

Raymond Townshend returned to his modest apartment after eating yet another passable roti at a local restaurant. Dining establishments were now allowed to be open at fifty percent capacity, which was progress from the previous week. But Ray was still careful, not taking his mask off until the server delivered his order to the table. He had remembered to take his phone with him. Different servers either did or didn't enforce the rule about mandatory vaccination certificates. He walked home slowly. Not that he was enjoying the scenery, as so many local businesses had closed down and were being replaced by either cannabis outlets or nail salons. These businesses tended to be transitional, but what might they have been transitioning toward? Ray knew that all the local stores were pitching their wares to younger customers. He had lived in the downtown west neighbourhood for many years and wanted to move out.

But to where?

The traffic light at Queen and Augusta was red but there was no impending traffic. This intersection was a midway resting point between two major intersections. He walked across Augusta on the north side of Queen.

But now a car turned left from Queen. Ray could hear the vehicle approaching but he could not make eye contact with the driver. The driver did not honk his or her horn.

Raymond Townshend was hit by the car. No pedestrians immediately saw the accident or let alone flagged the driver of the other car. By the time an ambulance had been called, it was too late.

Lewis Taylor decided against pouring another glass of *pinot noir*. He would be eating dinner soon, since he had decided against going to the birthday party he had been invited to.

He could always directly message Diana Hopkins and wish her the happiest possible birthday. He and Diana had somehow managed to maintain a friendship after breakup. But they had managed this without a considerable number of Diana's friends, who would undoubtedly be present at the gathering.

There were so many, Lewis muttered as he lit a cigarette. There would be Beth Tudhope and her girlfriend Joanna. There would be Jack and Linda Swinton. There would be Kelly Truesdale and Mercedes Frank and Jason Eberhard. There would be others.....Ray Townshend and Jenn Mortimer and then strangers who were probably also arrogant and rude.

Lewis worked with his colleagues. He saw enough of them during working hours. He didn't want to say home but he most certainly would not be attending Diana's birthday soiree.

So, what to do instead? What would be for dinner, and where?

Diana began cleaning up after the dinner party. Only Jenn and her friend Barry remained. Diana told them they didn't have to inhale their drinks while she cleaned the apartment.

Diana was beginning to get a sense that Jenn and Barry were dating. She felt they would soon finish their drinks and then go home to have sex .

The party had been fine and relatively without incidents. There had been a moment when Mercedes seriously had to pee and Beth and Joanna were monopolizing the bathroom. The couple had of course been doing cocaine, which had never been her favourite drug. Diana checked her phone for missed messages. There was one from her mother which she would return the next morning as it didn't seem to be urgent.

While checking her phone for messages she peeked at the news.

There had been a hit and run incident at a downtown west intersection. The victim had been rushed to hospital where he had been declared dead on arrival.

"Jesus Christ!". Her reaction interrupted Jenn's and Barry's conversation.

"What is it, Di"?, Joanna asked her.

"Ray Townshend had been killed by a car...at Queen and Augusta."

"No!", Barry hoped it wasn't true.

But it was. Raymond Townshend has been walking home with his takeout curry when he was struck down. No other pedestrians had come forward. Nobody had described the car or its driver. Nobody had noted the licence plate.

Just like that. Slam. Ray was dead.

The three of them decided that at least one more drink was in order.

Diana managed to get some sleep with the assistance of a barbiturate. She always kept a vial around in case of sleeping difficulty.

Upon arising, she decided to send a group email to all those who had attended the dinner party and also those who had been invited but who had declined the invitation.

Dear Friend,

I am sorry to be the bearer of terrible news.

Our mutual friend Raymond Townshend was fatally struck last night by a car. This happened at the north corner of Queen and Augusta. Details are scarce, at the moment. Perhaps Ray was crossing Augusta on a red light? Perhaps the driver was intoxicated? Presumably further details will emerge upon investigation.

I don't know any of Ray's family let alone any significant other. As you know, Ray was an extremely private person.

If I hear of any planned memorial event I shall of course inform you. Of course, current circumstances will prevent any large gathering. Indeed, last night's dinner was pushing the limits.

Please inform anybody else who you think should know about this horrible turn of events, but also please be discreet.

Thank you.

