Poet's Offer to Help Grieving Goes Unheeded

by Con Chapman

BOSTON. Jack Flavin is an untenured ”gypsy” professor who tries to keep body and soul together by teaching wherever he can among the Boston area's many colleges and universities, but most months he finds it's still not enough.

An “E” train on the Green Line

“This semester I'm teaching Introduction to Poetry at Northeastern, Freshman Composition at Tufts and Romantic Poets at Suffolk, and I'll still be a week late with my rent,” he says as he boards an inbound “E” train on the MBTA's Green Line. “My mother wanted me to be a lawyer, but Clarence Darrow said inside the body of every lawyer is the wreck of a poet, so I figured I'd skip the middleman.”

“Anybody have a recent death in the family they want to share?”

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But Flavin is more entrepreneurial than most underemployed literary types, and has started a business that he thinks has potential; hiring himself out to edit memorial poems that grieving family members write in memory of loved ones who've passed away, then publish in local newspapers.

"It's the Irish population here," he says, referring to the fact that Boston is home to more immigrants from the Emerald Isle per capita than any other city in America. "We're great poets, we are, but some of us are better than others."

And so as he settles in for the ride downtown, he takes copies of the two local dailies from his knapsack and flips to the obituaries to scout for prospects. "Now here's one that could use some work," he says as he reads a tribute to a grease trap cleaner who recently perished when an exhaust fan in a restaurant inexplicably reversed itself, asphyxiating him with toxic spare rib fumes.

Remembering you is easy
We do it every day,
When little Mike and Joey
Ask when the hell is Daddy ever coming home to play?

"Why'd you have to criticize me mum's poem?"

"Dear Mrs. Aucoin," he jots down in his spiral notebook. "I read your poem in tribute to your late husband with interest. The last line departed from the rhythmic expectations you created by your use of iambic triameter in the first three lines. When your next spouse dies, you could perhaps rework the last two lines to read 'I really miss you sweetie, and also all your pay.'" He signs the letter and puts it in an envelope along with his price list—$2 a line,

minimum charge $20, free estimates for original poems—to be mailed once he's tracked down the widow's address.

He scans the page for more inventory, and comes across a tribute written by a man on the anniversary of his wife's death in a freak snowmobile accident.

Yesterday I celebrated your special day.
It's hard to believe you've gone away.
You brought a lot of happiness into my life,
I'll look for something similar in my second wife.

“That guy is such a dink!”

“Dear Mr. Berube,” he writes. “When writing poetry, strive for concrete images rather than earnest but empty qualifiers such as ‘special' and ‘a lot.' When your second wife passes on, ask yourself what made her *different,* not just better. Consider the following, for example:

Yesterday I celebrated the day of your death.
I remembered your voice, your smile, your breath
after a meal of pizza with pepperoni.
You were always real, and never a phony.

It's a short walk from Park Street Station to the mail room at Suffolk University, where Flavin picks up his mail before entering his

classroom. “Looks like I may have a client,” he says with a note of excitement in his voice as he removes an envelope from his box and opens it to read a letter he finds inside.

“Dear Maggot,” it begins. “I hope you die a horrible death for criticizing my poem. Who died and left you boss? What makes you the expert to lord it over all the rest of us? I oughta come to your classroom and pop you in the nose, you jerk. Sincerely, No Fan of Yours.”

“What—what did I say?”

“That comes with the territory,” Flavin says with a sigh. “There's no one more sensitive than a poet.”

Available in Kindle and print formats on amazon.com as part of the collection “Boston Baroques.”