

FAMILY, FATE, AND THE FUGITIVE

The name: Doctor Richard Kimble. The destination: death row, State Prison. The irony: Richard Kimble is innocent.

For reasons that don't entirely make sense, I've been slowly making my way through all 120 episodes of *The Fugitive* (1963-1967). I'm currently somewhere in the middle of year two. The episodes are shot in high-contrast black and white - sort of a television noir - and I'm intrigued how the entire engine of the story is driven by one slender premise: an innocent man, charged with murdering his wife, is on the run. He knows who the killer is, a one-armed man he came upon at the murder scene, but no one believes him. The writers change; the directors change; the male guest stars change (Leslie Nielsen, Slim Pickens!); the female guest stars change (Tuesday Weld, Susan Oliver; they play either hussy-blondes with dark eyelashes or emotionally-infantile blondes with dark eyelashes). But the story remains essentially the same: a twitchy, sweaty David Janssen drifts into each guest star's town or horse farm or bar or warehouse, and, during the next 51 minutes, he offers them something: the gift of his strength, compassion, and humanity. He may be on the run, but he's a good guy. Their lives are irrevocably changed for the better. Kimble moves on: still pursued, pulling up his collar to the rain. Another alley, another suitcase, another cigarette.

One of the reasons the show continues to resonate for me is because it's about guilt: real or unreal, deserved or undeserved. And, in this regard, it echoes nightmares that have unaccountably haunted me all my life: I'm stranded in a city whose geography I can't make sense of; hurtling along an incomplete highway overpass to find my car suddenly sailing into the air. In these dreams I am always alone. Twitching and sweating.

I pulled myself away from this marathon a few weeks ago to fly to Lima, Ohio, for Lynn's mother's 90th birthday party. Her mother, Beth, sat in her reclining chair in the living room, barely able to hear, but still visibly aglow with pleasure, sharing old family albums with her 32-year-old granddaughter who sat at her feet and asked questions about each photograph. Her stout son, in his baseball cap, stood nearby eating a slice of the Junior's cheesecake I'd brought. Lynn sat on the couch talking about medical problems with her sister-in-law, and I remember actually saying the word *family* aloud to myself as if it were the title of a painting. And in that moment that word sounded ancient, enormous, and eternal. Apart for my brother Richard, my own family has all died. Sitting in that little living room, I felt my own sense of isolation rising around me.

That day, Beth actually said she was happy - a word she rarely used, according to Lynn. I wish I could say that her happiness endured, but, as William Conrad intones at the beginning of *The Fugitive*, "Fate moved its huge hand." Lynn's mother descended almost immediately into a dizzying decline; no doctor could adequately diagnose it. Was she dehydrated? Was she bleeding in her brain? In the space of two weeks, Beth visibly disengaged from the world. Three weeks after her party she was gone. I think of a John Updike story in which the narrator identifies the striking of a match on a car ride back to college as the happiest moment he'd known. "...a second after the scratch of his match

occurred the moment of which each following moment was a slight diminution....” (You need a microsecond pause after the word “match” to make that sentence work.) I visualize Lynn’s mother in her chair, her granddaughter at her feet, her great-grandson crawling on the carpet towards the kitchen – and I wonder if (at least recently) that was the happiest moment she’d known...each following moment a slight diminution....

I realize that another theme of *The Fugitive* is lack of family. Poor Kimble is not only without a loving family, he is accused of killing the one he was closest to – his wife. His endless chase and exile are all the more heart-wrenching because he is alone. And I suddenly remember that back in 1964 my brother Richard was such an ardent *Fugitive* fan, his 12-year-old dream was to own a car whose horn played the famous four-note “Theme from The Fugitive.” All these years later, that notion still makes me laugh. *My brother*. I should call him right now; maybe together we can look for the one-armed man we saw leaving the scene of crime.