

Some Considerations on **So Much Water So Close to Home (I)**

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The restoration of a presumably moribund form—literary realism—in American literature has been credited to Raymond Carver, and he has earned by his famous collections of short stories, “the reputation of being among the leaders of a new movement in short fiction that is characterized by flatness of narrative tone, extreme sparseness of story, an obsession with the drab and quotidian, a general avoidance of extensive rumination on the page, and, in sum, a striking restraint in prose style.”¹ This new movement, whose representative writers are Ann Beattie, Elizabeth Tallent, Tobias Wolff, Mary Robinson, and Frederick Barthelme, is called “Minimalism,” “New American Short Stories,” or “K-Mart Realism,” “Hick Chic,” “Freeze-Dried Fiction,” “TV Fiction,” “Hi-Tech Fiction,” “Post-literate Literature,” “Lo-Cal Literature,” “White Trash Fiction,” “Postalcoholic Blue-Collar Minimalist Hyperrealism,” “Around-the-house-and-in-the yard Fiction,” “Coke Fiction” with a little irony or sarcasm. But Carver’s death from lung cancer on 2nd August in 1988 brought to a close the career of a writing talent which had been established as one of the leading voices in the new movement which might be regarded as a larger renaissance of the American short story. Indeed the whole life of Carver gives us an American success story;

Raymond Carver is a typically American hero, a kind of literary Rocky—janitor, service-station attendant, an uneducated alcoholic no-hoper who rises to Major Writer status and the Professorship of English at Syracuse University.³

However, the lives he depicts in his stories are the very inversion; he stays in the world he knew before he began writing short stories, the world of a transient blue-collar middle-class life. In other words, Carver treats “dirty realism: a fiction concerned primarily with the ‘under-belly’ of American life.”⁴

So Much Water So Close to Home we will deal with in this paper is indeed such a story, and is one of the stories in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. At first Carver wrote the longer story with the same title but a different ending, and it was included in *Furious Seasons*(1977), but afterwards he recast it into shorter one and put it into *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981). This story, like the rest of his stories, is written in very simple style. Moreover, tones are restrained and flat. But after reading this story, we will wonder what kind of story it is. As Frank Kermode says, “Carver’s is a fiction so spare in manner that it takes time before one realizes how completely a whole culture and a whole moral condition are being represented by even the most

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seemingly slight sketch.”⁵ Therefore by paying attention to his simple and precise words with various images and implications, and considering seemingly restrained and flat tones, we will examine “how completely a whole culture and a whole moral condition are being represented by even the most seemingly slight sketch,” and at the same time will investigate Carver’s real intention of this story and also the meaning of the title “So Much Water So Close to Home” in the following chapters.

I

In this story, Carver uses a female first-person narrative voice. Claire, Stuart’s wife, tells us a story on the basis of what she herself sees and hears:

MY husband eats with a good appetite. But I don’t think he’s really hungry. He chews, arms on the table, and stares at something across the room. He looks at me and looks away. He wipes his mouth on the napkin. He shrugs, and goes on eating.

“What are you staring at me for ?” he says. “What is it ?” he says and lays down his fork.

“Was I staring ?” I say, and shake my head.

The telephone rings.

“Don’t answer it,” he says.

“It might be your mother,” I say.

“Watch and see,” he says.

I pick up the receiver and listen. My husband stops eating.⁶

This is the opening paragraph of this story, but we will feel a little queer gap between the couple, especially reconsidering the sentences “MY husband eats with a good appetite. But I don’t think he’s really hungry.” Claire’s observation goes on:

“What did I tell you ?” he says when I hang up. He starts to eat again. Then throws his napkin on his plate. He says, “Goddamn it, why can’t people mind their own business ? Tell me what I did wrong and I’ll listen! I wasn’t the only man there. We talked it over and we all decided. We couldn’t just turn around. We were five miles from the car. I won’t have your passing judgement. Do you here ?”⁷

At this point, we will find that he was involved in some serious affair, and that he told his wife about the affair, but that his wife is not satisfied with his treatment, so that the couple do not get on well with each other. And the dialogue continues:

He says, “What do I know, Claire ? Tell me what I’m supposed to know. I don’t know anything except one thing.” He gives me what he thinks is a meaningful look. “She was dead”, he says. “And I’m as sorry as anyone else. But she was dead.”

“That’s the point.” I say.⁸

Now we will understand that there was a death accident that her husband met with. Her saying, "That's the point." contrasts with her husband's indifferent attitude to the accident. Then raising his hands, he gets up from the chair and takes out his cigarettes. And he goes out to the backyard with a can of beer, and sits in the lawn chair, picking up the newspaper again:

His name is in there on the first page. Along with the names of his friends.

