Eleanor Rigby

Douglas Coupland

Published by Harper Perennial

I had always thought that a person born blind and given sight later on in life through the miracles of modern medicine would feel reborn. Just imagine looking at our world with brand new eyes, everything fresh, covered with dew and charged with beauty—pale skin and yellow daffodils, boiled lobsters and a full moon. And yet I've read books that tell me this isn't the way newly created vision plays out in real life. Gifted with sight, previously blind patients become frightened and confused. They can't make sense of shape or colour or depth. Everything shocks, and nothing brings solace. My brother, William, says, "Well think about it, Liz—kids lie in their cribs for nearly a year watching hand puppets and colourful toys come and go. They're dumb as planks, and it takes them a long time to even twig to the notion of where they end and the world begins. Why should it be any different just because you're older and technically wiser?"

In the end, those gifted with new eyesight tend to retreat into their own worlds. Some beg to be made blind again, yet when they consider it further, they hesitate, and realize

they're unable to surrender their sight. Bad visions are better than no visions.

Here's something else I think about: in the movies, the way criminals are ready to squeal so long as they're entered into a witness relocation program. They're given a brand new name, passport and home, but they'll never be able to contact anybody from their old life again; they have to choose between death and becoming someone entirely new. But you know what I think? I think the FBI simply shoots everybody who enters the program. The fact that nobody ever hears from these dead participants perversely convinces outsiders that the program really works. Let's face it: they go to the same magic place in the country where people take their unwanted pets.

Listen to me go on like this. My sister, Leslie, says I'm morbid, but I don't agree. I think I'm reasonable, just trying to be honest with myself about the ways of the world. Or come up with new ways of seeing them. I once read that for every person currently alive on earth, there are nineteen dead people who have lived before us. That's not that much really. Our existence as a species on earth has been so short. We forget that.

I sometimes wonder how big a clump you could make if you were to take all creatures that have ever lived—not just people, but giraffes, plankton, amoebas, ferns and dinosaurs—and smush them all together in a big ball, a planet. The gravitational mass of this new clump would make it implode into a tiny ball as hot as the sun's surface. Steam would sizzle out into space. But just *maybe* the iron in the blood of all of these creatures would be too heavy to leap out into space, and *maybe* a small and angry little

planet with a molten iron core would form. And just *maybe,* on that new planet, life would start all over again.

I mention all of this because of the comet that passed earth seven years ago, back in 1997—Hale-Bopp, a chunk of some other demolished planet hurtling about the universe. I first saw it just past sunset while standing in the parking lot of Rogers Video. Teenage cliques dressed like hooligans and sluts were pointing up, at this small dab of slightly melted butter in the blue-black heavens above Hollyburn Mountain. Sure, I think the zodiac is pure hooey, but when an entirely new object appears in the sky, it opens some kind of window to your soul and to your sense of destiny. No matter how rational you try to be, it's hard to escape the feeling that such a celestial event portends some kind of radical change.

Funny that it took a comet to trigger a small but radical change in my life. In the years until then, I'd been sieving the contents of my days with ever finer mesh, trying to sort out those sharp and nasty bits that were causing me grief: bad ideas, pointless habits, robotic thinking. Like anybody, I wanted to find out if my life was ever going to make sense, or maybe even feel like a story. In the wake of Hale-Bopp, I realized that my life, while technically adequate, had become all it was ever going to be. If I could just keep things going on their current even keel for a few more decades, the coroner could dump me into a peat bog without my ever having once gone fully crazy.

I made the radical change standing in the video store's parking lot, holding copies of *On the Beach, Bambi, Terms of Endearment, How Green Was My Valley* and *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis,* staring up at the comet. I

decided that instead of demanding certainty from life, I now wanted peace. No more trying to control everything—it was now time to go with the flow. With that one decision, the chain-mail shroud I'd been wearing my entire life fell from my body and I was light as a gull. I'd freed myself.

* * *

Of course, we're born alone, and when we die, we join every living thing that's ever existed—and ever will. When I'm dead I won't be lonely any more—I'll be joining a big party. Sometimes at the office, when the phones aren't ringing, and when I've completed my daily paperwork, and when The Dwarf To Whom I Report is still out for lunch, I sit in my chest-high sage green cubicle and take comfort in knowing that since I don't remember where I was before I was born, why should I be worried about where I go after I die?

