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A Solitary Stem*

I HATE THE SIGHT OF A SOLITARY LONG STEM in a vase. Last night, my neighbor brought me one, a long stem with a yellow rose on top, in a narrow tubular vase. If a flower is part of a bunch, it gets support from the left and the right and doesn't move around easily. But a solitary rose has no mass, it will lean against the side of the vase since it can't stand on its own without support.

"Everybody believes in death, but no one remembers it," what nonsense, I marked my place in the book and closed it. At my age the only thing you can remember is the end. These writers pen such nonsense. I let my glasses slide off and hang around my neck as fatigue closed my eyes. In traveling through life you reach a stage where fatigue dominates the day. You wake up tired, you're tired in the afternoon. Only at night, during sleep, if you're lucky to get any, do you really get rid of this fatigue. I slid my feet off the footrest and opened my eyes to get up when I saw the lonely rose sitting in the vase. I'm like her now. Plopped in a vase, alone, old, can't even stand erect without support. One day this rose will wilt and the petals will fall, one by one. I arranged the flowers I'd picked from my garden in the morning around this lone stem. See how the stem stands erect with a little support, it doesn't need support from the vase anymore.

I moved to Florida about twenty years ago. I was sixty when Jim died. John was thirty then. You could sense his bright future even at that age. Actually it was John who suggested that instead of living alone in New York, I move to Florida. He really cares for me. This proved to be a good decision. New York is really a jungle. I wasn't able to match its pace even when I was young, the city would have crushed me in my old age. John's suggestion was good. The weather in Florida is great. I hated New York's snowy winters. In Florida, I got rid of my asthma, but the humidity stirs my gout every now and then.

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Well, half the day is already gone. Since this morning, I had some milk and some bread, did some gardening, and read part of a book. What do I do now? “What do I do now” is *the* dominant question of my life these days. There was a time when this question didn’t even exist. There used to be a long list of things to do. I had to attend to the more urgent ones first, while dozens of others waited their turn somewhere in my subconscious. But at this age, wondering “what do I do now” is a serious occupation. Can I just spend the rest of my days in a chair with a feeding tube in my mouth connected to a never-ending magical drink at the other end, a book or television in front of my eyes, taking a sip, reading a page. Pages turn, the days pass, years advance and then the curtain draws. But no, this existence would meet its punishment. Since the first dawn, the sun has had to set as well. As for me, I still have the same problem to solve “what do I do now?”

Let me fix something for dinner, that will use some time. For lunch I can eat some fruits and vegetables. I opened the fridge and saw a tin of cat food. While “Salomi” was alive I tasted her food once or twice, just like that. It was so delicious that even though she’s gone now, I still buy some of this food. The girls at the supermarket see it and often ask about Salomi. Why do they have to poke their noses into others’ affairs? Goddam these pharmacists, there’s no money left after the medicines. This cat food is so cheap. Just fry the onions lightly, add a little salt and make a stew. It tastes so good. I didn’t get a new pet after Salomi. When John stays away for a long time, I’m not bothered by remembering him that often, but when he visits and then goes back it really hurts. I wouldn’t need a pet if John could come. It would be so wonderful if John was here. Poor thing, he must be so busy with his work. He has a nightmare for a wife. I’m civil with Martha, at least to her face. Otherwise she’s really a witch. John was here just two years ago, but it has been three months since he called. I’ll call him myself today. Maybe not, it’s better if he calls. He must be very busy that he hasn’t been able to call. Why should I intrude when he’s so busy. What if I call and Martha picks up?

Is the phone ringing? If the phone doesn’t ring for days your acoustic perception changes. Anticipation lowers the acuity. Loneliness has its own decibel range. When every sound raises the hope of the phone ringing, phantoms fool your hearing often. When the phone really *does* ring, it’s too late before you realize it. I opened the fridge door, my attention still mostly on the phone. In my haste, I stumbled and fell on the carpeted floor. Dear God, did I break a bone? Only two fears lurk in the shadows of my existence now, breaking my hip bone or having a stroke. I left all my other fears

behind somewhere, or conquered them. Fear changes its form with age: as a toddler, it is fear of separation; during one's youth, it is fear of getting caught; and during midlife, it is fear of being left alone. I have now landed at the highest step of the fear ladder. No, my hip wasn't broken, but by the time I leaned on the sofa to stand up, the phone stopped ringing. Tears filled my eyes. Who called, will he call again? I closed the fridge, sat next to the phone stand and put the phone in my lap. I was right, within a minute it rang again. The tone sounded like a Beethoven symphony, refreshing my soul. How do the deaf deal with it?

"Hello," I picked up the receiver.

"Hello, Mom." The sound of John's voice was like raindrops in the desert of loneliness. I was so overwhelmed, I couldn't answer immediately.

"Mom, Mom, are you there?"

"Yes, John, how are you?" I wiped my eyes and tried to keep my voice steady. It felt as if Salomi had come into the room, jumped in from the open window. A familiar scent filled the room.

"I called a few minutes ago but no one answered." This was more a comment than a question. Couldn't he have said, "You didn't pick up the phone earlier, were you all right?"

"Sorry, I was in the bathroom. How are you John?"

