

Lillian

March 27, 2006

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Her name, I think, is Lillian. At least that's what I call to her in dreams. She is not so much a person as a presence, a warmth that awakens me when I try to touch her. How strange to feel such longing for someone who may never have existed. She is like a name that you recognize but cannot place, a thought detached from words.

The rest of my life is very organized. A young man in a puffy blue gown and large white gym shoes awakens me at seven. It is more like a game we play. I am always awake wondering what has happened to Lillian and just pretend to be asleep when he opens my door. There are always such loud noises in the hall, carts and trays and funny smells, and large, happy people in puffy blue gowns calling greetings to one another.

If I have had a good night, he helps me out of my plastic wrappings and to the toilet and then the shower, where he sprays me with warm water. If I have had a bad night, well, we do the same things, but he sprays me first and talks to himself about why he gets all the nasty ones. When I tell him about my dreams, he says, "At your age? No way!"

At least that is what I think he says. It has been a long time since we have really communicated. Our last discussion was about shoes. He likes gym shoes; I prefer slippers. Since they are my feet, I can turn them away when he tries to put gym shoes on them. So he told on me to an overweight woman with a clipboard in her hand. I haven't worn gym shoes since I was a child, I thought so hard I was sure she could hear.

“He won’t wear shoes,” my caregiver complained. “Acts like he’s tryin’ to kick my ass.”

“Let him wear his slippers,” the large woman said. “He ain’t runnin’ no marathon here, Honey.”

That’s one of the few I have won in a long time. If Lillian were here, we would laugh about it together. Maybe she is down the hall, where they are lining up the residents in wheelchairs for their turns at breakfast. It is incongruous to see so many old people in wheelchairs wearing gym shoes. They are hard to put on, and none of the residents can bend over to tie the laces.

Meals are difficult. Everyone seems to concentrate on something that is happening somewhere else. People stare across the room, or at their food, or chew without putting anything in their mouths. Breakfast is the worst meal to watch other people eat. I think about Lillian until our time is nearly over and the food is cold. It is difficult to eat a cold breakfast in a hurry, but if you don’t, they put your name on a list and give you an injection instead. It hurts when they put in the needle, but there are benefits to not eating. The less I eat, the fewer bad mornings I have.

Somewhere there was a kitchen that smelled of bacon and coffee, and a young woman with brown hair wearing an apron over her fresh spring dress. She smiles at me while she stirs the pancake batter with the new electric mixer, and the children argue happily about who will be served first. Black headlines scream about war in Korea, but when she smiles, the world is soft and light.

If you are good and eat your breakfast, they take you to the sunroom, where there is a television set. The people in blue gowns like to watch shows where overweight

people sit around a stage and yell at each other. If the staff here and television shows are any indication, fat people have taken over the country.

Sometimes the people on television start hitting each other, but they are so fat that no one is ever hurt. People watching from an amphitheater yell, "Jerry, Jerry!" That must mean, "Hit them harder," because the people on stage keep right on pounding. Then come the commercials, where everybody is normal size again. So maybe the fat people haven't taken over the country after all. Maybe it's just here. Lillian would know, if I only knew where to find her.

Some of us get to go to the bathroom before lunch and some after. I wish I could remember which group I am in. If you forget, your caregiver has to take you back to your room and stand you in the shower again while he talks to himself and rummages through your dresser for clean clothes.

Today lunch is beef barley soup and enchiladas. I used to go to a place where they served Mexican food and cloudy green drinks that tasted like salt and lime. Mr. Jasper, who sits across from me, may have been thinking the same thing. In the evening we would sit outside on the patio and talk about ships and worry about ever finding the right girl. I tried to imagine Mr. Jasper in a white uniform with gold epaulettes. Neither of us touched our beef barley soup.