In any event, were you to enter the cubicle farm that is Landover Communication Systems, you probably wouldn't notice me, daydreaming or otherwise. I long ago learned to render myself invisible. I pull myself into myself, and my eyes become stale and dull. One of my favourite things on TV is when an actor is in a casket pretending to be dead, or, even more challenging, laid out on a morgue's steel draining pan bathed in clinical white light. *Did I see an eyelash flicker? Did that cheek muscle just twitch? Is the thorax pumping slightly?* Is this particular fascination of mine goofy, or is it sick?

I'm alone now, and I was alone when I saw my first comet that night in the parking lot, the comet that lightened my burden in life. It made me so giddy, I chucked the

rented tapes into my Honda's back seat and went for a walk over to Ambleside Beach. For once I didn't look wistfully at all the couples and parents and families headed back to their cars, or at the teenagers arriving to drink and drug and screw all night in between the logs on the sand.

A comet!

The sky!

Me!

The moon was full and glamorous—so bright it made me want to do a crossword puzzle under its light, just to see if I could. I took off my runners and, with them in hand, I walked into the seafoam and looked west, out at Vancouver Island and the Pacific. I remembered an old Road Runner versus Coyote cartoon—one in which the Coyote buys the world's most powerful magnet. When he turns it on, hundreds of astonishing things come flying across the desert toward him: tin cans, keys, grand pianos, money and weapons. I felt like I'd just activated a similar sort of magnet, and I needed to wait and see what came flying across the oceans and deserts to meet me.

* * *

My name is Liz Dunn. I've never been married, I'm right-handed and my hair is deep red and wilfully curly. I may or may not snore—there's never been anybody to tell me one way or the other. There was a reason I'd rented such weepy movies on the night I first saw Hale-Bopp. The next morning I was scheduled to have my two lower wisdom teeth removed—two big popcorn-shaped suckers that decided late in life to turn sideways and attack my molars.

I was thirty-six, for Pete's sake. I'd booked off the following week and was preparing myself accordingly: Jell-O and tinned food and broth soups. The videos were part of a *verklempt*-o-thon movie festival I planned to hold for myself. If painkillers were going to make me mushy, best to take control of the situation. I wanted to blubber shamelessly, and do so for seven straight days.

The next morning, Mother gave me a ride to the dental surgery clinic down on Fell Avenue, and although her life was as empty as mine, she made it seem as if I'd just made her reschedule her Nobel Prize acceptance ceremony in order to drive me. "You know, I was supposed to have lunch with Sylvia today. The portable kennel she bought for Empress broke in the first five minutes, and the woman is so weak-willed I have to go into Petcetera when she takes it back and be her bad cop."

"Mother, I'd have taken a cab if it was allowed, but it has to be a family member or friend to pick you up. You know that."

It was decades past the point where Mother chided me for my lack of friends. She said, "Empress is a lovely dog."

"Really?" Empress, from my experience, was a shrill, yappy, neurotic varmint.

"You should get a dog, Elizabeth."

"I'm allergic, Mother."

"What about a hypoallergenic breed, a poodle?"

"The hypoallergenic thing is a folk tale."

"It is?"

"It is. You can minimize reactions, but that's all. And it's not the fur that's the issue. It's the dander, saliva and urine on top of the fur."

"Pardon me for trying to help you out."

"I looked into pets long ago, Mother. Trust me."

Our arrival at the clinic put a quick end to that conversation. It was an eight-storey building from the sixties—one of those buildings I've driven by a thousand times and never noticed, sort of like the architectural version of myself. Inside, it was cool and smelled of sanitation products. The print on the elevator's DOOR CLOSE button was almost worn off. I pointed it out to Mother and said, "I bet there are a few psychiatrists in this building."

"What makes you say that?"

"Look at the button."

"So?"

"In the elevator industry, a DOOR CLOSE button is called a pacifier button. They're installed simply to give the illusion of control to your elevator ride. They're almost never hooked up to a real switch."

"I still think you should get a dog."

