Paddy Gercheszky

by C. P. Boyko

THE ELEVATOR DOORS closed, and Gercheszky began to sweat. He was not claustrophobic; he was alone. There was no one in the elevator for him to talk to. He needed to talk like a shark needs to swim. His thoughts, given no outlet, grew toxic and turbulent, like thoughts in a fever dream.

He was on his way to a party, and though he loved parties he worried that this party would be a bad one. He would know no one; worse, no one would know him. No women would be there; worse, no one famous. He would say something foolish and everyone would laugh at him; worse, no one would laugh, no one would pay any attention to him, no one would notice him at all.

Fretfully he began rehearsing the funny and interesting things he would say—he had a fund of these. What he really needed was a good entrance, something that would draw all eyes to him from the first moment he stepped through the door. He had a fund of these too. Should he do the blind-man shtick? The porno plumber bit? The missing penguin gag? By the time he emerged from the elevator he was drenched.

He found the apartment, dropped his trousers, and threw open the door like a man entering his own bathroom—an impersonation he had intended to garnish with the cry, "What are all you people doing in my bathroom?" But he did not get the words out, for there was no one there to hear them.

It was his worst fear: He was too late. The party was over. Great things had been said and done by beautiful and powerful people and Paddy Gercheszky had not been among them.

A woman in a bathrobe appeared, drying a plate. "You're bleeding," she said.

The sweat had caused a razor cut on his cheek to reopen. He stared at her with wild incomprehension, his pants around his ankles.

In fact, as usual, Gercheszky was early.

GERCHESZKY WAS A talker, not a writer. His handwriting was atrocious and his spelling notorious. He loved words, but he knew them by sound, not by sight. One time, going over the galleys of a novel, he had crossed out every instance of a strange new word, one which appeared to him to be the sound that a spring makes when it is plucked. He had never encountered the word "doing" in print before.

His ignorance was ostensibly explained by his claim that, till the time he immigrated to New York at age twenty, he had spoken only Yiddish and French. Amazingly, Gercheszky spoke impeccable English with only the faintest Canadian accent. Nor had any living soul ever heard him speak a word of French or Yiddish—though certainly he was known to season his talk with exotic idioms, implied to be Québécois, and occasionally his speech took on Yiddish cadences. If he refused to speak his mother tongues, it was, he said, because they brought back sad memories, and because now he was in America, and "in Rome one must as the Romans do."

He sometimes lapsed like this into infelicity, as if suddenly remembering his role as foreigner. But he also knew that his solecisms gave good entertainment value. He had heard the story about the multi-million-dollar computer that had translated the phrase "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" into Russian as "The vodka is okay, but the meat is rotten." He adopted this as one of his catchphrases, and invented others. "If beggars had pigs, then wishes would fly." "You can kick a dead horse in the mouth but you can't make him drink."

He was perhaps less successful when, in telling a joke, he feigned ignorance of double entendres. For example: What is the difference between outlaws and in-laws? The correct punchline is "Outlaws are wanted." But Gercheszky put the case more bluntly: "Nobody likes in-laws! Ha ha ha!"

LATER, AT A better party, Gercheszky bustled from group to group, making clever comments over people's shoulders. To a senator's aide and the sister of a film director who were both wearing grey he said, "Look at you two! Did you call each other up before the party and coordinate?" They smiled but gave him no opening into their conversation—some crap about *The Catcher in the Rye* or some other piece of crap he had never read. Gercheszky, the novelist, hated books.

Eventually he gave up and hovered near the snack table. When at last a couple took the bait, Gercheszky pounced. "You're wondering about my hat," he told them. They were too polite to deny it; besides, their mouths were full. Gercheszky did not share such qualms: through a mouthful of shrimp cocktail, he told them about his childhood.

At first, as he spoke, they watched rather than listened to him. Gercheszky was wonderful to watch. First you noticed the funny hat, the hairy knuckles, the flaring nostrils, and the shrimp juice dribbling down the chin. Then all those petty details were whipped into a blur of insignificance by the whirlwind spectacle of his vivacity. His energy was astounding; his exuberance made blasé people feel envious and guilty. When he told a story, his entire body was enlisted: his hands conjured shapes and relations; his chest inflated or collapsed to illustrate a character's stature; his eyes danced, and shone on each of his listeners in turn, so that even in a crowd you felt like Gercheszky was speaking to you alone. And then there was his face. One moment it was furrowed with anguish, the next twisted in befuddlement; now taut with rage, now drooping in melancholy, now slack with awe and relief.