I close my eyes and hold on to the sink. Then I rake my arm across the drainboard and send the dishes to the floor.

He doesn't move. I know he's heard. He lifts his head as if still listening. But he doesn't move otherwise. He doesn't turn around.⁹

Thus we will notice that there is quite a discord of opinion between the couple concerning accident. In this way, Claire as a narrator of this story tells us some gap between the couple, and goes on giving a full account of the accident:

HE and Gordon Johnson and Mel Dorn and Vern Williams, they play poker and bowl and fish. They fish every spring and early summer before visiting relatives can get in the way. They are decent men, family men, men who take care of their jobs. They have sons and daughters who go to school with our son, Dean.¹⁰

Stuart has three playmates, who are all decent men and family men, and who sometimes play poker and bowl and fish. Last Friday these four men left for the Naches River, and parked the car in the mountains, walking to the place where they wanted to fish. Of course they carried their bedrolls, their food, their playing cards and their whiskey. Then they met with the accident:

They saw the girl before they set up camp. Mel Dorn found her. No clothes on her at all. She was wedged into some branches that stuck out over the water.

He called the others and they came to look. They talked about what to do. One of the men—my Stuart didn't say which—said They should start back at once. The others stirred the sand with their shoes, said they didn't feel inclined that way. They pleaded fatigue, the late hour, the fact that the girl wasn't going anywhere.¹¹

Hunting and fishing, as in Hemingway, appear as basic subjects in Carver's many stories, and characters equip themselves for weekend escape to the woods from their troublesome family life, credit cards and some debts in search of imagined selves and an imaginary America. Such being the case, they do not report their discovery to the police at once, for that would upset their weekend plans to fish and camp. After all they leave the dead body where it is, and set up the camp. And they build a fire and drink their whiskey, taking a rest. When the moon rises, they begin to worry about the dead body:

When the moon came up, they talked about the girl. Someone said they should keep the body from drifting away. They took their flashlights and went back to the river. One of the men—it might have been Stuart—waded

in and got her. He took her by the fingers and pulled her into shore. He got some nylon cord and tied it to her wrist and then looped the rest around a tree.¹²

Here we will notice that the language has somewhat sexual undertones. The next morning (Saturday morning) they have breakfast and drink coffee and whiskey. After that they go fishing. That night they cook fish and potatoes and drink coffee and whiskey, washing eating things where the dead body is. Later on they play some cards until they cannot see them anymore. One of the men, Gordon Johnson, "said the trout they'd caught were hard because of the terrible coldness of the water."¹³ Perhaps Claire here will associate the hard trout with the young girl. The next morning (Sunday) they awake late, drink whiskey, fish a little. Then they take down their tents and gather their stuff and walk to where they parked the car. On their way back home, they drive until they find a telephone box and make a call:

It was Stuart who made the call while the others stood around in the sun and listened. He gave the sheriff their names. They had nothing to hide. They weren't ashamed. They said they'd wait until someone could come for better directions and take down their statements.¹⁴

Here we must take notice of the fact that they think they are not ashamed at all, though they did not inform the sheriff of the dead body at once. It is at this point that Claire differs from her husband in opinion. At any rate he gets home after taking a necessary step:

I WAS asleep when he got home. But I woke up when I heard him in the kitchen. I found him leaning against the refrigerator with a can of beer. He put his heavy arms around me and rubbed his big hands on my back. In bed he put his hands on me again and then waited as if thinking of something else. I turned and opened my legs. Afterwards, I think he stayed awake.¹⁵

When Stuart comes back, Claire is asleep, but she wakes up at the noise in the kitchen. Going to the kitchen, she finds him leaning against the refrigerator with a can of beer. And he tries sexual advances by touching her body, and has sexual intercourse with her that night. Significantly, he has sex with his wife *before* relating the story of the dead girl. After the sex, it seems to her, he stays awake. Perhaps he may have a conscience about his behaviour towards the dead girl. From now on, he oscillates between sexual advances and denial of wrongdoing.