Regretfully,

Diana.

She then prepared a list of friends who had come to dinner and then a list of those who had declined. The only people on the second list were Alex Madison, Lewis Taylor, and Raymond Townshend.

Ray.....Diana and Ray went back even before they had become teaching colleagues. Diana remembered having a serious crush on Ray Townshend, even though he was gay. She checked her phone to see if there were any images of Ray on the news updates. There weren't, at least not yet. Ray had been a gay man but to what degree had he been a member of that community? She recalled Ray having had a relationship with a writer named Martin Curtis but Martin had relocated to Los Angeles years ago. She didn't know whether Ray and Martin had been keeping in touch. Something had to break soon, she felt. The phone rang. Mercedes was inviting her over for brunch and chat. Diana declined the invitation. Not today, she told her friend. Not today.

Mercedes Frank had trouble finding a parking spot at the North Toronto mall, which appeared to be a conglomerate of several malls. They rarely drove to this northern end of the metropolis but today they had been obliged to visit an uncle who had recently slipped on black ice and required a hip replacement. Mercedes did not like this uncle very much. But they visited Uncle Donald as a favour to their mother. They found a parking spot as a car was about to leave one for them. And then Mercedes suddenly braked. The driver of the exiting car was none other than Lewis Taylor. What the hell was Lewis doing way up in North York? Well, maybe Lewis also had obligatory relatives or something. Lewis had always seemed strange to them. He hadn't attended Diana's soiree and Mercedes hadn't missed him. Lewis was chronically sullen and anti-social, a brooder without an ongoing project to justify his general surliness. Anti-social people were tolerable if they had some ongoing project that necessitated solitude. Lewis didn't seem to have anything on the go...not that they had ever talked to him at any great length. Mercedes made sure Lewis didn't see them and then parked in the spot that Lewis had vacated. If only Raymond had come to the party? If only Raymond were alive.

Officer Joe Ralston knocked on Diana Hopkins' door after negotiating the slippery sidewalk in front of the apartment complex. 'Good morning, Ms. Hopkins.' She returned the greeting. 'By the way, your superintendent should do something about that ice in front of the building entrance. There's going to be another snowstorm tonight into tomorrow.' Diana nodded. The super was a man who never read weather forecasts. He was also a COVID-skeptic. 'Would you like some coffee, Officer Ralston?' He accepted and sat down. 'So, Ms. Hopkins, you knew Raymond Townshend well?' Diana nodded. She knew Ray even before they had become teaching colleagues. Ray had helped her get her job.

‘You had a dinner event for your birthday the other night? I hope there weren’t too many guests?’

Diana chose to ignore that question.

“Raymond Townshend had been invited but he didn’t attend. Did he send you an email or anything explaining why not?”

‘No, he didn’t’, she sipped her coffee. “Ray either turns up or he doesn’t”.

Officer Ralson frowned. “That was typical of him?”.

“Ray Townshend had become less and less social over the past few years. But I really don’t know why.”

Officer Ralson sipped his coffee.

“He would have known your other guests? Was there anybody at your party who either disliked him or who he disliked?”

Diana wished that she hadn’t quit smoking.

“Well, officer, do you mean disliked or do you mean something stronger?”

“Loathed? Hated?”

Diana shook her head. “Nobody who Ray ever told me about. And I can’t imagine why anybody would loathe or hate him. Ray was a very private person...more and more over the years he kept to himself.”

Officer Ralston persisted. “When he was younger was he more social? Was that an ageing thing or were there other factors involved?”

“Probably ageing” Diana responded. “People often narrow down their social circles when they’re ageing”. She was feeling that perhaps it was time for her to follow suit.

Officer Ralston now requested a list of all those attending the dinner party and brief descriptions. He also asked the names of others who had been invited and who had declined. Diana provided the names of Alex Madison and Lewis Taylor.

Officer Ralston noted these names without commenting further. Then he stood and thanked Diana for the coffee.

“I’ll contact you again if anything else comes up. Thank you for your time, Ms.Hopkins.”

“Thank you, Officer Ralston. Nice meeting you”.

She saw him to the door.

Beth Tudhope and her girlfriend Joanna Hawking decided to grab coffee after watching their

movie. Cinemas and restaurants had just reopened with fifty percent capacity permitted.

