

Sending Out a Signal

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When the hourglass is turned over, the sands of time begin to pass through the aperture of our narrow and finite existence. And when the sand runs out, all that was written has been said.

Our life began when I visited Cairo, the city of ten thousand mosques and an indeterminate number of souls. She was born and lived where the street merchants doggedly sell their wares, where the artisans pound and tap tin metals into useful shapes, where the tentmakers assemble textiles from all over the world to stitch into designs for the home and body, and where the bakers, the chestnut roasters, the itinerant tea sellers and the street cooks keep everyone going day after day. Not long after I left this magical and ancient place, she followed, and the hourglass turned over as our new life together began.

I wasn't thinking of time when she arrived. On the contrary, everything was focused on the here and now. We adjusted to each other in a time and space continuum now occupied by two. It wasn't constant bliss by any account, but it also wasn't long, perhaps a month or two, before I had forgotten what it was like to have ever lived alone, as if she had been with me all along. We were in love and settled into a harmonious, Rockwellian coexistence, where the light was always on and the hearth warm when I arrived home at the end of a long day.

And so, our time slipped by, with water passing unnoticed under the bridge and the sand in the hourglass chasing its increasingly larger and former self through the aperture.

Like in the very beginning, I can clearly recall the regrettable end as I lay by her side. For weeks, her condition worsened. First it was a loss of energy, then abdominal pain, then a trip to the doctor, then the discovery of a tumor, and then a second tumor, and the tumors grew and no matter what medical remedy we tried, they persisted. There began a rapid loss of weight followed by my deep desire for her appetite to return, for the gastro-intestinal pain to abate so that her body could pull itself back up. But when this did not happen, her complexion became

more ashen and her eyes bespoke something we both knew, that the end was near. The spirit wanted to remain, but the body was no longer able to house it.

Death crept into our home as a draft exploits the jams of doors and windows. I tried everything I knew to keep it away; specialists, medications, herbal and natural concoctions of all sorts, and then prayer, which always played the role of last resort for me in times of trouble. The tumors were taking their toll and Margaret had been so reduced that I was now hand feeding her, counting the limited calories I could coax her to swallow.

Meanwhile, concerned friends had insisted that I break away one evening to join them at a nearby cafe to sing around an upright piano played by an elderly woman I can only describe as the Woman of La Mancha. Her wayward soul in search of good deeds lead her into and then back out of the convent, followed by a career of caregiving to the afflicted elderly while teaching music to young children. That evening in the little Montenegrin cafe near our home, Ann, in whose retirement volunteered to play show tunes on the mostly out of tune upright, coaxed half of us to sing along to the Great American Songbook while the other half looked on with encouragement and possibly some astonishment. We laughed, drank wine and feasted on burek, the baked phyllo dough pastries filled with cheese, spinach and beef, for which Deta's Cafe was best known. Unbelievably, I had momentarily forgotten Margaret's advancing and impending demise that had not but a few months prior transformed and consumed my entire existence.

She was still asleep when I returned, exactly as I had left her, unaware that I had escaped for a few hours of levity. Somewhere from within I knew intuitively that those hours at the cafe were a gift to rejuvenate and strengthen me for what was to come. Later, during the night, she appeared to me during a vivid dream asking how much longer she needed to suffer the agony of her bodily pain. When I told her I did not know, she pleaded with me to release her from it. "Help me, please!," she lamented in agony, "I beg to be freed from the pain. I don't think I can

take it much longer.” When morning arrived, I felt certain that it was somehow her or a part of her I had met during the night and that while she had refrained from saying so explicitly, some part of her already knew that there was no recovering; her time to leave this earthly realm was drawing nigh.

Incidentally, on this new and sunny summer day, I could not so much as coax her to eat or drink anything. When I propped her up to take in some water, all she could do was look at it and then me with a forlorn nod, before letting her gaze drift into a thousand yard stare somewhere over my right shoulder. It crushed my heart to see her like this. Softly I pleaded with her to try to at least drink, yet each time she looked at me with her loving and sad eyes before turning her head away slowly in resignation as she lay in bed.

Rejecting now water, the essence of all life, I became convinced of what I knew needed to happen. Ruminating on the “what-ifs” of her recovery no longer held sway over my heart and mind, especially given the foreshadowing dream and the previous evening at the cafe. It all seemed like a message, an undeniable and explicit message. Margaret had been given medication to make her more comfortable, which up to this point had been administered sparingly. I returned to her bedside with the ampule, woke her from her now almost continuous state of sleep, and motioned to her to discern if she wanted more. She lifted her head ever so slightly with a nod in the affirmative. I then prepared the injection. When drawing the liquid, I again looked at her, and then to the ampule with the needle inserted, and made a gesture to stop, whereupon she faintly said, “more.” Reluctantly, I modestly increased the dosage and paused. “More, she said, this time louder, “More, dammit” and then began to weep. In that moment, the anger at her condition felt like the last ounce of fight she had within her failing body.