I have to admit that I love hospitals, clinics and medical environments. You enter them, you sit in a chair and suddenly all the burden of having to remain alive just floats away—that endless brain-churning buzzing and second-guessing and non-stop short-term planning that accompanies the typical lonely life.

I'd never met the day's exodontist before, a hearty Australian who rustled up jokes and cheer even for my sad little face under its laughing gas mask.

"So where'd you go to school then, Lizzie?"

"Liz. Here in North Van—Carson Graham for high school."

"Ho ho! And after that?"

"Oh God. BCIT. Accounting."

"Marvellous. Lots of partying there?"

"What?" The anaesthetist clamped the mask harder onto my face.

"You know. Letting loose. Getting down."

"My life is not a beer commercial . . ."

That's when I went under. A second later I opened my eyes and the room was empty save for a nurse putting away the last of a set of tools. My mouth felt packed with sand. I smiled because it had been such a great thing to be conked out like that—one moment you're dealing with an Australian comedian, the next you're . . . *gone*. One more reason to no longer fear death.

In the car on the way home, my conversation with Mother consisted mostly of her sighing and me mumbling like a faraway radio station. She dropped me off outside my condo, and before she raced off to Petcetera she said, "Really think about a dog now, Elizabeth."

"Let it *go,* Muddah."

It was a hot dry day. August. The building's entryway smelled of sun-roasted cedar-bark chips and underwatered junipers. Inside, it was cool, smelling instead of the lobby's decaying nylon rug. Once inside my place, three floors up, I had the eerie sensation that I was watching a movie version of a still room. There was nothing in it that moved or denoted time's passage—no plants or clocks—and I felt guilty to be wasting all of that invisible film, ashamed that my condo was so boring. But then again, the right kind of boring can be peaceful, and peace was my new perspective on the world. Just go with the flow.

My head throbbed and I went into my bedroom and laid it

down on a cool pillow. The pillow warmed up, I turned it over to the cool side and then I fell asleep. When I woke up it was past sunset, but in the sky up above the mountain there was still some light and colour. I cursed because an afternoon nap always leads to an endless night. I touched my face: both sides swollen like the mumps. I fell back onto the mattress and my tongue explored the two new salty, bloody socket holes and their thorny stitches.

* * *

The Liz Dunns of this world tend to get married, and then twenty-three months after their wedding and the birth of their first child they establish sensible, lower-maintenance hairdos that last them forever. Liz Dunns take classes in croissant baking, and would rather chew on soccer balls than deny their children muesli. They own one sex toy, plus one cowboy fantasy that accompanies its use. No, not a cowboy—more like a guy who builds decks—expensive designer decks with built-in multi-faucet spas—a guy who would take hours, if necessary, to help such a Liz find the right colour of grout for the guest-room tile reno.

I am a traitor to my name: I'm not cheerful or domestic. I'm drab, crabby and friendless. I fill my days fighting a constant battle to keep my dignity. Loneliness is my curse—our species' curse—it's the gun that shoots the bullets that make us dance on a saloon floor and humiliate ourselves in front of strangers.

Where does loneliness come from? I'd hazard a guess that the crapshoot that is family has more than a little to do

with it—father's a drunk; mother's an agoraphobic; single child; middle child; firstborn; mother's a nag; father's a golf cheat . . . I mean, what's your own nature/nurture crapshoot? You're here. You're reading these words. Is this a coincidence? Maybe you think fate is only for others. Maybe you're ashamed to be reading about loneliness—maybe someone will catch you and then they'll know your secret stain. And then maybe you're not even very sure what loneliness is—that's common. We cripple our children for life by not telling them what loneliness is, all of its shades and tones and implications. When it clubs us on the head, usually just after we leave home, we're blindsided. We have no idea what hit us. We think we're diseased, schizoid, bipolar, monstrous and lacking in dietary chromium. It takes us until thirty to figure out what it was that sucked the joy from our youth, that made our brains shriek and burn on the inside, even while our exteriors made us seem as confident and bronzed as Qantas pilots. Loneliness.

* * *

The message on my answering machine the next morning was from The Dwarf To Whom I Report. His name is Liam.

I hope your surgery went okay, Liz. You didn't miss too much here at the office. I'm having Donna courier you over a few files for you to pick away at over the next week while you recover. Sorry I missed you. Call any time.