They had gone to see the Jane Campion neo-western Power of The Dog. The movie had been an epic, leaving them both absorbed and exhausted. The main character was a macho cowboy with a same-sex secret. This movie was controversial among friends who thought the filmmaker knew nothing about gay realities.

“Well, for fuck’s sake” Beth snorted. “This is the nineteen twenties in Montana.”

“Not even the roaring twenties”, Joanna agreed.

What left them uncomfortable was a feeling that the main character's hysterical misogyny was caused by his queer secret. Beth and Joanna knew full well that there were highly misogynist gay men and there were also homophobic radical feminists who considered gay men to be the ultimate patriarchy.

“But it’s the fucking twenties...in Montana”.

They entered a Timothy's coffee shop where they recognized their mutual friend Gary, sitting by himself drinking tea.

"Hey, Gary!"

He had seen them coming and he indicated that the pair should join him.

'Long time no see or what.', Gary remarked.

Beth nodded. She hadn't seen Gary since an outdoor memorial for their mutual friend Richard in late fall of 2020. Richard had committed suicide and she didn't want to go back there right now. Gary lived nearby in The Village. "I'm meeting Ken Proctor at Hair of the Dog in half an hour, but let's gab."

Gab with Gary tended to mean gossip.

They made small talk about pandemic protocol but then Gary mentioned Ray Townshend.

'Terrible news about Ray Townshend. You both knew him, if I'm not mistaken.'

Joanna nodded.

"And it was a fatal car thing?"

"That's what was said on the news, Gary.", Beth responded. They hadn't heard anything else about the accident.

'And he slipped on ice? So, why wasn't the driver paying attention?'

'Good question', Joanna sipped her coffee. Why hadn't the driver remained at the scene of the accident.

"Well, some of the damnedest people actually get their licenses, Gary." Beth chimed in.

Why hadn't any other pedestrians flagged the driver? Why hadn't any of the other drivers honked their horns?

"Ray was a friend of my ex", Gary told them. "I used to see him going downstairs into The Cellar but that place closed a few years ago.

Beth and Joanna knew little about men's bathhouses. Didn't guys do online hookups now, anyway?

"I doubt that he would have switched to Steamworks. Ray was getting too old for that crowd. Maybe Spa Excess?"

Beth and Joanna shrugged. As far as they knew, Ray still lived downtown near Queen and Spadina. That area had once hosted a few art galleries but now it was all cannabis shops and a few Indian or Thai takeout places.

"Sweet man, although very private"

Beth and Joanna nodded. They had always thought of Ray Townshend as being a loner, not much of one for community activities or whatever.

They chatted a bit longer to Gary. He still worked at the nearby reference library and still worked mostly from his nearby apartment. He hadn't seen Power of the Dog although he was curious. He felt though that it was still too soon to be going to cinemas.

But the neighbourhood pub would be okay. Gary finished his coffee and then paid the tab. Beth and Joanna tried to talk him out of it to no avail. Then Gary crossed the street and walked toward Hair of the Dog. Beth and Joanna walked toward the next main street over where they would continue toward the subway.

Officer Joe Ralston felt pleased with himself. He had finally wrangled permission from top down to browse through Raymond Townshend's phone and email activities.

“Here we go”, Ralston smiled at his colleague Anne Devon. She nodded as her colleague used some mysterious hacking technique to open Townshend’s files.

“Not that much activity here, Anne.”, Ralston remarked. “It looks like he had or has a sister named Petra. Or is that perhaps his mother?”

‘More likely a sister’, Anne commented. “Does Raymond respond to Petra’s emails?”

Officer Ralston shook his head. It didn’t look like Ray Townshend responded to his sister’s or anybody else’s emails or calls.

“Dawson Dental Centre was trying to set up an appointment for him.....There's a lot of PDF s from something called Academia edu...”

Anne Devon chuckled. “My brother gets them. He had to join up in order to access a paper relevant to one of his projects”. Anne Devon’s brother Paul was an art history professor.”

‘So why doesn’t, or didn’t, Ray Townshend just delete everything from Academia edu.? Did he intend to read them later?’

‘Your guess is as good as mine, Joe’.

“There's a few missed calls...probably from some insurance hacker. There’s his bank providing him with information..