“More,” again she whispered, and I pulled even more liquid into the needle. Then she weakly gestured with her right hand as if to say, “come closer” but instead whispered “don’t stop.”

I emptied the ampule into the needle and then the needle into her. Her deep green eyes I had known so well gazed at me with such longing and love like I had never seen before, a gaze that both unnerved me and demonstrated something I have since been unable to describe in words. Her eyes conveyed both a surrendering to the fight and a sacred truth that love was all around us. The filtered sunlight entering the room created a translucent and still atmosphere as moisture gathered first in the corners of her eyes where the previous tears had dried. Still in this fixed and motionless state, she lifted her head as if to pull me toward her, and without a blink, a final tear was released, tracing the route downward where the others before it had traveled.

There was no turning back now. I helped her to readjust her body comfortably in the bed and spontaneously decided to locate my copy of Kahlil Gibrahm's "The Prophet." There had to be some sort of ritual to this, for both of us, something that I did not think I would want until this moment but now somehow felt was both ancient and necessary.

"The stream has reached the sea, and once more the great mother holds her son against her breast.

Fare you well, people of Orphalese.

This day has ended.

It is closing upon us even as the water-lily upon its own tomorrow.

What was given us here we shall keep,

And if it suffices not, then again must we come together and together stretch our hands unto the giver.

Forget not that I shall come back to you.

A little while, and my longing shall gather dust and foam for another body.

A little while, a moment of rest upon the wind, and another woman shall bear me.

Farewell to you and the youth I have spent with you.

It was but yesterday we met in a dream.

You have sung to me in my aloneness, and I of your longings have built a tower in the sky.

But now our sleep has fled and our dream is over, and it is no longer dawn.

The noontide is upon us and our half waking has turned to fuller day, and we must part.

If in the twilight of memory we should meet once more, we shall speak again together and you shall sing to me a deeper song.

And if our hands should meet in another dream, we shall build another tower in the sky."

Her eyes remained open as I read, and a few more tears gathered but did not fall from her lower eyelids and onto her cheeks, but remained there instead as individual droplets on this last remaining plain of soft flesh as her spirit prepared to leave.

"And a cry came from the people as from a single heart, and it rose the dusk and was carried out over the sea like a great trumpeting.

Only Almitra was silent, gazing after the ship until it had vanished into the mist.

And when all the people were dispersed she still stood alone upon the sea-wall, remembering in her heart his saying,

A little while, a moment of rest upon the wind, and another woman shall bear me."

I turned toward her and saw that she was gone, her deep green eyes still fixed upon mine, moist with tears, her final gaze in this earthly realm. Her release filled me with a momentary sense of peace, which quickly transformed into a crushing sadness, a flood of emotion quaking in every part of my now trembling body. The reality of her being gone started to set in. Gone as in gone. Not gone to the grocery store to return later, not gone to work to return home for an evening cuddled up on the couch, listening to the sounds of birds, children playing, cars passing in the distance, but gone from this world. Permanently gone, or so it felt.

Later in the day, the sadness digressed into anger and then back into and sadness, but mostly anger. Why did I have to go through this? Why did she come into my life when I would only have two years with her? Why does there have to be bodily death and why do we humans

have to go through this? I was shouting these questions loud enough for the neighbors to hear if they happened to be listening, even if God wasn't.

It then occurred to me that I should have some sort of say in the matter, rationalizing to myself that I was owed something for all the suffering I have had to put up with down here on Earth. Not that I was or am the only person to put up with the struggles of life, but my struggles had to be worth something to someone other than myself. So I issued the following demand to that or it or they who inhabit the realm where I imagined Margaret now dwelled:

“To Whomever I know is listening. I am not exactly sure how this works or what lay beyond the veil of our earthly lives, but I have lived long enough to know that I am not alone. I know I have been helped and this knowing leads me to conclude that you know how I am feeling right now. I also feel like you owe me something for all that I have had to put up with down here, so with all due respect, this is more of a demand than a request. Because I am not where Margaret is and I believe you are, I need you to make sure that her soul is conveyed safely to wherever she is intended to go. Above all, I do not want her to be afraid or alone during any part of this transition. You know that I am unable to do this myself, in which case I would not be making this demand. But because I am here and she is there, I have no other choice but to burden you. So thank you in advance for your help.”

