ruination and moral bankruptcy. There may not be a glimmer of hope for these residents of Bareneed, but the narrative has a propulsive urgency that drags us along with it whether or not we want to go.

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