‘That could also be fake, Joe. Banks prefer to not send info by email as you probably have known for years, Joe.’

Joe Ralston took his colleague’s point. He scrolled back from his current position in Townshend’s emails and hit upon several unanswered messages from somebody named Lewis Taylor.

“Lewis Taylor here was trying repeatedly to contact the deceased. Well, I guess I’d better look at what Mr. Taylor wanted from Mr. Townshend.

“The name Lewis Taylor is ringing a bell. I’ve heard my brother talk about this man on several occasions.”

Joe Ralston read seven emails from Lewis Taylor to Raymond Townshend. Then he showed them to Anne.

“What does your brother say about Lewis Taylor, Anne?’.

“My brother thinks Lewis Taylor is more than a few sandwiches short of a picnic.”

Joe's face reddened. “I think your brother might just be onto something.”

Anne Devon nodded. She was going outside for a smoke and wondered if Joe Ralston would care to join her.

Lewis Taylor woke up from his nap in his aunt’s garage. Aunt Martha hadn’t needed a car for a long time but she kept the garage for storage.

Lewis knew he couldn’t stay in his aunt’s garage for much longer but right now it was not only convenient but peaceful. No neighbours and no noise.

He showered while Aunt Martha was still napping. He had decided to show his face at a memorial for Raymond Townshend. He had concluded that being present would be a good strategy.

Lewis had responded to the email invitation from Diana. A gathering was scheduled for a park near Raymond’s final address. There would be hot chocolate and no alcohol. There would not be a surfeit of friends or mourners.

He did not drive to the gathering. He allowed himself enough time to get there without having to hang around and talk to other people. Diana would speak for a bit and then invite others to speak about Raymond.

Lewis hoped the event would not degenerate into a mawkish memorial. He hoped that he would be able to say hello to his colleagues Mercedes Frank and John and Linda Swinton and even Beth Tudhope and her girlfriend without having to say anything at all.

Upon arrival he recognized most of the people there. He nodded to Mercedes and stood beside John and Linda. They acknowledged their sadness without elaborating further, Lewis nodded assent.

Diana Hopkins stood at a makeshift podium.

Thank you everybody for coming together today to remember our mutual colleague and friend Raymond Townshend. Ray was everything one could hope for in a working colleague. A supportive individual, a good listener, and also a very funny man. Ray could be great company at a movie or the theatre or at an art gallery. He could be acutely observant and also hilariously bitchy.

I know that Ray did suffer from depression but we have to remember that his death was the result of a terrible accident. Some inconsiderate individual who never should have been granted his or her license is responsible for Ray's death. Some asshole who didn't have the courtesy to remain at the scene of the accident for which either he or she was responsible.

But we should remember Ray Townshend for the fun we all had with him, for his serious contributions to artistic discourses not only locally but nationally and internationally. Or his devotion to our professions and our community. Now, if anybody else wished to add any further anecdotes or memories of Ray, please feel free to do so. Thank you for your attendance today.

Lewis was relieved when nobody took Diana up on her offer. People instead mingled and talked about Ray among themselves. Perhaps some didn't even talk about Ray. Ray was dead, what more could be said?

Beth and her friend Joanna recognized him and stood in his path. They hadn't seen him for a while. Where had he been? Well, Lewis was just getting over a flu. Surely that was all he needed to say to them. Lewis decided to say goodbye to Mercedes and John and Linda. He noticed a man with an almost buzz cut who he did not recognize.

Perhaps this was some non-academic friend of Ray's? Ray certainly had friends outside of his academic colleagues. Lewis guessed that Diana didn't know any of them except for this stranger. Whatever, Lewis decided. He now slipped away from the gathering in the park. He would catch the nearby street car that would take him to the subway and back to Aunt Martha's garage. He had put in an appearance. He was a functioning friend and colleague.

Diana poured herself a glass of red wine upon arriving home. She had been surprised by nobody wishing to speak about Ray Townshend at the gathering. People came and sort of paid their respects and then left, mostly by themselves.

But then Ray had become more and more of a solitary person over at least the past decade. He would meet people for one-on-one tea dates but would always have an excuse to avoid parties or soirees. Perhaps Ray Townshend really had led a double life?

