

AL STAFFETTI

## Mourning

AFTER THOMAS GRAY AND HIS WIFE left their youngest daughter on the campus, they decided to spend the rest of the week on Cape Cod, just the two of them. He chose the scenic road for the short trip, determined to enjoy every minute of their brief vacation, but as soon as some yellow leaves began to strike the windshield he began to wonder about the appeal of fall. On sober second thought it seemed all sorts of snares lurked behind its pleasant languor, like leave taking, unfulfilled expectations, change, regrets, so to chase away the blues he pushed from his mind the specter of war and began to focus on things that should have made him content: all three children doing well in school, everyone healthy (with the exception of a sister-in-law sick on-and-off all year), his job secure and even the stock market showing tentative signs of recovery. Kate, sitting quietly, kept reviewing what she talked about with her daughter, such as the value of balanced meals, a good night's sleep, budgeting, the need for moderation and hoped she left nothing out.

By the time they crossed the bridge to the Cape both began to be aware of the distending, slack quality of the countryside and heavy traffic rushing in the opposite direction as if summoned away, which meant less crowded streets, unhurried shopkeepers and deserted beaches. As they drove a bit further north lean cottages framed by hydrangeas began to appear and then, behind scrub pines, the silky shapes of dunes reclining by the side of the Atlantic and sandy paths leading to them flanked by saltspray roses and ranks of cattails swaying over the hollows. This was the old Cape, relaxed and reflective and beginning to shake off the excesses of summer.

They reached the motel at sunset and while his wife showered, Tom took off his shoes and hurried to the familiar beach, deserted now with only a file of gulls strung along the motel's ridge looking on. As he walked toward the setting sun the tide reached for his feet and a gathering breeze imprinted ghostly trails coursing along beach grasses. From some cottages

snatches of music and children's laughter drifted seaward with occasional puffs from grilled hamburgers sharply individualized in the briny air. Not long ago his own children bent expectant faces over buckets of clams and squealed each time they were sprayed with sea water but kept at their game with endless capacity for fun. He wondered now whether the breeze was strong enough to lift a kite, like the ones tethered to his children's arms not long ago. Those kites bucked and fishtailed in the wind trying to break loose. Just like they all did. Suddenly the breeze turned cold and he started following his dissolving tracks to the motel, looking forward to a hot shower and the drive to the restaurant.

A warm, scented vapor still hung in the bedroom, but he was disappointed to find his wife already fully dressed and staring at each item of clothing she was slowly hanging in the closet. He rubbed his hands together. "You missed a spectacular sunset Kate," he announced, then quickly asked if she reached her sister.

"Yes. All her tests were negative."

"That's great news! Quite a relief for all of them. Well, one more reason to celebrate, don't you agree?"

"Yes, I suppose. But one can never be too complacent."

"That's true," he replied. "Still, I'd say a negative biopsy is good reason for optimism."

"Possibly. But, remember John Denman? You met him and his wife at my school reunion two years ago. She told me he died last week in an automobile accident on his way to work."

"Sure, I remember them. I think they had three children. Am I right?"

"Yes, about as old as ours."

"I'm sorry to hear it." For years he attended those reunions as a reluctant appendage to his wife's presence. He was older than most of his wife's friends, grew up elsewhere and didn't really know anyone, but she looked forward to those reunions and he obliged and tried to be pleasant to everyone. But he was somewhat irritated by the news. He liked his sister-in-law, but she was a careless purveyor of calamities and occasionally managed to cast a pall over things. Still, he hoped the rest of the evening would dissipate the mood and so he prepared for dinner without delay.

There was little change at the Topmast. The same comfortable décor in the dim light: portholes on the walls, aging blocks, wheels and cordage, a pervasive faint scent of bayberry candles and the soft sounds from seated couples as waiters glided between tables. He turned to his wife. "Like a trysting place this evening," but she just smiled without taking in any of it.

They were seated promptly by a cheerful young waiter eager to discuss the menu, but his wife seemed distracted and, when food arrived, she picked at her salad as if each leaf carried an omen.

“Did you know him well?” he finally asked.

“I think so. His cousin Lisa was my best friend.”

“What sort of fellow was he?”

“He was studious and well liked by everyone, but reserved. Always seemed to be rushing on his way somewhere else with his knapsack. He belonged to the chess club and did volunteer work in a nursing home. If you didn’t know him well enough you might have considered him a bit eccentric. Once he stopped traffic in the village to let geese cross Main Street. He lived with his grandmother. His mother died some years earlier and his father worked in another state.”

“That must have been rough.”

She reflected for a moment, then said, “Yes, it may have been. One day he came to school unkempt and depressed, really unusual for him. Lisa thought something might have happened at home. When she finally got him to talk he confided his doubts about the existence of God. He told her he talked to his Pastor but was still upset.”

“The existence of God! How did she handle it?”

“Actually, we all tried. Lisa spoke to a few friends, then all of us got together at his house and talked with him all night.”

Just like that. He was startled by his wife’s matter-of-fact response.

“All night?” He repeated. “Yes. His grandmother fixed something to eat, we called home, lost track of time and remained with him until daybreak.”

“Did it do any good?”

“Maybe. He seemed less troubled afterward.”

Like a restored canvas, part of his wife’s past shed its conventional features and spread a new reality before him, the more compelling for the ordinary way in which it was disclosed. Was this her way of dealing with her feelings about the tragedy or was she revealing a dimension of friendship he never experienced? In any case this unexpected disclosure intruded on the intimate dinner he anticipated.

