

This Land: Wreck of the Old 97

You never know. Nor should you take it for granted. Coming home, that is. Getting home, that is. Opening the door and finding inside someone looking forward to you coming home.

Many of us have experienced watching someone endure long, gradual, and prolonged dying. Sometimes it even gets to the point where the family starts secretly praying for mom to hurry up and get it over with. I remember a great fellow with a huge belly laugh who was slowly dying. Leonard wasn't afflicted by any acute presenting disease except old age and him completely worn out from a good, productive, full life. His family kept near in vigil, his wife in the chair bedside. Him asking with a smile: "Hey, when is this going to happen?"

There is that type of dying, then there happens the God-awful abrupt disappearance.

Life turning on a dime. One day normal. Then in a cruel moment the loved one is gone. A car accident. A madman with automatic weapons committing a massacre. A bank robbery gone wrong. A tree limb crushing him. Allergic to a bee sting or peanut butter. The insurance agencies may designate such deaths as caused by God, an 'act of God.' No, no, no. Stop that superstitious nonsense please. God ain't Zeus toying with us. God ain't even a being.

Remember, I'm a God professional (well, kind of), so stop blaming God for the suffering we can rightly blame on ourselves and our choices, on others and their choices that affect us, or when nature just does what nature does. Don't look to the skies when you want to find a cause for human suffering. More often than not, look into a mirror.

My biggest problem isn't them, she, or thee
The one to blame, indeed, is me

There is a story I of a man who met a fool one day. The man was on a quest to fill an aching and lonely soul. He sought that fountain from which he could drink and if not recover the passion and thrill of his youth could at least induce a stupor of forgetfulness, not unlike the lotus. But as he searched he stumbled more and more, for with each step searching for this love to fill him he became clumsier and clumsier. His clumsiness caused him to trip and stub his toe, to bloody his shins and conscience, but worse, to damage and hurt others to whom he turned to fill himself, thinking them the answer. Only then when anger and hurt became abrupt did he gradually realize it wasn't his place to use others in the guise of being kind or playful. That is when the fool in the mirror turned up his mouth in a sad smile of recognition, as a tear dribbled down his cheek.

I have begun to think of the theological concept of the rapture in these terms of loved ones suddenly disappearing. I reject that silliness perpetrated by some churches that the all the good Jesus people will one day be raptured up to heaven while the rest of us get left behind to slog it all out. No, no, no. I suggest our Bible writers were reminding us how suddenly our

loved ones can disappear. Funerals happen in a blink of an eye. Having been with death for my career, I also have begun to believe that on our deathbed it will be very similar to when we return from a wonderful vacation, wake the next morning, and wonder if it every happened at all.

Did it ever take place?
Memory the only trace?
Days and nights seem a fantasy
Figures in mists so hard to see
Times spent, trips taken
Was it really real then?
So I suspect it will seem
All before a wispy dream
On my deathbed when death befalls
Did my life ever happen at all?
Did them and that ever happen at all?

Consider all of the widows and widowers of the Twin Towers coming back to their home, their uptown apartment in abject shock. There in the corner are his running shoes he kicked off before showering and taking the subway to work. His towel is still damp. There's the coffee cup beside the sink with a smudge of her lipstick. The husband lies down on their bed and there on her pillow he breathes deep her scent from this morning. How do you sleep when her imprint is still there? No fun an empty bed tonight when last night it wasn't.

Too many ghosts haunt his nights
Friends and lovers gone from sight
The vision of one most special
Of times most sentimental
Is a ghost that often comes and appears
If only he could reach out and hold her dear

There once was a wonderful man, himself a physician, who was dying from cancer. A well-meaning but inept rookie chaplain visited his room on the oncology floor of the hospital and suggested that since he was getting close, he probably should say to his family what he would want to say to them. The man shook his head and smiled: "We've been saying it all our lives."

A pretty good way to live. And a very good way to die. Neither morbid nor maudlin. Just reality. Just wise.

Each moment a life. Lest we take it and them – both the moments and them --for granted. Lest we assume we will come home today.

Sad, indeed, not to cherish this daily attitude. Sad to let it go too late. The hauntings of 'too late.' The ghosts of what wasn't said or did or shared or experienced. The spectre of 'should've.' The love not savored when the moment cries out for love. The kiss not kissed. The thank you left unspoken. The touch held back. The words you assumed were known but weren't because you never spoke them. Or wrote them.

Appointments, I've heard, don't wait for tomorrow.

Earlier today while visiting Danville, Virginia, and trying to chase down the location of a horrific train wreck a century ago, I finally pulled into the Dan River Park. Hundreds of moms and dads and kids were strolling uphill toward the minor league ball park to catch an evening ballgame. Little boys and girls carried their mitts just in case. Just in case, because you never know when you just might catch a foul ball.

Around the corner from all this life and delight, was the site of the train wreck killing eleven and injuring seven on September 27, 1903. The wreck of the Old 97. Pushing the locomotive to make up lost time, the train failed to navigate the Stillhouse Trestle. She flew off her rails.

Some disasters were born to inspire ballads. Woody Guthrie was among the hundreds to sing this ballad with lyrics that offer good loving advice for all us to heed and follow. It sure doesn't help to be in such a hurry you never come home. It sure does help to make sure when your lover must leave you, they know how you feel about him, her.

*He was a-going down the grade making ninety miles an hour
And his whistle begin to scream
And we found him in the wreck with his hand on his throttle
And scalded to death by the steam*

*Well, ladies, you can all take warning
From this time now and on
Never speak harsh words to your true loving husband
He might leave you and never return*