A short time later, deep sleep overcame me and when I awoke early the next morning, it was as if I were regaining consciousness from an extended torpor, such that I did not immediately recollect Margaret's passing the previous day or the misery that had been my life for months. But then, a wave of memory jolted my spirit back into reality and my flesh into tension. It didn't seem that falling back to sleep would be possible, while at the same time, it was too early to start the new day, the first of many to come without Margaret, so there I remained, devoid of drive to do anything.

My thoughts were on her as I looked up at the blank ceiling. Was she with me, floating above in the room, looking down at my miserable state? Had the friends I imagined I had on the other side fulfilled my demand to care for her soul during her journey from here to wherever she was going? Was there even a journey for her to make, a destination to reach? We all have different myths about the hereafter but let's face it, no one really knows for sure. I would like to believe that there is something that follows, but all I could say for sure was that she was no longer with me here.

The more I thought of her permanent removal from my life, the more sorrow I felt and the more my heart raced, my palms sweat and my stomach turned. I considered what could be done to manage this, such that I would be able to soldier on into the new day and the days that would follow. Meditation came to mind. I could try to perform the many manifestations of what has been described in the "Relaxation Response," "The Power of Now," and countless other books and traditions. What I knew of these processes was that they could lead the practitioner into a state of well being, even though I had not experienced much of any such success in my previous attempts. Still, if there was ever a time to try, now was really that time.

So I began to visualize my way into meditation, first by clearing out all images and imagining a dark and empty space. This proved easy to accomplish as it was still dark in the room and I was alone in a space that felt as empty as empty can be, especially so now that Margaret was gone. With my eyes closed, I remained in this empty place for but a few moments until thoughts of her began to form. The more I resisted, the more they came. "She's gone, she's gone....why.....why did she come into my life in the first place....why must we go through this, why must I go through this now....I can't believe she's gone." Then the thoughts of anger began to form around Margaret's demise with thoughts of cancer and the words of the doctor who assured me that with his treatments she would be fine. I realized now that the empty, dark

and imageless place I had just constructed was no longer empty.

Should I focus and fight back these images or just wait and let them pass through me, I wondered? When neither seemed likely to work, my mind happened upon another idea; to send out a signal to her. Yes, the idea of reaching out gave me hope in a space otherwise filled with anything but, and to my pleasant surprise, this hope immediately extinguished all of the negative thoughts and images that had invaded my dark and empty space.

Now the only thought present was how to go about sending out the signal. Instantly, an answer came: but of course, I will construct an antenna through which to transmit the signal, an antenna so large as to dwarf the tallest skyscraper. I started with a flat surface, still dark, but solid, flat ground or hard baked earth or stone, it didn't matter, so long as it was firm, unmovable and able to support. Once this was established, all of the space above and around it was the universe, the vast, empty space without end or shape, which was easy to construct. Now, I needed the transmitter. I thought of the pre-launch form of a space shuttle, the tall, narrow, conical structure that we so often see surrounded by scaffolding. In short, a rocket, powerful and able to leave Earth. Yes, this, but instead, it is an antenna of this general shape that emerges from the ground like the birth of a tree, breaking through the solid, intractable surface. And with a vigor and vim representative of its inherent power, it grows and grows, taller and higher, reaching out into the vast universe, providing a structure and shape, the only one in my vision. It reaches a height several orders of magnitude taller than any man made tower and has a rocket look about it, except no painting or decals. It's solid metal, gunmetal, cold and only somewhat visible, but very powerful in my dark and empty space. Feeling rather pleased with my design, I was ready for the next step.

Time to transmit. First and foremost was my desire to know if she was out there and OK. So this became my message. "Margaret, are you there? Please respond if you are." As this

couplet was repeated, the antenna emitted electrical impulses in the way of three oscillating lines, up and out into the nothingness from its tip. The pulsating lines radiated out of sight without resistance into the vast universe, in the way we understand light to do, traveling through emptiness without obstruction, encompassing everything everywhere above the ground upon which I gazed at my masterpiece creation. In short, I was satisfied.

But then, a very unexpected thing occurred that was not of my creation, for as with the antenna, the ground and the dark empty space about, I did not conceive it. From within the darkness out and beyond the antenna, a window opened, a portal if you will. What started as a speck of light quickly opened and expanded into a rectangular window about the size of one you would find on a house, but without panes or sashes. Instead the opening was filled with light, bright white light, brighter than I could have imagined it to be or to have created for myself. Naturally, I was drawn to the light. And as I drew my attention to it, I saw into and beyond the light and onto a scene of what I can only describe as The Peaceable Kingdom. I beheld a garden with a hundred shades of green I had never seen so brilliant before; grass, flowers, bushes and trees, all in perfect form and vitality. The same went for the sky above; a brilliant shade of blue background suspending perfectly formed bilious baroque clouds which only loosely resembled what I had seen before. Then I saw animals of several sorts, small and large, mammal and bird, playing with each other. I saw squirrels, rabbits and other small creatures being chased by cats and dogs not to kill, but in a friendly game of tag. I sensed the rabbits and squirrels enjoyed being chased and the dogs and cats enjoyed the chasing, but no one was going to suffer, that much I just knew, in a comprehensive knowing that eliminated the need for belief.