Meanwhile his voice boomed and whispered and tinkled and guffawed. People started to hear what he was saying; his spectators became an audience. As the buttonholed couple listened to his tale, their faces lost their wariness, and gradually became blank with rapture. Others who came for the hors d'oeuvres were drawn in by the story. Before long Gercheszky was addressing every person at the party, the senator's aide and director's sister included. They all stood clustered around him, jostling for the best positions

like a crowd at a crime scene, close enough that his gestures sometimes knocked the drinks out of their hands. They didn't even notice. Words of wonder and indignation fell from their loose, pendulous lips.

". . . Boiled bread!?"

". . . Fifteen cents!?"

". . . Only four years old!?"

". . . An igloo!?"

". . . With both fists!?"

". . . And still you ate it!?"

". . . The police too!?"

". . . Right out into the street!?"

". . . Not a word of English!?"

". . . And her a nun!?"

He never did get around to an explanation of his hat—an oily, balding patchwork of squirrel skins—because, for every newcomer, he started his story again from the beginning. And with each retelling, the story became only more amazing, saddening, and inspiring.

Years later, at other parties, people who were tired of Paddy Gercheszky would point to these embellishments as proof that he had made it all up. In fact, Gercheszky always held back details for later iterations, so that those who had come early would not be bored. He was a consummate storyteller.

And he had made it all up.

GERCHESZKY DICTATED HIS novels, of course. His friends took turns as secretary, or pooled their resources to hire one. The professionals rarely stuck around for more than one draft. Revision to Gercheszky meant telling the same story again, but better. To his secretaries it meant needlessly transcribing the same story again in different words. This practice won Gercheszky a reputation for perfectionism among people who did not work with him.

Years later, his wife bought him a tape recorder. Gercheszky would come home after a party and fill three or four spools, till he was exhausted enough to sleep for an hour or two. Unlike Dickens, who imagined his characters milling about his desk as he wrote, Gercheszky imagined his audience. He imagined himself, in fact, at a party—always a slightly better party than the one he had just left. As the tapes attest, he often addressed his phantom auditors by name, paused for their replies and questions, and laughed with avuncular affection at their naivety and delight. And though Gercheszky's transcribers and editors excluded from their texts this apostrophizing, the novels retain an intimate and hortatory quality. Every paragraph seems prefaced with an urgent "Now listen—"

LATER, AT A better party, he watched a woman patiently smooth her long brown hair into separate strands with her thumbnail. He approached her and said, "Haven't I seen you on television?"

"I don't think so."

"Oh," he laughed, "I must have been thinking of me."

Her companion said, "You've been on television?"

"Oh sure." Gercheszky told them about his appearances on Hal Patly, the Ed Sullivan of the Bronx. The couple stared blankly. He produced a copy of his own novel (he had planted it on the bookshelf earlier that evening), but the couple could not be made to recognize his name. His attention began to wander. Even as he told them the horrible, uplifting tale of his childhood in the Jewish quarter of Old Montreal, his gaze drifted towards the door. When a semi-famous actress came in, he excused himself.

"Hey," he said, meaning: I know your face but I can't remember your name.

"Hey," she said, which he took to mean: Thank you.

"Remember me?" he said, meaning: Recognize me?

"I *think* so . . ."

He took this to mean: Yes. His posture relaxed; though, as always—even when talking to someone famous, even when seated next to Hal Patly

on Channel 16—one of his shoulders remained thrust forward, as if he had been caught mid-stride. He always looked like he was on his way somewhere. He was.

He looked the actress over approvingly, like an old friend, and said the first thing that came into his head. (Once, at a funeral and hungry, he'd asked the mourners in the next pew if they had any food.) "I don't mean to be rude here, but are you pregnant or just putting on some flab?"

Several people in earshot showed that they were shocked. The actress, who had not even informed her lover yet, was, however, a professional. She laughed easily and took Paddy by the arm and gave him a piece of friendly advice: "Don't ever ask a woman that." Even as she feigned nonchalance, she felt the shock and fear draining away. Besides, it was simply too ridiculous to be offended by this clumsy bear of a man who wore some kind of beaver pelt on his head and blurted questions like a child. She began to feel protective of him, almost motherly, and listened indulgently as he told her the horrible, uplifting tale of his childhood in the Jewish quarter of Old Montreal.