“The boy’s crisis,” he suggested, “might have been a proxy for more plausible concerns, like the prom, making the football team or even grades, in roughly that order.” She listened passively, looking down at her glass but, even as he spoke, he realized the words he intoned meant to dispel the somber mood, were shallow, inappropriate and somewhat dismissive, quenching further conversation. He knew the hoped-for theme of the evening had been compromised as both shuffled through the rest of the meal and then left.

When they stepped into the cloudless night he stared at the Milky Way, a frozen stream overhead, then reached for her arm. "I do miss the night sky, Kate. Some say the universe is finite but unbounded."

"How so?"

"According to them, it may be like a soap bubble, minus both its interior and its exterior space."

"Tom, I find that hard to imagine."

"Me too. I suppose you can label it with words or describe it with math but you can't visualize it."

Even so on the drive back that notion nagged him as he tried to conceive such a bubble, an effort which made him queasy and, strangely, claustrophobic. It was almost as difficult to reconcile the smiling and untroubled faces he saw once in his wife's yearbook with the images evoked by what she had just revealed. He knew her story called for wise comments, something elegiac perhaps, not his sententious statements that trivialized it. He just wanted to celebrate life this day and, honestly, he couldn't completely share her feelings, but realized the fabric of the evening could not be mended and drove in silence until the tires crunched the clamshells on the motel's driveway.

The bedroom window overlooked the bay that shivered in the moonlight. Kate was asleep almost as soon as she got into bed but he stared at the sea for a while and then in bed he continued to fret about what he had said and left unsaid and meticulously revised each word and phrase until consciousness gave way and he sank into a restless sleep and a familiar dream that drew him to a distant time and a place where he knelt under a mulberry tree with a fledgling which he later nursed until that trembling puff of feathers turned into a lively green-and-yellow finch that he had to leave at summer's end when school began.

In the middle of the night Thomas woke up to the sound of slapping waves at high tide, a massive force tumbling pebbles along the beach. He turned the clock on the nightstand toward the full moon. Three o'clock. Then he heard another sound, subtle and featureless but vaguely human and narrowed the focus of his awareness on that sound until all that remained were muffled systolic pulses in his ears and that sly presence which seemed to emanate from the adjacent bedroom. It must have crept into his dream, a counterpoint to the rhythm of the breaking surf. Fully awake by then, he was able to make out intermittent, discreet voices and sighs until at last he knew what was happening in the next bedroom and that primal sound stimulated a surge of desire. He looked at his wife's shoulders and breasts rising and falling gently under the moonlight, one hand on his pillow, strands of hair fluttering near her lips and the flow of her body under the

sheet. But just then her story flooded his mind and with it a train of disappointment.

What could they all discuss worth remembering during that long night that couldn't fit on the cover of a matchbook? His pastor had not been able to pull it off it seemed, and he was a specialist. Yet the boy was less troubled afterward. That's what she said. But what did she mean? Of course one must take into account the friends' gesture, a fine gesture to be sure, which may have been enough to bring him around. But another possibility to be considered might have been some more concrete expressions of caring. That's it. Nothing could convert dreadful doubts into transports of belief like the prospect of sex. Johnny and his knapsack, a sensitive but troubled visionary. An irresistible combination. The intrusive thought flared for an instant and he tried to blot it out in a spasm of self-loathing. No. He had just been slow to recognize the uniqueness of that distant episode. Only youngsters they were after all, concerned and helpful and trying to tackle the mother of all problems. Successful or not, there was something noble, even heroic, in the attempt. He was deeply moved by this realization, even as he felt mean-spirited by comparison.

Poor Johnny. He must have looked at the stars himself one day, and in a moment of clarity, might have felt as defenseless as a piping plover, just like the one cowering in the sand below the motel window. And after graduation? He may have been ambushed again by doubt, stalking him like a resistant virus. Were friends with him once more? Yet there are worse things. Loss of love or the consequences of a moment's indiscretion can eclipse everything else, including the notion of an absent God. One might even domesticate the thought of death and rehearse it as an event, just like graduation or a birthday, and look on as a detached spectator to witness a parade of grieving loved ones unreeling past as a sepia-tinted version of afterlife. But what if it's a non-event that drops the curtain on itself and all that went before or might come after, without sequels or reruns?

Thomas now wondered whether he knew his family at all. Were his own children bemused in adolescent daydreams or grappling with insoluble riddles? Did he ever notice any of it? His wife, even after twenty years of intimacy, was still a mystery. Playful, desirable and carefree in the beginning, she was transformed into a competent household manager and nurturing mother. Not that he minded this unexpected bonus. But her interests were domestic and practical. Earthbound. And she had puzzling ways of reacting to occasional talk about life and death so that he couldn't tell whether her comments were inspired by fatalism or even condescension. Her self-possession suggested a self-mastery reaching deeper than fashionable posturing. The serenity he found so comforting seemed born of privileged insights,

as if troublesome, fundamental issues had been settled for her, leaving her free to take the true measure of life and face with equanimity its darker side. None of it, it seemed, was learned from text or pulpit. It was more like evolution's endowment, closer to the springs of creation, enabling her to respond to stimuli that eluded his own limited senses. His wife. The bearer of secrets. Like the finch with its racing heart and ruffled feathers. He was able to understand its need for air and nourishment and comfort but its existence was governed by still unknowable directives written in the wind.

Thomas looked at her and felt he was reaching across a great rift for a clearer view of a reassuring reality, uncanny yet somehow benign and congruent with his needs. Perhaps no one had to argue Johnny Denman out of his doubts after all. The intimation of an answer may have been enough.