

WHERE I'M CALLING FROM: By Raymond Carver

I admit I hold to the dark view of things,” says a Raymond Carver character in typically laconic manner. This man, after the passage of some years, has turned up unannounced at the home of his remarried ex-wife. Far from expressing surprise, the woman lets him in and brings him a cup of coffee. Then, in a deadly matter-of-fact tone, she reads him the riot act, spelling out in detail his past derelictions. He listens mutely for a long time.

“And then I do something. I reach over and take the sleeve of her blouse between my thumb and forefinger. That's all. I just touch it that way, and then I just bring my hand back. She doesn't draw away. She doesn't move. Then here's the thing I do next. I get down on my knees, a big guy like me, and I take the hem of her dress. What am I doing on the floor? I wish I could say. But I know it's where I ought to be, and I'm there on my knees holding on to the hem of her dress.”

This understated description of the character's act of contrition amounts to a Carver climax. Although the man's emotions are not verbalized, the unexpectedness of his act stuns the affected reader. The story ends with the woman helping her ex-husband to his feet and walking him to the door.

The name of this story is “Intimacy.” It is one of seven new stories that share space in this volume with 30 others selected from previous collections. Considered as an extended work, the book summarizes Carver's writing career and testifies to a literary achievement equaled only by the very best of modern American story writers—Hemingway, Welty, Salinger, Cheever.

Carver explores confused or uprooted lives in the simplest of ways, using everyday language with calibrated precision to suggest profound depths of meaning. For such economy of expression he has been pegged by undiscerning and lazy critics as a “minimalist”. Hardly. To see Carver's stories small is to overlook their fundamental engagement with universal problems. In them, under-achievers and even downright failures at life are given their just due—they are taken seriously.

The Carver landscape is peopled with casualties—bankrupts, insomniacs, unsuccessful door-to-door salesmen, desultory philanderers, young couples who have lost their childhood because of an unwanted pregnancy, and alcoholics who half-heartedly dry out. (“Part of me wanted help. But there was another part.”)

These people aimlessly jettison close personal relationships as well as their personal effects because they have been defeated in small ways that come to add up to too much. They mourn long-departed, adored fathers and abide unappreciative senior citizen mothers who can still reduce them emotionally to the level of an 8-year-old. The children of Carver's characters often turn out not quite right themselves ("The truth is, my kid has a conniving streak in him.") Wives are not so much to make love to as to cuddle while watching late-night TV or with whom to share 3 a.m. cigarettes.

Strangely, the viewpoint is not as negative as these examples seem to imply. An intermittent dry humor eases narrative tension, and the latter stories contain elements of, if not hope, then at least acceptance. Reading through this collection chronologically, one notes a deepening of thought, an evolution toward compassionate observation hinted at in earlier stories and now fully realized.

As two horses materialize out of the fog on a suburban lawn, the failure of a man to recognize his wife's handwriting is symptomatic of a marriage that has failed in the story "Blackbird Pie."

"Fever" charts the confusion of an abandoned husband who, unable to care properly for his young children, is himself tended by an angel of mercy, coming to him in the form of an elderly baby sitter.

In "A Small, Good Thing," an 8-year-old boy is knocked into the street by a hit-and-run driver, and mysteriously fails to respond to medical treatment. As his anxious parents wait for the child to awaken, a crank caller, obsessed by an imagined slight, intrudes on the couple's tense vigil. Out of this miserable situation, a communion unfolds in the story's last paragraphs, beautifully illuminating the darkness that has preceded.

In an early story, "Are These Actual Miles?" the forced sale of a family car, a wife's indifferent betrayal of her alcoholic husband and the man's disgust with himself contribute to his consideration of whether or not to hang himself. It turns out that he does not, but "he understands he is willing to be dead."

"Menudo" finds Carver at the top of his powers. The middle-aged, ex-alcoholic narrator of the story is acting strangely. Standing in the dark at his bedroom window, he thinks back on his failed love relationships. He remembers the sweet young wife he left, who now entrusts her life to various psychics. His present wife, whom

he regards as something of a cold cookie, once left him, but now he is betraying her by having an affair with a married woman who lives across the street. He stares at the light in the kitchen of her otherwise-darkened house. Later he finds himself in the yard of another neighbor, unsolicitedly raking the leaves.

This man will not hang himself. He thinks: "But now I don't know what to believe in. I'm not complaining, simply stating a fact. I'm down to nothing! And I have to go on like this. No destiny. Just the next thing meaning whatever you think it does. Compulsion and error, just like everybody else."

Just like everybody else. Even the epiphanies of this wonderful writer are modestly stated. Pick up on Raymond Carver. Where he is calling from is the innermost region of the heart.

**San Francisco Chronicle, 1988**