

Reunion

By Eric D. Goodman

(Abridged WYPR)

The poem lay in her lap; Joan read it again. How many times had she read the piece in these past few days? How many days had it been? Inked on parchment, the words both pained and comforted her.

She remembered the disoriented sensation she'd had back in college, the result of taking uppers and downers, and the neurotic sense induced by the drugs working against one another. Joan felt something like that now, only drugs weren't the cause, and the sensation was not one she would pay for or even accept for free. In fact, she'd be willing to pop a pill just to get rid of it.

The man seated next to her scribbled in a spiral notebook. He seemed consumed by his notes, but she didn't look at him for fear of being sucked into a conversation she was in no mood for. Once in a while she felt his gaze, but she didn't return it.

As she looked up from the parchment and out the window, the memory intruded. The sadness stuck there in her consciousness like gum on the train's floor.



Last week, the ride to Baltimore had been one that she wished would go faster and take longer at the same time, like a commute to a business meeting she wanted to both avoid and be done with.

She taxied to the hospital and raced to the reception desk. In the frigid hallway, outside their parents' rooms, her brother hunched over, his face buried in his hands. "Brad," she called softly as she approached.

"They're gone, Joan." Brad sniffed and wiped his eyes with his sleeve. "They never regained consciousness after the accident."

Joan sat on the bench next to him. She put her arms around Brad, pulled him toward her. If tears could regenerate life, Mom and Dad would surely have gotten up and walked out to join them. But tears brought nothing, solved nothing, altered nothing. Still, Joan and Brad remained on the bench, shedding tears as though it could make a difference.

Brad looked into Joan's face. "Guess we ought to go to my place."

"No," Joan said. "We better go to Mom and Dad's."



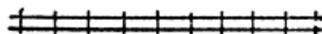
Joan was forty-six, though sometimes she still felt herself a child. She remembered wondering, as a teenager, how she could possibly survive in the bureaucratic world out there with all the paperwork, rules, and regulations. How would she keep up with the taxes and bills and legalities of life? She knew then she couldn't survive without her parents to help her.

But she *had*.

Brad struggled with dinner, but Joan knew he'd prefer it to the task of making the difficult calls to friends and family. Joan came to the kitchen, the cordless phone turned off but still attached to her hand. "That's all of them."

Brad nodded. "Dinner's ready."

They ate spaghetti. The ingredients had all come from Mom's kitchen, but the food did not taste right. What should he have added to it? What was missing? Even Joan, who was used to cooking for herself, couldn't pinpoint the elusive ingredient.



Joan wasn't sure how she came to be in charge of the arrangements. She was the de facto go-to girl for all business matters revolving around the funeral and estate;

she had even picked out the mums when the lilies were unavailable.

Jimmy came to the funeral. Jimmy used to play with Brad; they'd been best friends off and on during school years. Jimmy used to mow Mom and Dad's lawn and deliver their paper. Now, he worked at the local weekly, doing human interest stories on local anniversaries, unusual pets, and community events.

Jimmy shifted the grass with his shoe. "Why is it that it takes tragedy to bring old friends together?"

Brad swallowed. "I don't know, Jimmy. But you're always welcome. You're like part of the family."

Brad, Joan, and their five cousins were all that remained of their extended family, now that the parents were gone. The remnants of a generation had vanished in the auto accident—an entire layer of the family reduced to pictures and memories.

Once a year, Joan and Brad's parents had organized a family reunion. For Joan, the years revolved around those reunions. She weighed the importance of things that happened in her life by whether she would share them at the family get-togethers. Reuniting with the family each December strung the moments of her life together and gave them a sense of order.

The funeral could be seen as their family's final reunion, Joan thought. Many of the guests came by the house after the service, some bringing more flowers, others carrying casserole dishes. It was awkward, forcing conversation with these people, both the ones Joan knew and the ones she didn't. Long after most visitors parted, the

cousins remained. They sat around the dining room table, a buffet of mismatched entrees—cold and unwanted—between them.

Their cousin Sherry sighed. “It’s not easy. But you’ll get through this.” The line sounded too practiced to be comforting.

Brad had been silent most of the day. He stirred in his chair and finally spoke. “It’s up to us now, to keep up the family reunions.”

Sherry nodded, and looked from Brad to Joan. “Guess that’s up you.”

Joan felt the blood rush to her face. “Why me?”

“Well, you’re the oldest,” Sherry said. “You’re the head of the family now.”

The others considered the idea as though it hadn’t occurred to them, then nodded. Once stated, it seemed an obvious truth.

Her place in their family and the planning of a reunion were not responsibilities Joan wanted to think about now.



Two days after the funeral, after the cousins had left and the driveway was empty, Jimmy stopped by the house. Joan answered and for a moment she became a teenage girl again, letting Jimmy in to play with Brad. But they were all adults now, and the mood was too sad for fantasy.

Once greetings were exchanged and condolences once again expressed, the

three of them sat in the room where Mom and Dad had spent most of their time.

“Thanks for the obituary,” Joan said.

Jimmy hesitated, pinching the outer ends of an envelope. “I wrote something else for them, too.”

