BRICK

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One, two, three . . . pause

PATRICIA ROZEMA

Christmas Day 2008, I heard Harold Pinter's voice on the radio; it was cracked and wobbly from his illness, but I thought, It's still strong. Even when the hardware is failing him, his voice comes out strong. No decoration words, just pure intention. Unguarded. No fear of offending. No hunger for approval. No resorting to charm, no careful qualifications. Just that feel of someone who feels.

"The crimes of the United States have been systematic, constant, vicious, remorseless, but very few people have actually talked about them," he said in this recording of his acceptance speech for the 2005 Nobel Prize for Literature. "You have to hand it to America. It has exercised a quite clinical manipulation of power worldwide while masquerading as a force for universal good. It's a brilliant, even witty, highly successful act of hypnosis."

I thought, That's what makes writing good—the unfiltered lifeness of it. I know Harold writes and rewrites, but it was only to take the dead or borrowed parts out. Until it was a firehose of life, of feeling, of thought. Here he is, my Harold (you dare to say these absurdly possessive things to yourself), here he is, falling apart at the seams and still standing up to the bully. Then another voice came on the radio, one of those know-it-all, summing-up voices: "Harold Pinter, dead at seventy-eight." Stop.

Like most significant moments in life, I couldn't take it all in at once. My ears are too small, my brain too cluttered, my heart too . . . I don't know. There's always a moment of silent

stunnedness. Dumb. Stupid in front of the big sadnesses. Harold Pinter, dead at seventy-eight? That's like saying electricity is over or Mars is gone. What do I do with this? I cried. The father of my children hugged me. I tried to explain. "He spent all his declining energies defending the defenseless. How beautiful is that?"

Was that it? Was that what was gone? We had just had our phone system overhauled and accidentally a voice message from Harold had been erased. His booming voice had said, "Now, Patricia, of course I'd like to see you for lunch, but you've failed to say when you'd be in town . . . " etc. Nothing poetic or grand, just administrivia, but it was Harold and I couldn't quite get myself to erase it for a couple of years now because it amused me to hear how irritated and powerful he sounded just agreeing to go for lunch. But it had been accidentally erased not a week before. Poof.

I sent emails to friends who knew him, little lifelines to the living about the dead: Wally Shawn, Julia Ormond. My friend David Aukin—the producer on our film adaptation of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, in which Harold had played a bullying slave owner, a sexist patriarch insistent on selling off his niece/charge to the most advantageous suitor—wrote this: "He loved *Mansfield Park* and he loved being with you. You opened up a career that only illness cut short." David, also big of heart, wants to flatter me at this moment.

Once, one of my assistant directors told me that Harold had called me a cunt. One night on the shoot, he had to wait and he was in a hurry. His life was a hurry, because he happened to have more life in him than most and he knew it; he had so much to get out, to get down onto the record, to set straight, to clear up, to understand. How could I keep him locked up in a trailer out in the middle of nowhere and then haul him out, put him in a scene where he's one hundred feet away from the camera, and then have him do take after take without even recording sound? Why? Because it was an impossible shot of a horse running through the rain (fake) at night with a whip-pan and crash-rack focus onto Harold talking to our heroine's competition. He felt like a prop, it was late, and he'd already drunk a ton of whatever and smashed the bottle in the little Winnebago sink. When I said, via walkie-talkie, that we'd have to go again after the fifteenth time at three in the morning, he apparently called me a cunt. And left the set. I ran after him, described my excitement for the shot, and pulled him back into it. Sometimes you have to be called names by great men to get things done.

> Harry: Bill's a slum boy, you see, he's got a slum sense of humour. That's why I never take him along with me to parties. Because he's got a slum mind. I have nothing against slum minds per se, you understand, nothing at all. There's a certain kind of slum mind which is perfectly all right in a slum, but when this kind of slum mind gets out of the slum it sometimes persists, you see, it rots everything. That's what Bill is. There's something faintly putrid about him, don't you find? Like a slug. There's nothing wrong with slugs in their place, but this one won't keep

> his place—he crawls all over the walls of nice houses, leaving slime, don't you, boy? He confirms stupid sordid little stories just to amuse himself, while everyone else has to run round in circles to get to the root of the matter and smooth the whole thing out. All he can do is sit and suck his bloody hand and decompose like the filthy putrid slum slug he is. What about another whisky, Horne?
>
> —*The Collection*

He knew he could scare people. I'd say, "How are you doing today, Harold?" when he'd come to set. "Fucking awful! They have me in this goddamned trailer for two days." I'd listen, let him rage and let it die down, then try to explain, "We're like farmers, Harold, we're at the mercy of the weather." Then we'd get to the scene and his force would apply itself to the work with the same ferocity. "Now you listen here, Patricia, this isn't a comma, it's a period. You have it as a comma. That just doesn't play. It makes no sense at all!" And he was right. "But I always listen to my director," he'd say. "I always listen to my actor, Harold," I'd say back.

