

What's in a Name

Thirty years after Mary Lizzie threw the meat cleaver at Rory, the very cleaver whose shape reflected that of her hand from the decades of chopping beef, disarticulating rabbits, chickens, geese...whatever Rory, like a cat presenting trophies, dragged across the threshold of her kitchen...yes, *that* meat cleaver...at her husband's head...thirty years after the fact, it remained the stuff of legend. And even after she and Rory were tucked into the cemetery, communal memory of the event still generated reactions that ranged from shock, disbelief, admiration and, depending on who told it and who listened, envy.

Eventually, even laughter.

And questions! The big one, of course, was 'why?' Mary Lizzie and Rory, good Catholics, had raised six children over their 60 years of marriage. Three girls and three boys, and Mary Lizzie loved to recite, like a litany, their names, in the order in which they'd arrived: Katherine, Patrick, Maureen, Donnell, Colleen, and Riley. As ideals of marriage longevity, successful parenting, role models of friendship, parish and civic virtue, their reputation was unsurpassed.

Besides, people just plain liked them, even loved them, so Mary Lizzie's unprecedented behaviour that June day alarmed and astounded the community. And 'why' was the question highest on everyone's list needing an answer.

Wilma, postmistress of the village, who relished her role as town crier, offered her theory.

"That government official came to the door doing a survey. One of the questions was, 'Where did your wife work during all the years you managed the farm?'"

Wilma was familiar with the questionnaire because the agent had earlier called upon herself in his rounds. Besides, as everyone knew, being postmistress gave her inside information.

And Rory, Wilma surmised, to his everlasting regret, must've replied, "'Oh, Mary Lizzie never worked. She just stayed home.'"

How Wilma knew this remains part of the mystery; nevertheless, her antennae were shockingly tuned in. But as in small communities everywhere, the grapevine quivered relentlessly and shed details that proved to be quite reliable.

Mary Lizzie, who'd come through the back door after removing the second-last load of clothes from the pulley line and pegging the final load in hopes of catching the remaining hours of sun and breeze, overheard Rory's reply. Overcome by the burdens of the past 60 years of endless labour, stunned by the injustice of her husband's reply, within the distance from back door to front, via the kitchen... within that nanosecond, the 60 years of her devotion to Rory unravelled. Impulsively, she grabbed the meat cleaver from its place of honour above the stove and hurled it at her husband's unsuspecting head.

Some say her aim was amazing, off just that hairsbreadth that could have sent Rory to his grave. Some say the government representative, whose account mirrored Wilma's, narrowly missed taking Rory's place in the cemetery. At his account, the grapevine clearly convulsed.

No one really knows what happened next, but it's generally believed that Mary Lizzie, who'd never driven a car in her life but who'd occasionally sneaked a few turns around the back field in the tractor while Rory napped, had the presence of mind to grab the truck keys from the hall table, launch herself into the driver's seat, and start the engine. She fled the yard and managed to steer herself cross-

country to their daughter Kate's home.

"KATE!" Rory bellowed into the phone, as if there were no connecting lines. "You need to come. Now. Your mother tried to kill me."

He heaved a breath so ragged she, indeed, might have heard it across the fields without the benefit of technology. "She even called me the F word."

Being first born, and having observed the interaction between her parents all her life, this account of events didn't compute for Kate. But hearing her father unmoored for the first time ever, she said, "Dad, slow down. Tell me what happened."

"I *am* telling you," he sputtered. "This guy came to the door doing a survey for the government. He asked all kinds of questions about acreage and crops, how many kids we had and where your Ma worked. While I managed the farm, like. That's when she threw the meat cleaver at me. For no reason." His voice wobbled with a mixture of disbelief and outrage. "And," he paused dramatically, "she called me the F word."

"Dad, slow down. You know Mom would never do that, especially for no reason."

"But she did! I only told him the truth, that your mother never worked. And she called me the F word. Kate, I think your mother is losing her mind!"

Or maybe finding it, Kate thought, but deemed this not an auspicious moment to say so.

"Where is Mom now?"

"I don't know! She ran off in the truck...she can't even drive! She'll land in jail, Kate. What'll I do then?" he quavered.

Ah...so that's the crux of the matter.

“Well gosh, Dad, why would that be a problem? If Mom never worked, why would you need her there?”