I knew Mr. Jasper or someone like him, or maybe another person altogether during "the War." But which war was it? We were junior officers on the same ship, but whether the ship was gray metal with a white number on her bow, or she was wood and had a painted goddess on her prow, I no longer remember. Perhaps we fired broadsides from huge guns at tiny green atolls, while airplanes with red circles on their wings

banked towards us through black bursts of flack. Another time we built towers on our troop ships, so when the Carthaginian galleys swept alongside, we could shower them with arrows. Who could forget the brilliant blue sea and white sand that circled the harbor, but where was the harbor? San Diego? Piraeus? Nothing matters except the smell of the fresh sea air, which I shall never taste again.

“They sure like them enchiladas,” said a large young woman, who helps us to eat when we become distracted. “Just like we’re in Tijuana.”

Mr. Jasper and I smiled, and I picked up my enchilada before she could cut it for me. No, he is not Ulysses; no Penelope awaits him here. He has drunk from Circe’s cup and will never awaken. But I have sipped the liquor of the gods and danced with a nymph on the edge of the sea. Whether it was at Ensenada or Ostia makes no difference now.

We drank the salty green liquid and ate enchiladas with our fingers, then rinsed our hands in the surf and ran along the beach until the sun set. She was so beautiful, so tan, so close and so warm. Somehow I had persuaded her to drive down the coast in a borrowed car for the afternoon, and she had brought an overnight bag. That was the day I fell in love with the world.

There was a fishing shack where an old woman cooked us lobsters for a dollar and sold us Carta Blanca beer for ten cents a bottle. When we were full and the sand was turning cool, she told us in Spanish how to find our way back to the village. Neither of us knew Spanish, but we followed the beach as she said, just a few feet ahead of the moon swept waves, until we heard music and found our hotel. Mornings then smelled

like fresh sheets, and all our afternoons were full of sunshine. If Lillian were here, I would ask her why things are not like that now.

In the afternoons I sleep or go to crafts. I must sleep more often than I go to crafts, but I don't remember sleeping. I don't remember what I did in the afternoons before I came here. Don't people go to offices and sit at desks? I must have spent a long time doing something, but all those days have disappeared behind me like our wake on the ocean waves. Who can remember a single wave? Only here is life unchanging, like the time before birth or after death.

What I know now is sitting around a big table in our wheelchairs, staring at little piles of beads or colored papers. Crafts are a challenge for people with failing eyesight and nervous disorders. Only Mr. Jasper seems to enjoy them. As long as I have been here, he has been working on a model ship. At least it started out as a ship. He has glued airplane wings from another kit to the plastic hull, and waves it in the air in an imaginary dogfight. He will never finish it. Every day a few more pieces fall onto the floor, to be crunched into the carpet when they roll us back to our rooms "to freshen up" before dinner. No goddesses will call to him over the enchanted waves as we row past their island with covered ears.

Sometimes we go to the doctor. Going to the doctor is an adventure. They wheel us onto a special bus with a ramp that goes up and down. It is always a race to get to the medical arts building before someone has to go to the bathroom. If it happens in the bus, our caregivers have to clean it up; in the doctor's office, well, it's the nurses' problem. That's the rule, our caregivers say. The nurses don't always agree.

Then they roll us two or three at a time to the waiting room, where we sit around like we sit around outside the dining room waiting for our turn to eat. People in waiting rooms are not much fun. Like people in a restaurant ignored by their waiter, they scowl at newcomers, fearing that someone else will be served first.

When Lillian was pregnant the first time, I went with her to all her doctor's appointments. Husbands were not allowed to see the doctor with their wives back then. She was so excited when she burst out after the examination, taking my hands and kissing me and saying, "Everything's fine!"

Nobody says, "Everything's fine" to me now. The doctor asks how I feel in a loud voice, so his nurse can write "no change" on my chart and he can go on to another patient. That way they can get us back on the bus and out of there before somebody has another accident. Doctors were more attentive before they had alimony, second wives, children in college and Mercedes-Benzes to worry about.