He was up that morning before I could get out of bed.
To see if there was something in the paper, I suppose.
The telephone began ringing right after eight.
"Go to hell!" I heard him shout.
The telephone rang right again.
"I have nothing to add to what I already said to the sheriff!"
He slammed the receiver down.
"What is going on?" I said.
It was then that he told me what I just told you.¹⁶

The next morning (Monday), he is up before she can get out of bed. She supposes it is to see if there is something in the newspaper. And then the telephone begins ringing one after another right after eight o'clock. Every time he answers the telephone, he gives an angry word against the persons on the other end of the line. Only then he tells his wife what happened. At this point, we realize the outline of the accident. And here, the story goes back to the scene where she holds on to the sink with her eyes closed and rakes her arm across the drainboard, sending the dishes to the floor. Claire sweeps up the broken dishes and goes outside, only to find him lying on his back on the grass with the newspaper and can of beer beside him. She asks her husband if he can go for a drive, and he agrees to the offer, saying that they will pick up some beer. Getting to his feet, he touches her on the hip as he goes past. Thus they drive through town without speaking. On the way, he buys some beer at a roadside market, and Claire notices a great stack of papers just inside the door, and sees a fat woman hold out a licorice stick to a little girl. After that, they reach the picnic ground crossing Everson Creek:

The creek runs under the bridge and into a large pond a few hundred yards away. I can see them out there fishing.

So much water so close to home.

I say, "Why did you have to go miles away?"

"Don't rile me," he says.¹⁷

The creek runs into a large pond, and there some people are dropping lines. Seeing them, Claire thinks that there is "so much water so close to home." This phrase is the title of this story, and at the same time it reveals her psychological description; she is dissatisfied with him because he went fishing miles away though there is a good fishing place like this near their house. In response to her complaint, he only says, "Don't rile me." They sit on a bench in the sun over cans of beer, but suddenly Claire says:

"They said they were innocent. They said they were crazy."

He says, "Who?" He says, "What are you talking about?"

"The Maddox brothers. They killed a girl named Arlene Hubly where I grew up. They cut off her head and threw her into the Cle Elum River. It happened when I was a girl."

"You're going to get me riled," he says.

I look at the creek. I'm right in it, eyes open, face down, staring at the moss on the bottom, dead.¹⁸

At this point, Claire remembers a murder case of a young girl named Arlene Hubly when Claire was a young girl, and she overlaps Arlene Hubly and the young girl murdered and thrown at the river where her husband went fishing, seeing herself staring at the moss on the river-bed, dead. From now on, Claire seems to empathize with the girl murdered near the Naches River. Seeing such a mental state of hers, Stuart begins to waver, saying "You're going to get me riled.":

"I don't know what's wrong with you," he says on the way home.

"You're getting me more riled by the minute."

There is nothing I can say to him.

He tries to concentrate on the road. But he keeps looking into the

rear-view mirror.
He knows.¹⁹

We see the expression "get me riled" three times now, and Stuart continues to oscillate between sexual advances and some doubt concerning his behaviour to the dead girl, so he cannnot help caring about his wife in the rear seat even though he "tried to concentrate on the road." As for Claire, she feels that her husband ought to understand her feelings.

The next morning Stuart will not wake her up, she feels, but she is awake long before the alarm clock goes off, and she is in deep thought, "lying on the far side of the bed away from his hairy legs."²⁰ Now she hates to see her husband's hairy legs though she has thought nothing of doing so. Before leaving home for work, Stuart looks in the bedroom and clears his throat, but she ignores him with her eyes closed. After her husband goes out, she goes to the kitchen and finds a note from him, saying "Love." Then she has breakfast and reads the newspaper, turning it this way and that:

The body has been identified, claimed. But it took some examining it, some putting things into it, some cutting, some weighing, some measuring, some putting things back again and sewing them in.²¹

She sits for a long time holding the newspaper and thinking. Perhaps she puts herself into the place of the dead girl. Then all of a sudden, it occurs to her that she will get a chair at the hairdresser's by telephone. Then she goes to the hairdresser's and tells the hairdresser Marnie that she will go to a funeral the next day though she was not all so close, and that it was a murder, and she gets her hair fixed up for the funeral. Form that night, she changes; she makes her bed on the sofa, and the next morning she gets up earlier than her husband and fixes breakfast during his shaving. And Stuart appears in the kitchen appraising with a towel over his bare shoulder. The three of the family eat breakfast, but every time Stuart looks at her, she ignores him by asking her son "if he wants more milk, more toast, etc."²² When Stuart is going out, he says that he will call her that day, but she says she will not be at home. As he is left utterly helpless, he leaves for work, saying "All right." After he goes out, she dresses carefully and looks at herself in the mirror with a hat on, writing out a note for her son, Dean:

Honey, Mommy has things to do this afternoon, but will be back later. You stay in or be in the backyard until one of us comes home.