Later, she took him to a better party. When she allowed him to give her his number, inscribed in a copy of his novel, he swore that he would not leave the apartment till she called. She believed him—he believed himself at that moment—and, feeling sorry for him, called the next day. He wasn't home. Gercheszky never went home if he could help it.

She saw him eventually at another party. Later, at yet another party, they got married.

GERCHESZKY WAS NOT a great wit. He was funny, and clever, and incisive, as his novels show, but his mind was not swift. He suffered constantly from *l'esprit de l'escalier*. Brilliant retorts occurred to him minutes and sometimes hours too late. So, rather than risk seeming oafish, Gercheszky came prepared—with anecdotes, jokes, gags, bits, and market-tested witticisms to suit any occasion.

But there are other dangers than being slow; one can also be too quick. This pitfall might be called *l'esprit de la sonnette*: Instead of coming to you too late, your witticism comes to you too early—not on your way down the stairs, but while you're still ringing the doorbell. When one comes prepared, one runs the risk of seeming glib or rehearsed.

Gercheszky was too skilled and flamboyant a speaker for that; he told even his oldest stories as if they had just happened to him minutes ago. But there is another drawback to always knowing in advance exactly what you are going to say. Gercheszky, over time, began to bore himself.

LATER, AT ANOTHER party, Gercheszky told the story of how he had written his first novel—a story which most of his friends had heard before, or read about in his second novel, or both. Sensing that he was losing their attention, he segued into the story of how his second novel had come to be written. Still he sensed some fidgeting at the back of the room, so he decided to ham things up a bit. He answered the phone as if it had rung and carried on a dramatic dialogue with the imaginary caller, whose side of the conversation he revealed by asking long expository questions like a character in a bad play: "And that's when Mildred collided with a tree and broke her leg, and you had to ski down to the lodge to call an ambulance which they had to send up the mountain on a giant toboggan? Boy!" Then he went around the room picking up disgusting or inedible things which he persuaded people to dare him to eat. Swallowing a D-cell battery turned out to be something of a showstopper, so he moved on to constructing Drano bombs, shaking them and throwing them off the balcony and into the street. This livened things up until a little old lady in a wheelchair was allegedly blinded, at which point everyone became sanctimonious and pretended to lose interest in the game.

"Hey, Guggenheim! Where do you think *you're* going?"

"Aw, come on, Paddy, I've got to work in the morning."

So Gercheszky told his friends to go fuck themselves, and went to a different party—where he was upstaged by a seven-year-old ballerina.

"And this we pay money to see?" he grumbled. "She hasn't even got coordination. Heck, *I* can dance better than that." He showed them. "There!" he gasped. "And not one lesson have I had!" But it was obvious that his friends stubbornly preferred the child's clumsy kitsch to Gercheszky's intuitive artistry. The ballerina, he later discovered, was the host's daughter—which explained everything. "As an orphan," he quipped, "I hate nepotism." He wandered around the apartment criticizing the expensive furnishings. For old times' sake, he secreted under his hat a crystal vase which he thought he could probably hock, though he didn't exactly need the money these days. Finally with a honking sigh he went to sulk in the kitchen.

"I hate kids," he told a famous actress who was snorting coke and whom he was pretty sure he'd slept with once.

"Aw," she sniffed philosophically, "it's different when they're your own, Paddy."

"Yeah," he said, "when they're yours you can smack 'em."

He was so pleased with this witticism that he had to hurry to another party to repeat it. But somehow it wasn't as funny the second time, or the third, or the fourth . . .

GERCHESZKY NEVER CALLED himself a novelist. He found the term pigeonholing. He thought of himself as someone who, among other things, wrote novels. He had made it big because of the novels, perhaps, but he could just as easily have made it big in another field—and still might.

