
RYAN MEANY

Over and Down in a Barrel

I decided a trip by myself to Niagara Falls would be life-changing. On the lookout platform I held the cold misted steel of the safety rail in both hands like the needer I was, one attempting to release his need for insurance and insoles and so many people, and I was happy about being almost needed out with what I was getting watching the rapids, the water working in a whitecap fear of falling, all falling anyway, over the edge I couldn't see over from where I was, not afraid. I'd been nineteen and afraid the last time I was there, of something, on a roadtrip with old friends, one dangerous and gone now, another story. Instead of fear the falls reminded me of a painting I'd seen on the way.

In a book store somewhere in Pennsylvania I by pure chance came across *The Last of the Mohicans* and having liked the movie—long book, though, I noticed—I bought the copy with the painting *Distant View of Niagara Falls* on the cover. The coincidence sent me straight to Chicago to see the painting in its museum. Two Indians stood in the foreground that was so far away it wasn't really a foreground. The Indians were quiet, one kneeling, or crouching, the other standing next to the other, both with their backs to me, the one standing standing

with a rifle barrel jutting up from his (maybe it was her) left shoulder like a crooked pet hawk, the butt of the rifle down and out from his right hip as if the gun would soon tug on the buffalo skirt to ask the Indian why they were so close now. The Indian ignored the gun like a concerned parent looking across the river. The Indians' silence was a little more vast than the surrounding hills. They were quietly calling across the river to something they didn't want to wake, something the painter had forgotten to include. In the river the scared water had fallen from the falls, water now white foam biting the river at the foot of the falls until carried farther down the river, the water began to understand it was part of the river, calming down, the river and the scared water calm now, not afraid of flowing out of the painting together. The falls weren't in the background because a dark sky was. Dark with clouds and light. The falls were white mist, maybe just canvas without paint. I still don't know because I wasn't a painter then and I'm not a painter now, but when I got to Niagara Falls and thought about being in the museum in front of the painting, I had an idea.

I walked from the safety railing at Niagara Falls to a lookout platform that had been built closer to the edge of the mist so that you could

see the boats far down in the water. The boats traveled dangerously but roller-coaster safely close to the falls. The people wore raincoats. They were crowded on the boats, yellow oblong dots with heads. I think there were three boats total, circling in an orderly fashion under the chaos of the falls. The platform had been built for me to watch the people, brave but not really, ward off the mist of fear with loaned-out but paid-for raincoats, and I can't tell you how much I appreciated the builders of that place where I stood because some were probably Indians in blue jeans being underpaid as they poured the concrete to make the spot for my wet shoes, however they did so, to get it to stand so high up over the fighting water for my place among the overlooking crowd, the people without the money or little bit of bravery it took to get on one of the boats. Proud, I guess I was proud. And pissed. I was pissed also at whatever his name was for painting that painting with the sad Indians in it. I know we made Indians sad and killed them in the process. I know. But I was happy with the son-of-bitching tourists, even the guys in football hats cussing and laughing loud. They obviously would have much rather been football players than assholes. With the exception of a kid tugging his mother's shorts, the tourists looked happy too to see that water becomes thunder when it's in the process of being scared to death of falling. I got the idea that the poor tourists

needed me to be there to be, the same as the water had to fall and fight the river in order to understand it needed it because it was it. I had no idea where else a tourist should wish tourists to go.

I left Niagara Falls for the museum to change the painting. My life was nice with its emptiness of people whom I'd been closer to than tourists, so I thought to hell with it and also thought the painter might have thought the same before he started his painting, whether he toured Niagara or not, whether he knew Indians or not. I wouldn't have minded with the nice-emptiness way my life was going going back to the time when Indians talked to their guns, crazy from killing and killing more than ever because as tiresome as life had become it wasn't just a wailing baby you could sacrifice to gods. I was sure others wished they could have wished among bleeding Indians. I imagined them where car lots and fitting rooms now were, wearing buffalo ass over their buffalo balls, war-paint hooting into the smoke of a new fire, one that cooked the living instead of the dead. I drove terrifyingly, came up behind cars slowing down my thoughts, honked. I don't and didn't retain details of history but I would have stopped all the death necessary to add my name to those details I tell you what.

