

Dad, August 10, 2010

by Richard Toon

Satchmo sings a love song over the sound system. People read books, tap keyboards, drink coffee, eat cake. In Barnes & Noble—more a coffee shop these days than a bookstore—I am thinking about my dad and his stomach cancer.

The terror he has fought to keep at bay most of his life now growls at his door. “Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear,” I hear him saying, the way he would cluck on the motorway when he missed his turn. As death stalks him, I feel I should be back in England to say, as he said to me many times, “Don't worry. Never mind.” After he spoke, I still worried and I minded, but his wish to spare me lent comfort.

Laurie wanted me to step outside myself and maybe feel the balm of art, so I went with her to the Farnsworth Gallery to see paintings by Andrew Wyeth. As we sit here, the coffee shop fills and empties like waves that swell and recede on a beach, and I am thinking of one of the Wyeth paintings. It was of a man leaning back and recoiling with a look of obscure apprehension. His hand is on the metal latch of a door he is about to open. The label text beneath it explained Wyeth wanted to get the latch just right, so the viewer would hear its creak and feel in the hand the way it had worked for generations.

My dad is older than anyone here. People with his stage of cancer are mostly out of sight. My mother's dementia is eclipsed for now. I imagine them dying soon and that this is what Dad wants. My brother informs me in an email today that Mum is only vaguely aware of what is happening. But was she ever aware, rarely deviating from the path of her next spoken thought, a path I could seldom follow? When Dad asked his doctor how long he had left to live, the doctor said, “How long is a piece of string?” On the phone, Dad keeps repeating this phrase to me.

Glenn Miller now swings on the sound system, the sweet tones of the woodwinds, the signature clarinet playing with the saxophone

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section. Strange how strongly the music brings back the stories of how, during the war, my parents met at the Tower Ball Room in Blackpool. I see them on the dance floor—swift and agile, their arms entwined. How strange that this music should be playing now. I have not yet cried for my father.