He often considered entering politics. He could see himself as the mayor of someplace, or the President of the United States, or something like that. At other times, he fancied himself an entrepreneur. He believed that fortunes were built on ideas. With a good idea, any bozo could make a million, while not even a genius or superman could wring a profit from a bad one. And Gercheszky was overflowing with ideas. They came to him everywhere. One night at a party, for instance, he stood on the patio for hours, watching people through the glass doors and occasionally knocking and beckoning. He laughed every time another stranger wandered over with the

same look of prospective recognition on their face. What started as a joke developed into a business plan by way of a generalization: “People love looking at other people through windows.” He would open the first human zoo! Visitors on one side of the glass would pay to stare and point at visitors on the other. “The beauty part? No overhead!” Generally, however, Gercheszky found his inspiration in words. The next best thing to a good product idea was a good name. A good name usually involved a good pun. He would open a chain of coffee shops called Bean and Nothingness, or an eyeglass store called I Wear Eyewear, or a Canadian-themed credit union called MountieBank. (Gercheszky knew what a mountebank was, but assumed his clients would not—that was the beauty part.)

Another way he might distinguish himself was through investments—that is, by buying things. Gercheszky considered himself a canny investor. When he had money, he spent it fiercely, as if the stuff scalded him. He saw expense as proof of value and a guarantee of good return on investment. The more overpriced an object the better; he often haggled *up*. Some of his friends saw in this allergy to money the absentminded unworldliness of the artist. Others, less charitable, called it stupidity. Still others believed Gercheszky desperate to acquire the symbols of status and success.

The truth, I believe, lies elsewhere. Gercheszky often called himself lazy—an adjective that no one who had seen him would ever think to apply to a man so obviously brimming over with schemes, ambitions, and energy, and that no one who had read him would ever use to describe an author in whose torrential prose even the punctuation marks are washed clean away. Nor was Gercheszky prone to false modesty; his was genuine enough. He may occasionally have painted himself in his stories as more down and out than he actually had been, but this was for dramatic interest. The flaws, obsessions, and weaknesses that he gave his narrators really were his own. Assuming, then, that Gercheszky believed himself to be lazy, it makes sense that he would go to such lengths to stay broke. Poverty forced him to keep busy. Desperation lit a fire under him. He wanted to be rich and famous, but he dreaded the indolence that riches would allow.

LATER, AT YET another party, some girl was talking to him. His attention wandered violently, shooting out in all directions like a frightened hunter lost in the woods. Everyone who came in the door was famous, beautiful, and powerful, but to Gercheszky they seemed ugly and dull because they had all heard his stories already, and had even told him some of theirs.

"... put people on diets," the girl was saying.

"Yeah? Maybe you could put *me* on a diet. People say I eat too many batteries."

When he had explained this joke, the girl said, "No no no, I'm a *dietician*. I don't *put people* on diets. That's what people *think* I do."

"Uh-huh." Why was he talking to her? Because from behind she had looked beautiful but her face was plain, and he had been puzzled and intrigued by the contradiction. And because he had never seen her around at any parties, and had assumed therefore that she hadn't heard his stories. But it turned out that she'd read them. Why had he ever written those novels? Why had he let those publishing sons of bitches bleed him dry?

Some thumping came from the ceiling and the girl said it sounded like they were having more fun upstairs.

"Don't count on it," said Gercheszky. "It's the same all over. You just can't hear the parties happening downstairs."

The girl assumed he was drunk. He wasn't like this on TV. On TV they could hardly get him to sit still long enough to answer a question. It was strange, standing so close to someone she had seen so many times on TV. Even though she had only a small television set, she'd assumed he would be much taller. She felt an overwhelming urge to grab him by the ears and pull him close to see if he was real.

Gercheszky was not drunk. In fact, he had never had a drink in his life. His father had been an alcoholic; but that fact—never spoken, never written down—he had forgotten long ago. He'd never had a drink because he'd never needed one.

"Oh Christ," he said. "My ex."

His ex-wife said to the girl that she could see that Paddy, as usual, wasn't letting anyone else get a word in edgewise. She was bitter because she had loved him once, worshipped him even, before realizing that while he gave a very convincing impression of being fascinated by her, he had never in fact heard a single word that had come out of her mouth. It was as if she'd married a carnival, or fallen in love with a movie—something thrilling and larger than life that could not, by its very nature, take any notice of her. It was the loneliest experience of her life.

Gercheszky told the girl a little about the marriage and the divorce.

"Oh!" The girl clapped her hands. "You're 'Eva'!"

Gercheszky's ex-wife told the girl that certain facts had been distorted in the novel, and cited several instances. Gercheszky explained to the girl the concept of artistic license. His ex-wife explained to the girl the concept of eating shit and dying.

They had a beautiful argument, which everyone gathered round to watch.