Looking at Niagara Falls in the museum through the mist of wondering whether my idea on the painting would mark a future for me in

history, I concluded for sure I would now add the good details of now to an old painting of an older tensely peaceful moment, a period small as two Indians to be swallowed by a gaping landscape of bad details. Respecting the painting for needing my idea I stopped staring at it because I no longer saw it as it was, thankfully.

I left the museum to buy paint. Painting paint is hard to find when you have a good idea in a strange town that is Chicago. People who were brave about not being tourists looked at me talking to myself but I was ecstatic not to need them as much as I needed to see my idea on the painting at the museum. The yellow pages smelled like pizza but that was the restaurant behind the payphone. I looked up *art*, found *art supplies* and wondered how many people actually painted anymore and were their ideas as good as mine. Mine was so good I honestly did not care. The place I called gave me directions, which I almost remembered before turning around, lost, to drive to another payphone, which did not have yellow pages. I asked the convenience-store clerk if she knew where the art-supply store was. "No." If only she knew who I was. I bought a Coke in a plastic bottle because I felt I owed someone for taking up a space in a line made long by everyone wanting at once. I was so lost that the third payphone I found was right next to the first one. Both had yellow pages, so I used the

new ones, swollen dry after being dumped on, angering me at the person who ripped out the art-supplies page, whom I had to forgive after I ripped the page from the original yellow pages in case I forgot the directions again.

I didn't look at the specific names of the colors I bought. Shades of yellow, red and blue I took back to the museum like a knife in my pocket that would do more good than harm. I meant for my point to have an edge for those people who would only see the harm. I wasn't completely sure I understood my point or myself now, but I was wholly happy to be aware of having both. I forgot brushes. I should have practiced being a painter sooner. I used my fingers. I felt like a safe kid. I needed much less than a lifetime to improve the harmful way the world can look. I pointed into the paint bottles forgetting about the silent lookers around me. Forget them. They didn't know why I was dotting the painting with the yellow dot heads of the people I'd seen at Niagara Falls, spreading a blue lookout platform over the small Indians. This was my time and it would be over soon. Not too soon but soon enough my rainbow fingers were squeezed by a funeral-dressed man with a fear face that didn't scare me. He said *Sir?* in a sound of voice that said *Are you out of your mind?* I was so well aware that I was out of my mind that I didn't care to answer to *Sir?*, so even sooner than soon a guard's blue yellow red face was against mine on the museum carpet in

the close mean way people are when they're fighting because fists are asking them to, then his face was gone and I was being walked out of the museum between two banks of museum lookers, like I was a river or something, lookers not looking at the paintings but instead painting gladness graffiti on my face, which I understood. The painting they hadn't been paying this much attention to hadn't been horrible, had been nice before I changed it, but nice had had no place to stand overlooking my idea. I was proud, proud.

To the guard wiping his face I said, "You should try to understand what I've done."

"So should you."

Jail got me thinking about pride and ideas until I didn't want to leave. Even though I didn't deserve to be next to a man good enough not to complain about the blood rag he held to one eye while the other tried hard to watch the TV—no joking, a TV, in jail—showing police and yellow tape around an ugly house with dirt. I betted the person who died in that house hadn't destroyed perfectly fine glass over a nice painting, so who was I, I understood.

I asked the good man if he deserved to be in here too.

He didn't move.

"Have you ever painted?"

I questioned how could someone watching

with one eye not move so well.

"I understand," I said.

But I didn't. My dumb idea was done and I'd landed in a piss foam of people. The cell hissed loneliness. In a commercial on the TV a tough truck clawed to peek over the top of a dune before the TV flashed incredible numbers and tiny treaty-like words. A guard dropped a bellowing drunk on a bench. Switch their clothes and they would have been characters in a rape show. The man next to me was arm-hair close, smelled like machinery. His eye had gotten what it should have gotten a long time ago, before I had a chance to know him, when it could have looked at a person at a point when that person had just been asking for a look and really needed it, even more than I. The jail stank of loneliness and all over the place again I was happy or madly glad or both about having changed the nice painting for the good and I hoped, really, that I'd never leave the jail with TV where I was standing up, again, to leave the eye that had deserved whatever and couldn't look at me because of blood. Here I went a vertical blood body in jail space. Standing I walked ahead of dark-horizon memories. I had faith I could and would be willing to never be a needer of lonely people again, would continue walking this way no matter what lonesome bad man crossed me. Not practicing doesn't hurt. 