"I am having trouble sleeping," I replied.

The doctor and his nurse acted like I had slapped them. It may have been the first time I had spoken since, well, that may come to me someday, too.

"Did we start him on an antipsychotic last time?" the doctor asked the nurse.

"I don't think it's related to the medication," I continued. "It has something to do with a missing person."

"Who?" they asked together.

Her name, I think, is Lillian. Unlike the doctors and nurses when I was a boy, however, they could not hear my thoughts.

They looked at one another again, the nurse wrote something in my chart, and the doctor went on to the next patient. It is lonely sitting in those green rooms, wishing you were somewhere else but not sure where that would be. I am an oracle in a cave that no one enters.

When we ate at the club or a restaurant, she always let me choose the wine. The waiter would pour me a sip, and I would swirl it and smile over the glass at her before tasting. It was one of those games married people have played so long they forget how it started, but I remember. It was at the wedding, when the champagne bubbles went up her nose, and she laughed so hard everyone thought she had drunk the whole bottle.

“From now on, you go first,” she cried and started laughing again.

We only had a weekend together, because the ship was sailing Monday morning. I still remember her on the pier in a light blue dress, pumps and white gloves, waving as happily as if I were leaving to go fishing with the children. That was another time, I think, but she always waved to us from the dock.

There is no wine list here. If you order ice tea, the ice is melted by the time you get it, and the lemon has sunk to the bottom. They serve bright colored vegetables, hard potatoes and chewy meat. It would be difficult to find the right wine for food like this. On the ship the food was much better, and you could see the bright blue ocean through the portholes. We were able to eat by ourselves, too, with white-coated stewards to serve us. If Mr. Jasper were here, he might remember. Perhaps they forgot to wake him up after lunch. Sometimes that happens to me.

When they finally remember to get you, all the food is gone, so they wheel you into the television room to get sleepy again. At night the people on TV yell at each other

about somebody named Bush and what he and his friends are doing in Baghdad.

Baghdad is the city where Aladdin flew on a magic carpet and where Genghis Kahn built a mountain of human skulls outside the city gates. From the way people are insulting each other on television, I think there will be a mountain of skulls beside the city gates before anyone flies there again on a magic carpet.

Sometimes, when they leave me too long in front of the set, the screen goes blank and there is a fuzzy, rushing sound, as if thousands of insects were buzzing against the screen porch of our cabin at the lake. Then I change into an aerial sprite and hover close to the ceiling, where I can see the night nurse playing cards with the male orderly at the nursing station. If I stay near the ceiling, I can slip past them and creep silently through the dark rooms, looking for someone I recognize, someone who can still speak.

“Lillian?” I whispered, but it is not she.

My Lillian did not have an old woman’s white hair and sleep with her mouth open.

And here is Mr. Jasper, staring with yellow eyes at the ceiling. They should draw the blind at night; his face looks like wax in the moonlight. What could he be thinking that makes him forget to shut his eyes? If I had two coins, I would place them over his eyes, so that Charon would row him quickly away on his last voyage.

One of the others is awake.

“Are you Lillian?” I ask?

“Go away,” she says, pulling the sheet up to her chin.

I must look like the angel of death, floating toward her bed. When the children were young, we took them out trick-or-treating on Halloween. When we came home, we all ate candy corn out of the bottoms of their sacks.

“Hey, Walt, man, you gotta go back to your room,” the orderly says, taking my arm.

“We just started,” I complain. “The next house has Hershey bars.”

“Whoa,” he says.

But it is too late. I, who navigated the ship across the wide Pacific, can surely find my way back to the sea. Oh, how I could run, if they had not wrapped me so tightly in plastic.

“That’s cool, Walter, man,” he says, setting me back in the wheelchair. “Let’s get you some medicine so you can sleep.”

I am too old for sleep. I want to be like Mr. Jasper; I want to die.