I gazed upon this, completely transfixed and momentarily without any thought of or for Margaret until she arrived at the edge of the portal, looking out toward me and the antenna which was still transmitting the signal. “Who is calling to me?,” she asked without opening her mouth.

Strange as this may seem, her communication was telepathic, seemingly through the eyes.

Without thinking how, I responded with “it’s me.”

“Oh,” she said, “It’s so good to hear your voice! How are you?”

Surprised by the inquiry into my state of being, I responded with,

“I’m OK. Well, actually no, I am not OK. I have been sad and worried about you ever since you left.”

“There’s no need to worry, I am doing fine. In fact, it’s really great here. I am doing much better than I was at the end before I left you.”

There was no doubt about it, she was in a great place. If I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes; a beautiful bucolic scene with animals frolicking about as if I were looking upon some famous painting by Edward Hicks, I would not believe it. She loved nature, so I could only imagine that this was paradise for her.

“I am so happy to hear this and to see you are doing well,” I responded.

“Listen, I am so glad you are here because I have been wanting to tell you how much I enjoyed our time together. You are such a loving person and I feel blessed to have found you when I did. I will never forget what we had, you can be assured of this. And thank you for taking care of me, especially at the end.”

“You are welcome, but there is no need to thank me. I have enjoyed every minute and will always treasure our time together.”

In the background, the playful activity of the animals increased. They were now appearing closer to where she stood at the edge of the window and I could see them running around near her feet.

“Sorry to have to do this, but I need to get back to the animals and the to the game we are playing. Thank you again for everything. I will always love you.”

“Yes, yes, I totally understand, you should get back. I will always love you too.”

And with this, instantly and abruptly the portal closed and I found myself back in the dark place I had created, alone but with my extinguished, no longer transmitting antenna. Immediately, the anguish I had for her uncertain condition washed away from me and with it came a feeling of relief for her happiness and well being. This however was short lived, for once my thoughts had left her, they returned upon my own self, and a new weight pulled me deeper into the void I had created. I didn't need to be told that I would hereafter be denied access to her and her Peaceable Kingdom. This was a one time pass and I was back on the outside. While seeing her safe and sound had relieved me of further concern for her welfare, I still needed to reconcile going forward in my own life without her. It seemed an unsurmountable task, and still being in the dark void made me feel incredibly alone. All I could sense now was my consciousness trapped and free-falling in the black formless space, being pulled down lower by my own torment, devoid of limbs to reach out to grab onto something and sight to see that which was around me.

With increasing velocity, I was approaching a level of despair bordering madness, when suddenly an external force imposed itself upon my racing mind for me to shift my attention to the right. Not feeling possessed of a body, I imagined one and how I would rotate to the right a quarter turn of a circle. Thus turning, I began to perceive something I had known before, something from my childhood. It started as the most gentle breeze barely perceptible upon cheeks, which I now felt I had. Discerning further as a curious animal lifts its ears or nose to a new sound or smell, I too extended my senses toward the feeling. Gradually, it increased such that I knew it was the soft bellows of gentle wind. Then came a feeling of dampness upon the skin, a pleasant humidity carried by the air, which bespoke life. Included in this air came a smell of trees, grass and plant life, which I also instantly associated from my earliest childhood memories, as if I were experiencing my olfactory for the first time. I had long since forgotten the

feel and smell of vegetal life but knew that it must be spring or early summer. How many times since my early days had I taken this for granted? Or did I just not perceive it any more, much as the white noise of my urban life?

Youthful curiosity drew me further toward the moist, warm air and the smell of green leaves and earth. It enveloped me and became my companion in the void. No longer descending, I continued to fix my consciousness to the right, into the humid, life bearing wind, and as I remained there, a new sense awakened. Ever so faintly, a threadlike line appeared in the center of the void. At first, my sight was blurred, but then it focused upon the barely perceptible thin line in the distance. The line revealed itself first as dark gray, then dark red. As the light increased, it became blood orange, and then a more distinct rich and brilliant orange with other shades of color beginning to form around it. At that moment, I realized I was witnessing the dawn of a new day. And while Margaret was no longer with me, I knew that this is where I belonged. And so, with a newborn sense of excitement, I turned the hourglass over and stepped forward boldly and without reservation, into the unwritten, unmanifested potential that is our unique gift to receive.