“What do you mean? Who’d cook my dinner? Do my laundry? Clean the house?” Rory didn’t even have the grace to blush.

“No problem...you would. Nothing to it, Dad.”

“I would? But I’m retired!”

“All the better, Dad. You’ll have more time to plan meals and shop for groceries. Keep track of the kids’ and grandkids’ birthdays and such.” Kate, on a roll now, continued as if totally unaware of the resounding silence on the other end. “And keeping the kitchen garden will be great exercise, help you lose a few pounds. Bring your blood pressure down. Fewer doctor appointments to keep track of, too. Seems to me like a golden opportunity, Dad.”

At the mention of exercise, losing pounds, and doctor, Rory felt the blood drain from his head and pool around his labouring heart. He absolutely had to lie down, stave off a heart attack. Overcome by massive anxiety, he told Kate he had to hang up , and then he staggered to the sofa, flung himself down...well, very gently laid himself down...closed his eyes, and crossed his hands over his heart.

Keep the kitchen garden! What about his bad back and rickety knees?

He’d never forgive Mary Lizzie for this. Never.

But maybe the county coroner would come first, and he wouldn’t have to.

TERRIFIED by almost killing Rory, Mary Lizzie heads, cross-country ‘as the crow flies,’ to Kate’s house. All the way in second gear, which she landed in quite by accident, but which serves her well as the truck bounces and jounces and generally flings her about over hidden hillocks and deceptive

little dales, unable to decide which is worse...hitting her head above or shattering her spine below.

As a measure of her misery, she muses upon ancient grammar lessons, her long-ago strength in school: the declension of nouns and the conjugation of verbs. Featuring, in this case, the F word. The word she's never before uttered, even thought about: F as noun, verb, adjective. F as present, past, and future. F as gerund, describing what, she's now feeling, the last 60 years of her life have been like. Until she comes to the end of the fields and must navigate the F'n highway to Kate's street.

Well, 'highway' is a euphemism. It's still a dirt road, like when she married Rory, because the Trans-Canada Highway bumped it out of service some years ago. Still, Mary Lizzie now has to keep the truck between two ditches, which seems more daunting than negotiating the hills and valleys behind her.

To reassure herself that she's totally capable, she reviews guiding six infants out of her own body, and more than one calf and lamb out of their tucked-in elbow-deep nooks, and if she could do that, she can keep this rig between two ditches.

Six pregnancies! Six! Morning sickness, fatigue, all night breast-feeding sessions, bleeding nipples, post-partum depression with Kate, the misery of colic with Maureen, no rest, no sleep...and finally, after the Donnell, when she'd dared to consider having her tubes tied, her doctor frowned at her across his desk and said, "Have you talked to your husband about this?"

When she'd remained silent, he tried again.

"What about your priest? Have you mentioned it to him?"

Discuss birth control with Rory? Maybe...but with Father R., the man at the top of this testosterone pyramid? The man whose approval Rory would need but wouldn't dream of

asking for? Whose body *was* this, anyway, this vessel being used to glorify Mother Church, as if Mother Church had something to say about it?

Again, she remained silent.

She never mentioned it to any of them.

Instead, she'd buried her anger; she'd baked a few more acres of flour into bread, knitted a few more mills of yarn into socks and mittens, and piled a few more orchards of apples into pies. Fields of cotton weighed down her clothes lines and her ironing board; gallons of soapy water soaked diapers and mopped floors. Heaps of wilting weeds testified to the hours she spent in the kitchen garden.

And she'd delivered Colleen and Riley.

Upon overhearing Rory's cruel words so casually tossed into the ears of a stranger, words destined to validate an official government document, her dormant rage erupted, engulfed her, and fuelled the ferocious energy that honed her aim with the meat cleaver.

Terrified by what she'd almost done, Mary Lizzie arrives...or more like lands...at Kate's doorstep, where her daughter waits with open arms.

"Mom," Kate says, "Dad called. What happened? You tell me your side."

RORY opens his eyes. For a moment, he's puzzled by the silent kitchen, the absolute absence of a single enticing aroma. He notes the change in the slant of sunlight across his feet, realizes he's been asleep.

Still drowsy, he calls, "Mary Lizzie?"

Silence.

"Mary Lizzie?"