LATER, AT ANOTHER stupid party, Gercheszky read aloud passages from his fourth novel, breaking in periodically to explain how today he would write it differently. His haggard audience (the host and the hostess—everyone else had gone home hours ago) listened obediently, with the respect they believed due a great novelist, till long after the sun came up and Gercheszky's voice grew hoarse. When he caught them nodding off, he tore the book in half and threw the halves at their heads. "Go!" he screamed. "Sleep! Who's stopping you?" He stormed out of the apartment, then immediately returned, contrite. "I'll stay on the couch. Not even a peep will I make. I'll cook us all breakfast, the real traditional Jewish breakfast of Old Montreal."

Everybody knew by this time that Paddy Gercheszky was neither Jewish nor Québécois; that he had grown up in a suburb of Toronto; that he was not an orphan; that he was not even Paddy Gercheszky—his real name was Patrick Gurchase. But they all pretended not to know, because they liked Paddy, more or less, and anyway had known him longer than they had

known his biographer (whom they no longer invited to their parties). Also, perhaps, they did not want to admit that they had been fooled. They chose to believe that they had always known there was something fishy about Paddy's stories, and that it hadn't mattered because he'd told them so well. As they say in Yiddish: You don't ask questions of a story.

But now his friends just wanted some sleep. "Aw, come on, Paddy. Don't be like that. There'll be other parties."

Long ago, at a better party, someone else had said words like these to him.

He'd been the life of that party: telling jokes, singing and dancing, trading insults with his uncles, entertaining everyone—his parents, his eight older siblings, and all their friends. And then they'd sent him to bed.

Alone in his room while the fun went on without him, he felt angry at first, then frightened, then strange. He felt tingly and insubstantial—like he didn't have a body, like he didn't exist.

Later, his mother sat with him amidst the wreckage—apparently he'd thrown a tantrum—and ran her fingers through his hair to calm him. "Paddy, Paddy," she said, "won't you ever go to sleep? The world will still be here in the morning."

But that was what he was afraid of: that the world would always be there; there when he woke, there when he slept; that it would just go on being there, whether he was part of it or not.

RIDING DOWN ALONE in the elevator, Gercheszky remembered none of this. He popped a sleeping pill so that he would pass out as soon as he got home. He had no more novels to dictate.

Downstairs in the lobby, the night watchman recognized him. Snapping his fingers, he said, "Hey, aren't you—"

"No," said Gercheszky, then added benevolently, "but I get that all the time."

The night watchman was offended. He had often seen Gercheszky on TV—the TV behind this very desk. Gercheszky should have been amazed by

the coincidence and flattered by the recognition. After all, how many people sat up all night watching old reruns of Hal Patly? How many people had sat up night after night listening to Paddy Gercheszky whine about his childhood, kvetch about sex, and repent his marriage? The night watchman felt that he knew Gercheszky intimately, as few did. He and Gercheszky had shared a bond.

Well, to hell with Gercheszky. The night watchman was glad he'd never bought any of his books. They probably stunk.

FEW DO READ Gercheszky's books these days—unless it is to point out where they deviate from fact. The interest in Gercheszky has shifted since his death almost entirely from the work to the man himself. The biographies now outnumber the novels by a factor of four, with more on the way each year. A Hollywood film, starring funny man Kyle Lipton, is purportedly in the works.

It is hard at first to imagine that Gercheszky would mind this trend. But then one realizes that if his life or his childhood had been more interesting, he would never have needed to become a *novelist* at all. If not the savvy investor, bold entrepreneur, politician, or movie star that he sometimes dreamed of being, he would surely have become in fact what he could only pretend in this life to be: a great memoirist masquerading as a novelist to avoid lawsuits.

I think the trend towards biography is unfortunate, because Gercheszky *was* a great storyteller. He had an instinct for what to borrow and what to leave out. His books, I believe, represent the best of him. The novelist is a sort of sculptor who hews and polishes the rough block of his life down to something beautiful and elegant. The literary biographer by contrast scrutinizes the dust and rubble on the floor, and would happily obscure the sculpture in his effort to restore the rough block to its original state. But I suppose that in writing this character sketch I am guilty of the same desecration.

The biographer of another novelist once said that poetry always triumphs over history—by which he meant that a lie well told always outlives

the truth. Although parts of his legend survive—this story is called "Paddy Gercheszky" and not "Patrick Gurchase"—I am afraid that, for once, history will triumph over poetry.