

The Mourning Words

by Don Schaeffer

Four am blues, he called it. The mistakes and the unmet duties personified in his dreams made Jacob wake. Ever time he had a such a vision of a big mistake, even made years ago, he said, "Dear God" to make the vision go away. It got absorbed somehow. Jacob asked God, "Are You the great Eraser of Visions, are you the Bosom Taker, the Confirmer of good Intentions?"

Jacob mourned, not for dead because his life had not yet brought him close to that. He knew the dead would be impatient, waiting in his brain for mourning, but there were specters already there tugging him about tasks he could not complete and injurious errors. Death is not really essential to mourning. Beings who passed out of his life claimed him as much, memory ghosts lost to his life who return to dance on his memory.

We laughed together every day at coffee and broke bread. When Jacob was hungry for friendship he thought he had something constructed of laughter and shared interests. They relied on each other, confidants, conspirators, until the money stopped and there was nothing left except for the mourning. Jacob knew the value of conspiracy.

They spoke together quietly, Frances Parker and he. Elaborately constructing enemies built the bond. Conspirators without enemies make poor friends. Jacob knew this. But there would be no lonelier place than a world without conspiracy.

"You fell in love with her." Ginny told Jacob as they met walking along with the Peace Now crowd. He was pleased with Ginny's nearness. He felt a kinship in her, the last time they saw each other.

"No," said Jacob, "I didn't."

Frances and Ginny passed into ghostliness.

"Dear God." He now recites when he thinks of them.

A young student generated such unease in Jacob. Jacob hated it when he was frightened of people weaker than himself. He couldn't count on his strength and felt the pressure of oncoming humiliation. Jacob reacted with panic. And the girl passed into ghostliness. "Dear God."

Well into his 70s, Jacob's bygones were the loci of life. Memory was where the ghosts resided. So Jacob was haunted and the haunting filled his hours, enriching him by augmenting things of the senses with things discarnate. He passed through this rich soup of animation every day. Voices and poetry, dredged scraps of speech, disconnected events harmonized.

Jacob's biggest haunting was from Rachel, the woman he was sworn to, slowly dying alone in the cold city fifteen hundred miles away while he was enjoying a life of light and dawn. It's not a practical guilt since betrayal was the only way he could have lived. The nurses and the social worker urged him to chose life. But the deep promise lingered, amplified when he received pictures with

cheery captions from his children. Fading, thin, bandaged, tubed in another world or no world. Oh God. He tossed in bed and let the quilt slide off his legs.

How many years ago was it, Jacob thought, when we believed we could conquer anything. Rachel took a confident look at her problem of salvaging her life. Then it was just a feeling of dizziness when she crossed the street, she said.

Rachel consulted books, reading about a theory that such dizziness was caused by inner ear problems and could be treated with antihistamines. They bought antihistamine tablets and to tried to test it and the medication brought new and illusory hope. Rachel went to the doctors. A neurologist gave her an EEG series and declared that she was having continuous seizures. Rachel started to have bouts of pain then, finally diagnosed as severe arthritis.

Rachel was drinking lots of wine. She would hide her kegs down in the laundry and on top of the washing machine, pour the wine into paper cups. Jacob couldn't understand where the stains were coming from. He was spending his hours on the computer hiding away in the basement office. The years of joy were behind, encoded in memory and hope. But life, life always felt renewable, always heal able. Rachel and Jacob tried to stem the changes.

When they went to the mall, Rachel started needing a shopping cart to walk. Then they purchased a rolling walker. Rachel started wanting to ride on the walker because her walking slowed so much. Then they bought a wheelchair.

Pain intensified. There were medications. Doctors all hoped they could use new treatments to control the pain. Physiotherapists tried electrical stimulation, message, acupuncture. There were waves of hope.

The bed became the refuge Rachel sought more and more often. Nurses started coming to the house. When one of them suggested getting a hospital bed, Jacob said he didn't want his life to change. She told him, it already has.

It's rare, Jacob mused, for people with soft cheeks and full flesh to go someplace and never return. It's hard and sharp, their eyes squint and mouths tighten. Even the the ticket agent is surprised when he sells them a one-way ticket. "Are you sure?" the agent would say.

Repeated changes of seasons, heading once again to summer, the cycles of the day always renew. That gives hope to those in the throes of their lives. But when Jacob pleaded to the nurse how he didn't want his life to change, and she said it already had, Jacob heard her words like the words of a myth. He heard them as they faded.

"Dear God."

Jacob got out of bed and walked out of the room to check on the welfare of the cats. One was outside climbing on the backdoor trying to get in. It was cold tonight. Jacob let him in. Then he paddled back to bed, trying not to wake Roxy. Life here still felt new, even after 4 years. He remained in an old world, old habits embedded in his muscles. In reality, Jacob was protected from the past, insulated in a box made of star-dust, closed where it points to the earth but with a big opening toward the vacuum of the sky. It was unrealistic, delusional that he brought the old world back when he created dreams.