But he had never been closeted about his sexual orientation or preference or whatever the correct term. So did Ray have another community...mostly if not entirely consisting of middle-aged to senior gay men? It didn't seem likely. He had lived downtown in what had formerly been an artist neighbourhood...now characterized by endless cannabis hops and nail salons.

Also, Ray Townshend had stopped taking care of himself. He had been a lifelong nail biter and he had stopped using face cream let alone putting any effort into self-grooming. He did not work

out at any gym. If he had been dating somebody, he'd never let this on to any of his faculty colleagues.

She noted that she hadn't seen Ray Townshend at an art gallery for a longtime before his death. He had been an art historian but that hardly meant that he should ignore what people were doing now...especially young artists.

The accident was odd. Ray must have been walking with his face to the ground. Why hadn't he made eye contact with the oncoming driver? Queen and Augusta was not unlike a lot of secondary stop light intersections in the city. Pedestrians had the right of way on green lights but that didn't mean that all drivers were playing by the rules.

Diana sipped her wine. The whole thing just didn't add up. She had been surprised that Mercedes Frank, for one, hadn't spoken at the gathering. Mercedes had often told her how supportive Ray had been during their transitioning process. And then Lewis Taylor....he and Ray had gone way back well before becoming teaching colleagues. Lewis had shown up at the gathering and not spoken a word to anybody. And wasn't the man supposed to be on sabbatical?

Diana wondered whether or not Ray had a will. If so, who would be the executor? Ray had never talked about family to her or probably anybody else in their mutual circle. He had lived modestly but surely not in poverty. Ray might well have had a rainy day bank account.

Or he may have been planning some mysterious overseas vacation? But now she would never know.

And who would be taking over his courses? Somebody already part of the faculty, or someone from outside?

Diana decided to watch the local news. The anti-vaxx mob that had besieged Ottawa was threatening an action in Toronto over the coming weekend. She shook her head. Protesting was an honourable tradition in a free country for sure but blocking access to hospitals was completely unacceptable. Doctors and especially nurses were commendable and certainly not agents for some stupid nanny state.

Between the looming weekend demonstration and the explosive situation involving Russia and The Ukraine, the news was depressing. It was happening in an outside world that she had no way of regulating or controlling. She turned off the news stream and tried to distract herself by playing WORDLE. This new word game had become an actual haven of sanity on social media.

Lewis killed time at the local Shoppers before heading back to his aunt's house with the groceries from the bakery. He found the magazine stand at Shoppers...that was where he could kill time even though the cashier was glaring at him.

He found a music magazine that was all full of the latest salvos in the war between Neil Young, Joe Rogan, and Spotify. Neil Young and other Laurel Canyon musicians had removed their songs from the streaming service in response to pod-caster Rogan's tendency to host anti-vaxx and even further right-wing guests. Lewis had some sympathy for Young and Joni Mitchell but wished that some musicians young enough to be their grandchildren would also pull out of Spotify.

But they wouldn't. They needed the money from the streaming service. Spotify, Amazon,,,,there were others. He had a friend whose son posted original music on Bandcamp but that seemed to exist in a different economic strata.

The cashier now asked Lewis to hurry up and either buy the magazine or return it to its place on the shelf. Lewis performed the second option and then exited the store. He did occasionally buy things like deodorant and toothpaste from Shoppers so he didn't want to get himself banned. He walked toward Aunt Martha's house at a leisurely pace. Aunt Martha did enjoy her Danish Pastries and eccles cakes and who was Lewis to be judgemental about somebody else's dining habits anyway.

Aunt Martha had lived by herself since Uncle George's death. Aunt Martha made as much sense to Lewis as did anybody else in the world.

A greyish green sedan pulled up beside him. Lewis realized that the driver wanted to talk to him. The driver was the mysterious man with the buzz cut who he now remembered from the gathering for Ray Townshend.

'Lewis Mark Taylor.'

That was his name and it wasn't a question.

The man stepped out of the car and stood in front of Lewis' path.

"Lewis Mark Taylor, I wish to speak to you about the death of your colleague Raymond Edward Townshend. Please get in the car. Don't argue with me. Just get in my car. Do you understand?". That wasn't really a question either. Yes, Lewis did understand.