MORT'S PEN BY PATRICIA SCHULTHEIS

Mar 24, 2021 | Non-Fiction | 0 |

Louche. The man sitting opposite me was louche. I looked up, and there he was, across my dining room table, one arm draped over the back of his chair, suit coat open, tie loosened, dark hair needing a trim. His eyes, not too tired to hold a sardonic spark, He smiled. "Well, hi there, Pat."

"Who are you?"

"You can call me Mort."

"What do you want?"

"The question is, Pat, what do you want?"

"I want my sister back."

"I'm afraid that's not possible. How about something else?"

"Like what?"

"I've got an idea." He pushed away from the table, ambled around to me, and opened his hand. A pen lay in his palm, "Here, take it. You know you want it." Deep blue with a silver cap, it looked like a Parker, the sort of fountain pen I used in third grade back in Bridgeport's Blessed Sacrament School, where I first learned to diagram sentences. Mort was right: I wanted that pen. I wanted it very much. But I wanted something else more, "It's beautiful, Mort, but, if it's all the same to you, I'd rather have Sally back."

"Pat, you know Sally can't ever come back. In the meantime, take the pen."

"What do you mean by 'meantime'?"

Mort leaned in closer; I could smell his woodsy aftershave, "You know meantime, Pat. It's the between time. Something happens. Meantime comes. Then something else happens, and poof! Meantime's over."

"Sounds like life."

"You wouldn't be the first to say that. I strongly suggest you take the pen." I did. I was fifty-two years old. I was growing up.

# # #

I never knew how old I was, not in the sense of age-appropriate behavior. In my early childhood all my behaviors were mimicry of my older sister's. When

Sally flopped down in our backyard to make a snow angel, I flopped down. When Sally learned to swim, I learned to swim. When Sally learned to ride a bike, I learned to ride a bike.

Our uncoupling began on the Saturday afternoon she sat on her twin bed across from mine and mused about what she wanted to be when she grew up. "I think I want to be a nurse," my big sister said, and I knew right then our paths must split because I was eleven and already caught in the allure of the word.

Still, our untwining took decades: When Sally graduated from college and moved from Connecticut to Maryland, three years later I followed. I settled fifteen miles away from her in Baltimore, where I met the man I married. So, there we were in Maryland, my big sister and I, young brides, soon with five children under five between us. It was the "70s, and the drumbeat of militant feminism was sounding everywhere. It caught Sally's ear. She marched away from her marriage, moved to California, married again and soon marched away from that marriage, too.

Meanwhile, I stayed in Maryland with Bill and our two boys. Flitting from one hack public relations job to another, I wrote newsletters and on my lunch hours scooted out to interview someone for whichever local newspaper accepted articles from free lancers. Fiction, I thought, I'd get to that later, after I made it as a journalist. Into my early fifties, I was still thinking that.

The phone rang one early spring afternoon. It was a Sunday; the phone woke me up from a nap. It was Sally calling from California. She had bad news. She had liver cancer. She had less than three months to live, although she didn't know that then.

But Mort did.

He lurked in the shadows the afternoon Bill and I arrived at Sally's little house in northern California. There, in a back bedroom, my beloved older sister lay, already a skeleton. In place of her once luxuriant dark hair, pink chemo tufts checkered her skull. Worse, impatient bones protruded beneath her leathery skin, as if they couldn't wait to poke through.

At two the next morning her third husband, John, propped her up on the side of the bed. I sat on her left; he sat on her right. “I love you, Sal,” he told her. Somehow, she managed to say “I love you” back. John laid her down and Mort stepped out of the shadows. He took my sister away.

No words I have ever read, and certainly none I ever have written, have answered death’s great question: how can someone not BE? How can someone speak three words of love one minute, and leave forever the next? Where does that person go? When bones fail, where does the mind that spoke “I love you” abide? Does it wait in an ineffable somewhere until reuniting with those it loved? Or is this meantime between coming and going all we have? Are we just snow angels waiting for the noonday sun?

Within four years of Sally’s death, my father, a brother-in-law, a friend, and a thirty-three-year-old neighbor died. And Bill had his first bout of cancer. This life of mine, I finally realized, was finite. So, I stopped chasing free-lance journalism stories and picked up the pen of Mort. I began to write fiction.

# # #

Aside from a few I had written in college, my total fiction consisted of four stories. Nevertheless, thinking acceptance would indicate that I had talent, I sent the fourth to the competitive Bread Loaf Writing Conference and was accepted.

I was fifty-six and saw no reason why I shouldn’t fit right in with all the ambitious young things sporting their fresh MFA degrees. Of course, I didn’t. For one thing, we spoke different languages. They spoke the language of post-modernism and could inflect every sentence with irony heavy enough to make the Twenty-third Psalm sound like a second-rate comic’s Tuesday night routine.