Joan took the envelope and opened it. She couldn’t judge the poem, of course. There was no judging something so personal, so close to one so dear. Death sometimes brings out the best in a poet; it can also awaken the worst.

Brad reached over. “Let me see it.” His eyes glistened as he scanned the lines.

When Joan was in high school, a secret admirer used to leave love poems in her mailbox. She still had the poems, a dozen or so in a shoe box at the back of a closet shelf. She remembered that each one—with its mystery and promise—seemed a masterpiece. Years later, when she’d read them again, looking for self-validation after a break-up, she was surprised at how terrible they were. They had seemed so wonderful when fresh, but read as mediocre greeting cards after the connection had worn thin.

Looking up at Jimmy, Joan realized now for the first time who that secret admirer must have been. She wondered whether this poem was the same, seeming the work of a master wordsmith, because of the sensitive subject matter and the intensity of the moment. The poem touched her, and that made her certain that this was genuine poetry, not the greeting-card sludge of her shoe box.

The three of them sat awkwardly, like passengers forced together, trying to avoid getting sucked into conversation. It had been years since they'd really talked. Joan knew what that meant. Small talk is harder to ease into when there's a trunk full of experience between meetings. They'd opened the trunk, but this wasn't the time to unpack it. Jimmy left. Joan went to her room.

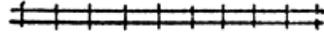
Unlike her messy apartment, this shrine to childhood was immaculate. Even when she'd lived here, it was as though no one had. Everything was arranged according to the structure of the house. It would always be that way here.

As she made her way to stand before the dresser mirror, she half expected to see a little girl reflected back. But she was grown, with wavy brown hair, a shapely figure and heavy make-up—now a device to make her look younger instead of older, as it once had. Only the trappings of childhood remained around her in this nostalgic place.

Joan opened her closet door. The only clothes here were left-behinds she wouldn't wear. She rummaged through the closet until she found the old shoebox in a corner, buried under a pile of T-shirts. She took the shoebox to her bed and opened it.

She read through the poetry, taking in the sweet proclamations of love. There was no denying it: this was mediocre poetry at best. But Jimmy's essence lived in it

and the words took on a new meaning now that she knew the author. How could she not be moved by poetry that sang her praises? She chuckled as she read, but a deeper emotion stirred inside her.



Jimmy looked surprised when Joan showed up. “Come in,” he said, “Don’t mind the mess. Never had your parents’ knack for a tidy house.”

Books and movies stood in shaky towers around the television. Movie posters and sticky notes decorated his walls. Joan examined the writing on the wall. “I really appreciate the poetry.”

“Oh, it’s the least I could do. Your parents were like family.”

She turned to face him. “I mean all of the poems.”

Jimmy flushed.

“Do you still feel the same way?”

Jimmy stalled. “Yes.”

Joan embraced him and whispered warmly in his ear, “I never made the connection until today.”

Jimmy’s love poems may have been mediocre, but his response to her kiss was anything but. She replayed his adoring lines in her head until he pulled away.

“No, we can’t. Not like this.”

“Like what?”

“I can’t take advantage of you in your time of grief.”

Joan hadn’t forgotten. But she longed to lose herself in love. “I’m not grieving at this very moment.” To prove it, she pressed her lips against his and lost herself.

The next morning, Jimmy offered to join her on the train.

“What?” Joan searched for her jacket. “Are you crazy?”

“For you I am.”

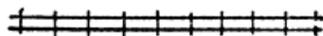
Joan smiled sweetly. “It would never work. You’re Jimmy: Brad’s friend, the paper boy, the kid who mowed the lawn. I mean, I love you, you’re like part of the family. But you’re Jimmy.”

“You could call me Jim.”

“No, Jimmy, I can’t. I’ve got another life out there. This stays here.”

Jimmy sighed. “For you, maybe. But I live here. It stays with me.”

Joan gave him a tight hug. Then she took her jacket from the books on the chair, and left.



On the train, the poem lay in Joan’s lap. She hadn’t asked her brother if he wanted it. She’d just tucked it in her black leather purse and taken it with her, as

though it were hers alone.

Joan and Brad had discussed the arrangements. They would keep the house. They didn't want to lose all of the memories stored there. Joan would always have a room there, a shrine to girlhood. She would organize the family reunions. She might even invite Jimmy; he was practically family.

Joan felt someone's eyes on her and noticed that the man in the seat next to her no longer wrote in his notebook. The passenger peered over at the parchment; Joan folded it. These words weren't for just any stranger's eyes.

"I'm a poet too," the man said. She pretended not to hear him, not wanting to be sucked into conversation. She saw his reflection in the window as he looked at her and then returned to his notebook. She noticed for the first time how much he looked like Jimmy.

Joan wanted someone else to take control for a change. Independent as she'd become, her parents had always been there, just a phone call away, to give her advice, to guide her with knowledge and experience, whether she wanted it or not. Beneath her self-reliance, there'd always been the safety net, the fact that she wasn't alone. She didn't want to be head of the family. She just wanted to be the little girl in the dresser mirror.

Her cousins and brother thought she had it together, but she knew better. She'd been put in control, was now the head of the family, but she didn't know how to steer. Joan was just another passenger on the train, and she no longer knew where

she was headed.