And then, remembering, an epic sense of dread replaces the sunny warmth of his toes, crawls past his spindly shanks,

and settles in the area of his heart. Mary Lizzie is gone. She tried to kill him.

It's six o'clock; he's famished. He rummages in the pantry, tries to prepare Mac and Cheese, but can't find his glasses or the magnifying glass to read the instructions. *Can't be that hard*, he thinks. Dumps everything together in a pot of cold water, waits for it to boil, then throws the entire gluey mess outside.

From the freezer he randomly selects a casserole but can't decipher Mary Lizzie's written instructions for thawing and reheating.

She didn't even leave him any supper.

He'll never forgive her.

KATE, as eldest, is coordinating a siblings' teleconference, trying to explain the current situation to a chorus of questions.

"Mom," she tells her five linked siblings, "is upstairs. She's not speaking, other than to admit she did throw the meat cleaver at Dad's head." Kate tries to breathe deeply. "And when I try to comfort her by saying she didn't *really* mean to kill him,"...and here Kate's courage fails her, and she sobs..."Mom says, 'Yes, dear, I did. I wanted to kill him. In that moment, I wanted to, darling.' And then she goes quiet and looks at me, puzzled, like."

"But why, Mom?"

The siblings are quiet now, waiting for Kate to unwrap this mystery.

"And Mom says, 'Kate, I devoted 60 years of my life, my entire adult life, to your father and our family, and he told that government person that I never worked. *I never worked*. Like I was a lady of leisure. When...when...there were years on end when I didn't get more than three hours sleep

at night. Never a pay cheque, never a promotion, never a reward, a pension plan. Never any recognition of my life's work!" Kate's voice, like her mother's, spirals in the telling, then continues.

"But Mom, you *know* how much all your love and devotion meant to the six of us. We told you; we *never* took it for granted, not for a moment!"

"I know you didn't, Kate. And that's what kept me going. But Rory is my *husband*! And he never, *ever* told me I did anything special! He never *ever* seemed to know that my heart was..." She stopped here, lost for words, and turned her ravaged face to the wall.

"And then," Kate continues, "Mom took to her bed, and there she's been ever since."

IN the weeks since Mary Lizzie left, Rory's small paunch no longer challenges his pants. He's tightened his braces and hauled his belt up to his armpits, so that now the pant cuffs rise inches above his ankles.

Beleaguered by regret and despair, he patrols the boundaries of his retired farm and fields.

What if she never comes home? What did I say? What did I do wrong?

Beside the kitchen garden, her pride and joy, he sees her on her knees in spring, rejoicing in the feathery tops of carrots, the leafy frills of lettuce. In autumn, she holds aloft to show him her prize-winning beets and cabbage. Under the fruit trees, she fills baskets with apples and plums. Who will make all the pickles and jams this year?

Morosely, he passes the hen house, the coop empty of clucking and of the rooster, no Rambo strutting around, lord of all he surveyed. Mary Lizzie loved 'her girls', could tell them apart, named them, and spoiled them shamelessly

when they were broody. Brought individual dishes of water to each nest. Reached beneath into each beating breast to cradle the warm ‘babies in progress,’ she called the eggs.

In the barn, the aroma of Henry, the horse, lingers, boosted even now with the lingering long-ago scents of fresh hay. Warm milk pails under Bossie and Cracker always released more milk to her hands than to his own.

Rory stands there in a shaft of dusty sunlight streaming through the high window reliving the cold Easter morning he’d never forget. Lambing time. Alone in the barn with Nellie, the ewe, in trouble trying to birth her first baby. Rory, relying on the mechanics of the process, which were terrifyingly failing, awoke Mary Lizzie in panic.

“It’s Nellie,” he quavered. “She can’t get the young one out. And I’m no help.” He raised his right arm, bloodied to his elbow, as proof.

Mary Lizzie left her bed, followed him through the late spring snow and, noting immediately that Nellie’s panic was in the same range as Rory’s, said, “Rory, you fetch the old horse blanket and I’ll deal with Nellie.”

“Where is it?”

“Over there. Look.” She gestured vaguely left.

Vastly relieved, Rory scrambled away; equally relieved, Mary Lizzie knew he’d take forever to find it. Meanwhile, he’d be out of her way.