"I'm OK, Mom." There was a pause after exchanging the initial pleasantries, with silence on both ends. A mother and her son, who haven't seen each other for more than two years, who haven't spoken on the phone for three months, were pausing after only a minute of conversation. What could we have talked about? My finances, my health, my old age.... These were all topics where sentences could become tangential. You could drop the ball, it could bounce in any direction, someone might get embarrassed, the call might get disconnected prematurely. Let's limit our conversation to safer subjects.

"How's the Florida weather, Mom?"

"It's good son, not too hot, not too cold, stays the same (just like its citizens, I wanted to add but couldn't). How about New York?"

"New York is good as well. Weather has been great this year. The winter has been mild, it isn't as extreme as we're used to getting." He laughed loudly.

"How's Martha?" I couldn't resist.

"What can I say, Mom, she's OK. But she's so different than me; she doesn't help me at all, spends like crazy!"

"Come on, she's not all that bad." I knew that as long as I took her side, John would speak openly. As soon as I shared my true feelings about her, he would retreat into his domestic harmony and defend her. It's a strange

sensitivity. One can disparage one's own relatives, but as soon as anyone else says something, it goes sour. We played this game for a few more sentences.

"Why don't you guys take a vacation. You both work so hard. Once you spend some extended time with each other you'll learn to be more tolerant and round off your sharp corners."

"Mom, we went to northern Canada last year, we came back early."

"Came back early?"

"Yeah. She wanted to go to California, I loved northern Canada. The whole vacation, we fought. Here we only fight sometimes because we don't see each other all day, there we fought all the time."

"So, why not go to California?"

"I'm thinking about it, we might go next month for a week. I'm trying my best Mom."

"Why don't you guys have any kids yet, it will put some stability in her personality?"

"Who'll raise the kids?"

"You both will, *of course*."

"No Mom, neither of us has time. And there isn't enough money to hire a full-time babysitter."

"But John ..."

"Come on Mom, just drop it."

Conversation must be limited to an agenda set by only one party!

"Mom, do you get lonely" he asked, reluctantly.

"Oh no son, why would I get lonely. Being alone gives personal freedom, like a single long stem in a vase."

"A single stem in a vase?" He couldn't understand.

"Yes, alone and graceful, just like a single stem in a vase." I said more than I intended.

I don't know if he got it. The line became quiet for a while. I felt Salomi leave the room again.

"Why do you ask, are you planning to visit?" What made me say that, I cursed myself. I'd rehearsed this phone call in my mind and promised myself I wouldn't ask that question. Why did my tongue slip then? Does self-control weaken with age? Am I returning to my childhood? I used to even drool then if I didn't get my favorite chocolate.

"Mom, you know how busy I am. If I get even a minute, I'll fly to you." I felt he was prepared for this question. Had his shield ready, as soon as he saw the arrow, he raised it.

And that northern Canada, California, some things are dangerous to repeat.

"Your room is ready, just the way you left it *two* years ago." My voice

lingered on the words “two years,” making sure the message was conveyed before moving on.

“Has it really been that long?” he wondered out loud. This was enough, I thought he would try to forget what he heard.

“You can come whenever you want. I’ve even hung some shirts that are your size in the wardrobe. Even if you arrive unannounced, everything will be ready.”

“Mom, you know...” The incomplete sentence finished his reply. All excuses, all reasons for not coming were in that incomplete sentence. Now it was up to me to choose whatever excuse I liked.

“Yes, John, I understand.”

“Mom, how’s the weather there?”

“You already asked about it, John!”

“Really, it slips my mind when you talk about so many things.”

“So many things?” Warning bells started ringing. Visiting time is finished, grab all you can.

“John have a baby, are you waiting for me to die. Am I going without even seeing my grandchildren?” My emotions dropped all the wrappings. Maybe, maybe he’ll understand my feelings, if he has any of his own.

“See, you repeated a question as well.” He laughed to lighten the mood. Time passes quickly if the conversation goes as you want it to, otherwise it just hangs there, suspended in confusion.

“Mom, Martha is so worried about her figure, she doesn’t want any kids right now. How’s your diet and eating?”

Cans of cat food came to mind.

“Diet is good son. See, I’m eighty, but such strong bones, don’t break even from a fall. John, did you get promoted?”

John tensed on the phone, like a mouse sensing a cat around. My next question might be trickier. He thought to nip it in the bud.

“I can hardly hear you now, Mom, are you walking with your phone? Your carrier doesn’t seem very good. Hello, hello, Mom, hello...”

I hung up the phone. One doesn’t embarrass one’s own son. “Were you promoted?” followed by “How much are you making now?” John sensed the danger so he started having a bad line. I silenced my voice so he wouldn’t have to lie.

I put the phone away and returned to my sofa. I put my glasses on my nose and picked up the book: “Nature has already written our destiny, just kept us in the dark, so we’re always hoping about what lies ahead, what the next moment has in store. Nature herself is the silent observer, enjoying every moment.” I read these two lines and closed the book. Who is this “nature?” Our writers are such philosophers that I get bored. What

they don't write is that behind the word "nature" hides all of mankind's helplessness, ignorance and humility. As for me: "What do I do now?" □

—*Translated by the author*