And I spoke the language of loss, the language of Dylan Thomas’s rage at the dying of the light and of Shakespeare’s bare ruined choirs. The story I submitted was about the illogical and bizarre actions of a grief-struck family immediately following the funeral of a Vietnam War veteran. The youngsters in my workshop hated it. Too long, they said. Too many characters. Too much

dialogue. Not enough action, tension, conflict. Their criticisms rolled up one side of the long seminar table and down the other.

I didn't care. I hadn't come to Bread Loaf to learn what anyone thought about my writing. I had come because I needed someplace to confirm that I was more than the reliquary for the memories of my dead sister, father, brother-in-law, friend and neighbor. Someplace to restore and strengthen the essential nucleus of myself, and, yes, someplace dedicated to the path I saw when mine first split from Sally's. A place dedicated to writing.

Despite my classmate's criticism, Bread Loaf, with its yellow dormitory and rustic barns, gave me the freedom to explore the mysterious art of fiction and to learn the craft of creating it. Plus, I found one person who actually liked my story.

Leslie Pietrzyk, a pretty blonde woman from my workshop, took my arm one morning. "I know what your story's about," she said. "It's about grief, and I understand what that feels like. Many people don't know this about me, but I'm a widow."

There, with all the glory of late summer in Vermont ripening about us, between that beautiful young woman and myself hung the horrible truth: Mort is no respecter of age. He chooses whomever he will.

The next spring, he chose my mother.

The winter after that, I entered The Johns Hopkins University's writing program. My first class was held in Washington, and toward the end of the semester, local writers were invited to address the class. One was Leslie Pietrzyk. I doubted that she would recall me from Bread Loaf, but not only did she remember me, she remembered my story.

"It was good," she said as we walked to the Metro; "What did you do with it?"

"Well, actually, nothing."

"You should send it out. It was good."

A year and many rejections later The Distillery published "After the Service." Thirteen years after that, it was included in St. Bart's Way, my award-winning

short story collection published by Washington Writers Publishing House. I invited Leslie Pietrzyk to write a blurb for the back cover.

I was seventy-two years old. And, by then, like Leslie, a widow.

# # #

Writing saved me. Six weeks after Bill died, I received a letter from a New York agency to which I had sent fifty pages of a mystery I was revising. Could I please send them the rest? Sobel Weber asked. No, I could not, I replied. Those fifty pages were all I had managed to revise before Bill's cancer took all my time. We understand, Sobel Weber answered. Send us the rest whenever you can.

Some of my writer friends rejoice at the prospect of writing for hours. Not me. For me, the blank page is a fissure-laced icefield that challenges my every step. And revising isn't much easier. It all feels like work, always.

Still, the summer after Bill's death, I forced myself get out of bed, go downstairs, and open my computer. All through the fall and winter and into spring I worked on that revision. What would I have done without it? Disappearing into entropic, inescapable grief was a distinct possibility.

Eight months after they requested it, I sent the revision to New York. Sobel Weber's letter declining to accept me as a client came a few days after the first anniversary of Bill's death. I was crushed, but, remarkably, breathing. Not actually alive, but breathing. I doubt that I would have had the energy to inhale and exhale, had I not had to get to work.

# # #

Writing, like music, painting, and societal norms, is driven by the demands of the marketplace, and the marketplace must endlessly resupply itself with whatever is fresh, new, and skewed toward youth. No wonder those young writers at Bread Loaf hated my story: they were reading what the marketplace was publishing, and what the marketplace was publishing were stories peopled with characters like themselves, people grappling with life's complexities for the first time. Falling in love, coming out of the closet, going

into rehab—all of it fascinating because it seemed so new, and therefore unique.

I always have been grateful to Leslie Pietryzk for telling me that she understood that grief lay at my story's heart. But I also wonder if she wasn't grateful to look down that long seminar table and see one person like herself, one person who understood the fearsome wedge separating herself from the workshop's ambitious youngsters.

We all know that we live in a meantime between birth and death, but that realization dominates the lives of the bereaved. Death beats the tattoo of their hearts, sets the rhythm of their days, and twists their nights into tormented wakefulness. Isolated from those happy others outside grief's cocoon, they wander, searching for the one they lost. And for their own lost selves.

But along their rocky path, they may discover unexpected gifts: a sorrow that grows into understanding, an understanding that ripens into wisdom. This is the realization upon which I build my stories. This is the gift Mort brought me.