Once, when we were doing my favourite bit of the movie, he questioned me: I had written these tableaus at the end of the film in which everyone in the scene would suddenly become still, slip into reverie, stare off into the middle distance at exactly the same moment, and then, altogether, slip back into the day-to-day. When I wrote these moments in, I knew I'd never be able to explain exactly what they meant. So here I was off-camera yelling, "Three, two, one, pause . . . " then, "three, two, one, back!" It was a big scene and the wind was shaking the camera, wrecking the stillness I thought it needed. Take after take. "Now you listen here, Patricia, I don't know what in God's name you are doing with this scene." Only honesty works with him: "I'm not sure either, Harold, feels like a filmic way to do what Austen was doing in the book, but I'm not sure, I just like it." He thinks. "I can respect that." And off we went: three, two, one, pause . . .

Why didn't Harold scare me? Because I felt there was love in his scariness, an almost unbelievable tenderness.

Three days before we finished shooting, I was paralyzed by a blinding headache. I was literally blinded, I couldn't take any light. I couldn't walk. After some talk of migraines, the doctor finally diagnosed me as having meningitis. Ambulance, spinal tap, quarantine. Polite English concern came in from several quarters. But from Harold, letters and flowers poured in along with messages on my machine. A lot of them. "But, Patricia, you're my director, for God's sake." "Now, Patricia, you listen here, what's going on? Call me the minute you're able."

Harold said his teeth were falling out when I saw him last February. His teeth, for God's sake. I met him before a production of his two short plays, *The Lover* and *The Collection*, at The Comedy Theatre in London's West End. His wife, Antonia, was with him, and we laughed about things, I don't remember what. Harold, for all his gravity and force, was a terribly amused and amusing guy. His face rested naturally in a bit of a smile. He didn't come from anywhere sophisticated, so honesty and humour

were his only currency. And a searchingness. He didn't have enough respect for any authority to care much about one's credits or achievements. At intermission, after *The Lover*, he asked me what I thought about the production. I told him it was all played a little more archly than if I had directed it. (I'd been thinking I'd love to direct it.) It would be more shocking if it was played more normally, naturalistically. Quiet . . . quiet . . . his face getting more and more red. Then he exploded: "You should know better than to criticize an author's work at intermission!"

"But, Harold, it's a compliment to your work, to your writing, the force of it doesn't need that extra push from the actors."

"Now you listen here, Patricia, I don't want to hear this. Just . . . go, go take a walk around the block instead, for God's sake. You should know better."

I actually thought he might hit me over the head with his cane . . . or collapse. But you can't backpedal with Harold. That'd be worse. Any change of opinion that was about being liked or approved of would be out of the question. That

would end the respect and thus the relationship. Intermission was over.

The second half of the night was *The Collection*, in which I'd seen Harold act exactly ten years before at the Donmar. He had played the menacing older man. He'd played all the pauses for humour and fear together, and for the natural stumbling speech of real life. Under every line there was a cliff you could fall off. All so dangerous and consequently so precious. His performance in this play is what made me think he was right for the role in *Mansfield Park*. I wanted my Austen to have blood in it. I wanted to feel the force underneath the niceties, the raucous energy that Austen's teenage writing had, all held down under that proper British lid. To get an actor who could show that, represent that, I knew I had to get an actor who could feel it. There's all too much preciousness around a great novelist such as Austen. And when you do anything with Austen in England, you are, as a dear friend reminded me, "fucking with Jesus." If anyone would dare to do that, I knew it'd be Harold. He understands the origins and deliciousness of violence more than anyone. He understands class presumptions. He understands privilege—the almost irresistible desire to use one's innate force for personal gain. He understands the sex in fear. (I once overheard three young actresses in *Mansfield Park* discussing him on set: "I'd do him." "Oh, ya, I would too." He was sixty-eight.) But while I watched this other actor play Harold's part in the new production of *The Collection*, I kept thinking that Harold was so much better. I couldn't tell him that. And I couldn't not tell him that. If I said that after criticizing *The Lover*, he would be sure to hit me over the head. Or spit his teeth out at me. So I didn't go back. I guess I was scared. That time. The next day we exchanged emails and made up sweetly. I apologized for bad timing and he wrote, "You have to understand, I was nervous. No harm done."

I don't tell these stories to show my special place with him, but to show his special force for all he encountered. I know full well that through all his life Harold felt strongly for everyone. Every lust and every grief would have been at a higher pitch than for the rest of us. Every love lost would have been epic. Every attraction overwhelming. Every injustice insupportable. Even at the end, there wasn't the tiniest suggestion of pacing himself, withholding his energy for something else, someone else more important. A firehose of lifeness.

I called his number right after I heard he'd died. "This is Harold. I'm not here. Leave a message." I couldn't.