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Blue Sea and Sails

Jeremy had final stage cancer and eyes sparkling with joy - little blue shining stars that took hold of my attention from day one and held me for a while in his company each time I visited and as he told me episodes of his life and of when he was a young man - a long time ago when Edinburgh was still a humble city, just a few years after the end of the last war. He had been given six months of life and he, like me, attended the day-care unit weekly at a Hospice.

‘I met my wife at the cinema in 1952 and I offered to walk her home so she would be safe’ he started one day. ‘And that’s how my love story began!’ He was gentle and grateful that he had even found real love and had been faithful to it all his life! Not only to his wife, but to his work and his hockey. His eyes lingering over the seascape through the large windowpanes, gauging the strength of the wind out there at sea from the speed of the sails - how long would it take for that boat to move from one windowpane to the next? His keen eyes would follow the boat and know simply by experience. He had been a sea scout when he was a teenager, and his father was a fisherman in any case. He just knew these things.

Marina, sitting next to him was just holding my hand and agreed with him: her father had also worked as a fisherman, but Jeremy and Marina, who were the same age, had never met as children in Leith. Cancer instead had taken them in the same room each week at the end of their lives.

‘My wife and I had a daughter’ he started one day, ‘but I have lost them both some twenty years ago, they also had cancer... First my wife and then, ten years later, my daughter. They have left me an orphan. But I am going to join them soon.’ He added once more ‘soon!’ ‘I don’t know when... soon.’

Each time I returned to the day care unit Jeremy was there, still sitting next to Marina. I noticed how Marina was wasting away, losing weight fast and holding on more strongly to my hand each time like she was looking for help, for strength, she was holding on still looking at the sea next to Jeremy: ‘The wind is strong today...I reckon 40 miles per hour’. And then one day a few weeks later I visited, and Marina had died leaving an empty chair and a bunch of thank-you cards she had created during day-care activities and a small red ribbon glued on one of them. I felt the emptiness.

By that time Jeremy and I had formed a strong connection. He had told me more stories of his life and each time I arrived he caught my eyes, and his eyes sparked a little more and a shy smile widened his wan face - just a moment that only I and him could understand. Faces become familiar and then one time unpredictably you notice a beating heart behind them and tender feelings. Our feelings were mutual and soothing in their innocence. A new friend, a new father figure, perhaps a new love. Though innocent.

Work issues imposed a break to my visits, for some months I could not attend the day care clinic, I could not deliver my poetry sessions to the patients and it felt terribly long and lonely without my new, small community of elderly people. But I often thought of Jeremy and wondered if he was still alive, and prayed for him as I was able to then. Then life brought me there in the clinic as a volunteer during the following bright September – my heart rejoiced when I saw that Jeremy was still there, alive, as he said so beautifully and

profoundly one time – ‘waiting at the airport’ for death to come and reunite him with his dear ones. His eyes still sparked with hope, with endurance. But one thing had slightly changed, he did not smile at me with his usual I-really-like-you-smile. It had gone, far-away over the sea and, though I secretly hurt just a little, I was glad he had been keeping well and was still there waiting. He shined with deep peace, the peace that one feels when he has lived his life well.

Our conversations started again and since he was a good storyteller, he recounted to me again how he had met his wife, and how he had lost both her and their daughter prematurely. I patiently heard those stories again and, once again, he brought from home the poem and old black-and-white photograph where he had featured as a hockey player on the newspaper so many years ago - and I listened tenderly because I liked to listen to him and it seemed so important for him to re-tell his life in episodes, in very short poems and to paint it in bright wax-crayon colours - vivid and heartfelt, starting though to fade to more pastel hues with a touch of melancholy in them. ‘And then one morning a brand-new story started. He told me with some emotion of that lovely lady he had met in the day-care unit who would come to read poems to them and how she had stopped coming to see them - perhaps because of work, he didn’t really know why. How he had missed her and that she lived over there, on the other side of the coast - and his eyes betrayed love, affection and once more another loss. He asked me all the questions one asks new acquaintances and kindly I replied to them all. I listened to him, and later cried alone. The head nurse told me ‘He is still our lovely Jeremy, but he is starting to forget things and people.’ For me it was as if I was losing my father and maybe he felt he had lost yet another daughter. And he kept waiting for his flight to take him home where his loved ones were waiting for him, longing to be re-joined with them.

That was the last time I saw Jeremy, and his eyes still catch me sometimes in my dreams. An old friend, a passing little love that I do miss sometimes. Poetry connects people, its spark jumps from heart to heart and gifts love. And Jeremy was for sure a powerful poet and a humble storyteller, enduring in the love he had carried all his life. ‘In *his* body *he* felt no pain. / When straightening up, *he* saw the blue sea and sails.’ (Czesław Miłosz, ‘Dar’ [‘Gift’], 1955, my changes)

Commentary to ‘Blue Sea and Sails’

‘Blue Sea and Sails’ is a recollection of images and thoughts I had whilst working as a volunteer in a palliative care day-unit clinic in a Hospice. It was there that my interest in shifting my academic research attention to storytelling and poetry developed, which brought me, in the long run, to operate and serve in organisations that support the most marginal fringes of society: the ill, the homeless, the poor, through the rethinking of public organisations that may approach people in a person-centred manner to put at the centre the dignity of each human person. In this way, a patient in palliative care, in the example from this short story, may gain ability and freedom to voice their life story and prepare physically, as well as spiritually to die in dignity. Poetry reading and discussion when shared in a group of two or more people, create aural-oral exchanges that may most powerfully turn into tools able to enhance and transform spiritual and mental well-being and help dying patients come to terms with the changes that end of life brings to

us. In the short story the central character, Jeremy, not only is able to view in hindsight the whole of his life in a series of episodes, feeling again the love and emotions he felt during his life, but he can also find the strength to wait with faith for his ‘flight’ that will re-join him to his loved ones. The same faith he showed during his long beautiful and faithful life – this is what brings him peace. He is also able to add more love to his life experience, by secretly ‘falling in love’ again in a very innocent and elderly affectionate way with the therapist who, each week, listens to his stories. And very innocently and secretly he is corresponded in his affection, which seems to be fatherly rather than romantic. The whole story unfolds in front of those large windowpanes that overlook the sea and add a nostalgic note to the memories of those dying patients, Jeremy and Marina, linking them back to their childhood and their love for the sea and for life.

Note: Although my work experience as a researcher and volunteer therapist in poetry and storytelling in the field of palliative care had a strong influence in the writing of this short story, all names and life details herein contained are fictitious and completely coincidental, and based liberally on my own life details, and my own poetry readings and other texts I read and listened to. This short story is influenced particularly by the poem ‘Dar’ [‘Gift’] written by Czesław Miłosz, one of my most loved poets of the 20th century.