Why is he fastening the seat belt? Are we going to crash into the wall? Isn’t Tiresias the one who can never die? What was magic draught I took that I should live forever?

The nurse serves me pills in a little paper cup, like a mother setting out candy at a birthday party. I always liked birthdays. Everyone here has forgotten how old they are, and they won’t let us have sparklers. The pills are bitter, especially the green ones. That means they are very powerful.

The days now pass quickly, like waking moments in dreams. A middle-aged woman came to see me, but she could hardly speak. She just sat beside my bed, sobbing

quietly. She looks like someone I might have known once. Why has she ventured into the Sibyl's cave?

“Have you seen Lillian?” I finally asked to break the dismal spell.

“Oh, Daddy, you know she's gone.”

Of course I know she's gone, but where? Outside? Is there still an outside? If I can find a tear in the screen, I will slip away and find her. But then what? Will one of the people in puffy blue gowns catch us in a net, dip us in chloroform and pin us in a glass case? No, I shall never go outside again.

The middle-aged woman showed me pictures of a young man in a black cap and gown. So they still have graduations. I wonder from what. Perhaps he is skilled in medicine, or law, or Slavic languages, or how to align the burial chamber in a pyramid with the North Star.

“You really must behave, Daddy. This is the last place in town we could find for you. Please don't cause any more trouble.”

To show her how passive I am, I stop breathing. When I turn blue, she runs to the nursing station, and a large woman stalks in with an injection. I shall miss lunch again, I fear, but I do not miss company. My forays into society always end badly.

“Just try to be good, Daddy,” she pleads. “Sometimes I think you have forgotten who you are.”

She says that in the loud, self-righteous voice mothers use in supermarkets, when their children are running amuck. The large woman from the nursing station looks at her and nods. I am in for another afternoon alone in my room, with only the banging pipes for company. Like the blind seer, I do not speak because there is no one left to hear.

If you cannot see your own face, how can you know who you are? How can you be sure that you have not turned into someone else? Don't take mirrors for granted. I used to think there was one in the bathroom, but the last time I looked in it, the old man from the next room stared back at me. He hasn't had a haircut in a long time, and his face is lined and gray. His eyes have that shiny look that means he has forgotten who he is. I shall not look in there again.

Have I told you about Sundays? I know it is Sunday, because they wheel us into the TV room to watch Father Lawrence O'Grady, OFM say mass. I am not a Catholic, but that does not matter here. Father O'Grady carries out his sacred duties with the enthusiasm of a car salesman, who knows the people on the lot are just looking. Sometimes he doesn't turn off the TV. Perhaps he lacks self-confidence or doesn't want to miss a moment of "Meet the Press" or Robert Schuller's "Hour of Power."

After he leaves, just before bathroom time or lunch, Bishop L. Tyrone Washington of the New Canaan Church of God comes in with his band, and we really have some fun. They always turn off the TV, because they need the electrical outlet for their synthesizer. Oh, how I hate it if I have to go to the bathroom before lunch on Sunday. When the band plays, I can almost forget what I have lost. But when I turn to look at her and touch her hand, all I see are the pink, staring eyes of strangers, and oh, how quickly the music is over.

In his sermon Bishop Washington says that God is love. If I have known love, then I have known God. So finding Lillian has become my quest for the Holy Grail, my personal search for God. If she existed, then so does He. What does it matter if, as the

middle-aged woman said, she isn't here any more? How long has it been since you saw God?

“Amen, Amen,” I say, while the Bishop and his acolytes unplug the synthesizer and pack up their instruments.

As long as they are here, my caregiver is very patient.

“Good bye, Walter,” the Bishop says, pressing my arm on the way out.

His fingers are so soft and warm.

“See you next time, man.”

“Amen.”

If Lillian were here, I would not be sitting around waiting for the Bishop to return. But she is not here. She is not anywhere anymore. So all I have is her memory and proof of the existence of God.