Over the twenty-one years since I went to Bread Loaf, I've had some thirty stories published. As I look over the list, I count ten where the action springs directly from loss. Because her sex drive died along with her husband, Jayne goes to a bar to meet an anonymous lover. After she loses her mother, Sara opens a lingerie store on her father's farm. Connected by the stars to the baby she miscarried, Lynda begins trusting her own witchy powers.

Characters written with the pen of Mort appreciate the hand holding theirs under a blanket, the warmth of a well-cut coat, a morning prayer offered by a river. Nothing is guaranteed. My characters know that life is brief, and caprice is its polestar.

But, oh, the sudden wonder they discover. In my stories, an aged aunt dances on Christmas Eve, the reflecting light on a son's bike catches the setting sun, a single gold charm dangles from a wife's wrist—each of them a red wheelbarrow propelling my characters forward, both burdened and enlightened by the certainty that every step they take is a step toward their meantime's end.

# # #

One out of three hundred and sixty-five are not good odds, so when a happy event happened on the day that would have been Sally's seventy-eighth birthday, I accepted it as a gift from her. On June fifth, I was sitting on a bench outside a Baltimore bistro when a very tall man walked up, "Are you David?" I asked.

"I certainly am," he answered.

Not my type at all: way too tall and wearing a leather handbag over his shoulder. And, according to his posting on Match.com., only two years a widower. No, not my type at all, except that he had a sly humor, seemed kindhearted, and lived five minutes from me. A playmate! Sally had sent me a playmate!

I was seventy-four. Certainly no one could have faulted me for putting Mort's pen aside and enjoying myself. I had earned the right.

I just had had my third book, a memoir, accepted by a publisher—in addition to my story collection, I had written Baltimore's Lexington Market, a pictorial history of a public food emporium. So A Balanced Life was to be my third, and I knew from experience that publishers expect a quick turn-around once they begin the back-and-forth process of sending galley proofs to an author. But, once I returned those galleys, what was I going to do in the meantime until they came back to me? Certainly not work. No, my big sister had sent me a playmate and I was going to have fun.

David and I went to farmers' markets and museums, to Walmart for a puzzle and the veterinarian for my sick cat. When he asked to go to church with me, we did that, too. Summer passed, and A Balanced Life came out, but by then fall had set in, and Christmas catalogues were arriving. And what is holiday time if not playtime?

The new year came and went, and still I played. I was writing some: three op-ed essays, a book review, and a short story were published. But I wasn't working. Not really.

Another New Year approached and along with my perennial resolution to lose ten pounds, I vowed to rededicate myself.

At the root of the decision lay the moral question of how best to spend my remaining time. If meeting David was a gift, and, since whatever time he and I had left was quickly running out, shouldn't I spend it living in gratitude for our happiness?

Thankfully, David understood when I told him I had decided otherwise: I was going to work more and harder. I was going to write, which is to say I was going to break the constraints of time.

Writers work in an art form that transcends the limits of set by calendars and stars. Moreover, they do it in secret. Knowing neither who will read them nor when, writers lay down their words in silence. Years, centuries, even millennia later, someone may silently read them. Yet those words, silently written so long ago, will have the power to fire the synapses of the reader's brain, and silently change that brain forever. It's a power akin to the sacred, one that humbles, even scares, me.

So why do I persist, especially when out-of-print books much finer than mine litter the graveyard of the literary marketplace? No character of mine will ever come in from the cold or fly over the cuckoo's nest. Nor does the joy of one acceptance countermand the pain I feel from dozens of rejections.

The only answer I can give is that the intensity of rejection's pain and acceptance's joy make me feel fully alive. I'm still discovering worlds I didn't know my mind contained and still inviting others to join me. For however long it takes to read a story of mine, readers can escape their own work-a-day worlds and live in the one I created. Within the safety of their minds, they can enter the portal where my character Alice Hilmsley discovers a gin bottle in her lodger's drawer, and Lonnie joins a fishing boat's crew, and Virgie orders much too much meat.

Writing has been a gift to me; I hope that reading what I've written is a gift to others as well. I'm seventy-six now and know the day's fast approaching when

I'll look up from my computer and see Mort standing in the shadows, "Give me back my pen, Pat," he'll say; "You're done."

I'm familiar enough with Mort to know it's futile to argue with him. I'll have no choice but to take his hand, and, perchance, discover worlds more wondrous than any mere words can tell.

Patricia Schultheis is the author of Baltimore's Lexington Market, and St. Bart's Way, an award-winning short story collection published by Washington Writers' Publishing House in 2015. All Things That Matter Press published her memoir, A Balanced Life, in 2018. "The Pen of Mort" the 2020 Soul-Making non-fiction award. http://www.pschultheis.net