Sitting beside Nellie, she drew the ewe’s head into the curve of her neck and shoulder, murmuring softly. Gradually, the frightened animal quieted, the terrible bleating lowered to bearable decibels, and when Rory finally returned, there, on spindly legs beneath Nellie’s belly, wobbled a tiny replica of herself, already making her displeasure known with tiny bleats and much searching for breakfast.

Rory relaxed; Mary Lizzie grinned; Nellie squawked. Suddenly, her belly contracted again and, where Rory stood

holding the blanket, a sister for Daisy, (whom Mary Lizzie had already named) dropped out. Within moments, Daisy and Daffodil began to share the banquet.

Rory passed the blanket to his beaming wife; she draped it over Nellie's back. It just reached the barn floor, warming and providing privacy to all three of the Easter celebrants.

REMEMBERING that morning now, and so many moments when she'd come to his rescue, Rory has no idea what magic Mary Lizzie tapped into, but no way is he ever going to mess with it. Seems she spoke animal languages along with devoting uncountable hours and endless energy into him and their family, he feels himself swell with pride. *Well, no one can ever say that woman didn't ...didn't...*

...Uh oh. OH NO...What have I done?

IN her upstairs bedroom at Kate's, Mary Lizzie has no tears left. *Where did I go wrong?* she wonders. Like every woman, this is her default question. Now, at the end of another week of reflection, she has a glimmer of understanding of her role in Rory's hurtful behaviour. She wants to reject this insight, but her honesty precludes that. Besides, accepting it is the only way she can ever forgive him.

But first, she needs time to forgive herself.

KATE is baking biscuits when she hears footsteps at the back door. Before she can call out, the door opens.

"Kate, I need to talk to your mother."

Kate is shocked at his weight loss, his dishevelled appearance, the new wrinkles in his face.

"Dad, come here."

She wraps her arms around his new fragility.

"Mom's still upstairs, Dad. She won't come down. She won't eat. She only nibbles cheese, crackers, like a mouse. She barely sleeps; I hear her roaming at night. She won't let me call the doctor. I'm really worried about her. All of us are. We thought she'd never stop crying."

"I'll talk to her; I have something very important to tell her. She'll come and talk to me. I know she will."

He pulls himself out of his daughter's embrace and walks to the foot of the stairs. "Mary Lizzie. I need to talk to you. I have things to explain...please come down."

SUCH a *beautiful name, Mary*. With a name like Mary, a woman can be a queen, daughter of a saint, the mother of a saviour, of angels.

But Lizzie? No Lizzie ever wore the crown of England; no Lizzie ever claimed the title of most beautiful woman in the world; no Lizzie ever attained the Most Excellent Order of anything, let alone the British Empire, or Chancellor of any university.

No. *Lizzies* hoe gardens, slop pigs; Lizzies birth lambs and make pickles; Lizzies answer to a name they hate. Nowadays, Lizzies end up bag ladies, because they expect next to nothing, and that's exactly what they get.

As she did.

HALFWAY up the stairs to her bedroom now, Rory, stung by his wife's continued rejection, stops. Almost whispers: "Mary Elizabeth, please come and talk to me. Or at least, listen. I have something important to say to you. Please, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth. Rory called her Elizabeth when he courted her. And for a long time afterwards.

“Elizabeth?”

An old feeling stops her breath, floods her heart.

She hesitates then throws aside the quilts, straightens her robe, her hair.

She has something to say to him, too. Because she loves him, confessing her own behaviour is the only way she can ever forgive his.

“You can come up now, Rory.”

Guy Talk

At the end of driveways
over tables at Tim's
in parking lots

Guys talk
tractors, tires, transmissions, tools
retreads, potholes, taxes, tanks
snow blowers, lawn mowers,

and balls
lots of balls...

baseballs, footballs, golf balls,
basketballs, soccer balls
bowling balls, volleyballs
pool balls
and things to hit balls with:

sticks clubs
bats cues
hands feet

And—sometimes—
guys talk about girls.

Girl Talk

On telephones
at checkouts
in libraries, hair salons
waiting rooms,
over cups of tea
glasses of wine

girl talk
kids, grandkids, friends,
relationships,
dates, restaurants,
bad hair days failed recipes
good books college courses

and many kinds of pain:
menstrual pain labour pain,
unrequited love pain
post-partum pain
hot flashes, lost-youth pain.

And—sometimes—
girls talk about guys.