Love, Mommy²³

She looks at *Love* again and underlines it. Seeing the word *backyard*, she wonders if it is one word or two. Now her mind is in utter confusion. Thus fitting herself for the funeral, she dirves "through farm country, through fields of oats and sugar beets and past apple orchards, cattle grazing in pastures."²⁴ Then the scenery changes, and she sees mountains on the right far below, and sometimes sees the Naches River. Then a green pickup appears and follows behind her car for miles. Hoping that the pickup will go past, she often speeds up and down at the improper times, gripping the wheel until her fingers hurt. At last the driver, "a crewcut man in a blue workshirt,"²⁵ goes past after driving side by side for a minute on a long clear stretch of the highway, waving and tooting his horn. Feeling relieved, she pulls over and shunts off the engine. Then she hears the

pickup coming back, and locks the doors and rolls up the window to defend herself. He comes up to her and asks if she is all right, rapping on the glass and bringing his face to the window with his arms leaned on the door, but she only stares at him because she is so upset that she cannot think what else to do, and can do nothing but shake her head to the man who asks why she is all locked up:

“Roll down your window.” He shakes his head and looks at the highway and then back at me. “Roll it down now.”

“Please,” I say, “I have to go.”

“Open the door,” he says as if he isn’t listening. “You’re going to choke in there.”

He looks at my breasts, my legs. I can tell that’s what he’s doing.

“Hey, sugar,” he says. I’m just here to help is all.”²⁵

At this point, she cannot pass fair judgement on this situation because of her empathy to the girl murdered with nothing on. Of course we cannot say whether or not the crewcut man asks her out of kindness if she is all right, but we can only say that she herself thinks the man has come to look at her breasts and legs.

At any rate, she goes to the funeral. As soon as she takes a seat, the organ starts up, and the funeral begins. The casket is closed with floral sprays. After a prayer for the living and a prayer for the soul of the dead, she goes past the casket along with other people, and then moves out onto the front steps and into the afternoon sun. A limping woman ahead of her looks around on the sidewalk and speaks to Claire: “Well, they got him. If that’s any consolation. They arrested him this morning. I heard it on the radio before I come. A boy right here in town.”²⁷ At this, Claire says, “They have friends, these killers. You can’t tell,”²⁸ but the woman tells her about the childhood of the girl without answering her question. Also here her mind goes back to her childhood, which in turn reminds her of the girl murdered by the Maddox brothers.

When she returns home, she finds her husband sit at the table drinking whiskey. For a moment she is getting confused and is afraid that something may have happened to her son. So she asks him where her son is, and feels relieved to hear that he is outside. Seeing such a mental condition of hers, Stuart, draining his glass, stands up:

He says, “I think I know what you need.”

He reaches an arm around my waist and with his other hand he begins to unbutton my jacket and then he goes on to the buttons of my blouse.

“First things first,” he says.

He says something else. But I don’t need to listen. I can’t hear a thing so much water going.

“That’s right,” I say, finishing the buttons myself. “Before Dean comes. Hurry.”²⁹

Here this story ends off suddenly. At first sight, the couple seem to get on well with each other in the future, but she already notices “so much water going” close to their feet.

(Continued)

NOTES

- 1 . Arthur M. Saltzman, *Understanding Raymond Carver* (University of South Carolina, 1988), p.4.
- 2 . See Saltzman, *op. cit.*, p.5.
- 3 . Graham Clarke, *Investing the Glimpse: Raymond Carver and the Syntax of Silence in The New American writing Essays on American Literature since 1970*, ed. by Graham Clarke (Vision Press Ltd., England, 1990), p.99.
- 4 . *Ibid.*, p.104.
- 5 . *Ibid.*, p.103.
- 6 . Raymond Carver, *So Much Water So Close to Home* in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1981), p.79. Subsequent quotations from *So Much Water So Close to Home* will refer to this edition.
- 7 . *Ibid.*, p.80.
- 8 . *Ibid.*.
- 9 . *Ibid.*.
10. *Ibid.*, pp.80-81.
11. *Ibid.*, p.81.
12. *Ibid.*.
13. *Ibid.*, p.82.
14. *Ibid.*.
15. *Ibid.*.
16. *Ibid.*.
17. *Ibid.*, p.83.
18. *Ibid.*.
19. *Ibid.*, p.84.
20. *Ibid.*.
21. *Ibid.*.
22. *Ibid.*, p.85.
23. *Ibid.*.
24. *Ibid.*.
25. *Ibid.*, p.86.
26. *Ibid.*.
27. *Ibid.*, p.87.
28. *Ibid.*.
29. *Ibid.*, pp.87-88.