

Ciao Bella!

By Gwen Gordon

Amelia had been feverish all week. She'd managed to drag herself, frail and dizzy, through her classes, but could do little more than sleep in between. Whatever strange illness had overtaken her was a mystery. The only symptoms were a temperamental fever and a tendency to weep whenever she fell asleep. With the week finally over, she hoped she might feel well enough to visit a friend for the day. But getting out of bed was like pulling herself from quicksand. Her bones ached and her head swarmed with haunting dream images: mass murderers, torture devices, and a cat named Nietzsche. It would have to be another day of rest, she realized.

And after all, deadlines for final papers loomed, and there was a lot of studying left to do. She remembered that a few books were waiting for her on reserve at the library. If she left soon, she could work quietly at home for the rest of the day. She put on a pair of dark sunglasses, pulled down the wide brim of her hat, and, like a refugee forced to leave the motherland, dragged herself slowly to town.

The burst of sun and bird song overwhelmed her at first, so she kept her eyes fixed to the sidewalk. Focusing on the flat gray squares of concrete, her mind succumbed to flat gray thoughts. This mysterious illness, she decided, had to be Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. From now on her life would be a series of doctor's appointments, foul tasting tinctures and naps. She may as well accept her bleak fate. In a few years she'd be wilted in bed, staring blankly at television fuzz, eating cheap ice cream and swatting flies.

The books waiting for her at the library made her nostalgic for the time, about a week ago, when it had been worth the effort to care about something. She checked them out blankly and headed home. On her way, she stopped at a deli for soup. An older man was sitting quietly at a corner table with a big half-eaten loaf of Italian bread. Amelia noticed his gentle, intelligent presence and

smiled. He asked her what she was reading. She showed him her books: *The Denial of Death*, *The Illusion of Immortality*, *The Force of Character* and *the Lasting Life*. She was confident her reading list would discourage any attempt at conversation.

“How interesting!” he said. “Why are you reading them?”

Reluctant to move from her solitude, she answered flippantly, “Oh just a little light reading for the holidays!” She was surprised when the man smiled. She decided to give him the benefit of the doubt, “Actually, I’m doing research for a paper I’m writing.”

“What are you studying?” he asked.

“Philosophy.”

“Is that so? Well why don’t you have a seat and we’ll talk philosophy.” He pointed to the loaf of bread and the empty seat across from him.

“But I really do have to write a paper,” Amelia insisted.

“Oh, now Socrates would never have passed up this opportunity. You aren’t supposed to write philosophy. It’s meant to be lived, talked about, wrestled with.”

“But Socrates wasn’t in graduate school with a paper due in two weeks.” Even as she protested, she moved toward the table and tentatively sat down. There was something about this man. And after all, her soup wasn’t ready yet and she was feeling weak.

“What are you writing about?” the man asked with genuine interest.

His mediterranean, clean-shaven face had deep creases. He must be in his 70’s, she thought. With a paper to write, however, she wasn’t about to make small talk. “I’m writing about what the Greeks called *poësis* and *techne*, in other words the notion of creativity as bringing forth something from within versus creativity as acting on something outside. I’m exploring how the two ideas relate to Buddhist principles of dependent origination. I use the German philosopher Heidegger’s ideas to explore the impact of our attitude toward death on what

and how we create.” She paused, “Does that make any sense?” She hoped it didn’t.

The man leaned forward, his thick eyebrows furrowed. “Yes, it’s very interesting. Tell me more.”

Amelia found it hard to believe he understood what she was talking about, but tried another angle. “I believe that when we live in synchrony with natural rhythms and cycles...in other words, when we are truly with the world--attentive, related, caring --then whatever we make, whether it’s a poem, a building, or a restaurant, adds to the world’s life and beauty.

Accepting death makes it possible to accept the whole ephemeral world of cycles and rhythms, without begrudging, fearing or trying to control it. Denying death changes our relationship to the world completely. We get way out of step with life and make things that are ugly. To make beautiful things takes sensitivity to the world, true caring, and acceptance of death. These are ultimately the same things. I can’t remember who said it, but ‘Death is the mother of beauty.’”

“Wallace Stevens,” The man said without missing a beat.

Impressed, Amelia looked at the man more closely. For all she’d known, she was talking Heidegger to a car salesman or pig farmer.

“But please go on, this is very interesting,” he encouraged.

Where was she?

“The things we make when we deny death are not only ugly, they’re deadly.”

“Why is that?” he asked.

“Because the things themselves don’t die. You can’t get rid of the stuff. It’s like eating something you can’t digest or metabolize. It makes you sick. That’s how the biosphere feels.”

His eyebrows rose. “Like Nuclear waste! Or Styrofoam!”

“Yes.” Amelia leaned forward and pointed to the table. “Polyurethane doesn’t even show signs of use. Not like a shovel’s wooden handle or a leather saddle, which just get more beautiful the older they get.”

“I’ve always known these tables were ugly, but I didn’t realize they were deadly.” The man shook his head. “You’re right, of course. The chemicals it takes to make ugly things are vicious, they also cause birth defects.”

Amelia sat up. “PCB’s and Dioxins are endocrine disrupters. They effect the reproductive system. So, they’re not only killing life, they’re killing birth. They’re inhibiting poeisis at its biological roots.” She made a note to herself to put this in her paper.

The man sat back and nodded thoughtfully.

Despite the depressing tone of the conversation, Amelia felt herself coming back to life.

“Have you read Heidegger?” she asked.

“I read a couple of his books, oh, decades ago.”

“Really!”

Amelia’s soup finally arrived in a Styrofoam take-out container. They both stared at it in disgust. “Maybe I’ll take it home and turn it into a bird feeder,” she said.

She ate, amazed to discover for the first time that week, that she actually had an appetite. She found herself becoming keenly interested in this gentle, literate man.

“What do you do?” she asked.

“I’m retired. I used to teach.”

“Really! What did you teach?”

“Ethics at USF. Mostly undergraduates. I haven’t taught for years. You know I used to ask my students where they thought wonder came from. What do you think?”

Amelia took her time, relishing the question. Meeting this man on this particular day, she was starting to feel some wonder herself.

“I think it’s how the universe feels when it beholds its own magnificence through the human heart. It may even be our purpose for being here, our little part in the big passion play, to stand up, flail our arms and shout, ‘Wow!!! This is Amazing!!!’”

A few customers turned to watch Amelia demonstrating wonder. She put her arms down, lowered her voice and went on.

“All the splendor of creation pouring everywhere. It’s nice for at least a few pairs of eyes, a heart and, well, a whole being, for that matter, to be able to feel its immensity. When we do, we’re bouncing some of the big love of creation back into the universe while also bringing more of it out.”

Amelia’s eyes lit up. “That’s it! Poieisis! Wonder inspires us to create, to bring out more of the universe. It is our impulse and energy to join in the cosmic dance.”

“Ah, cosmos. I’m glad you used that word,” said the man, his eyes sparkling. “Pythagoras used it to mean beauty, order, and harmony. The natural cycles of death and seasons of change are cosmos; it’s order and harmony. There’s nothing like the great mystery of death and birth to fill us with wonder. Where did it all come from? Where is it going? How do I live a fleeting life in such a fleeting world?” The man’s gaze seemed to suddenly turn inward.

“And also what doesn’t die? Amelia offered, coaxing him back into the conversation. “What is never born? And how can we feel ourselves a part of that?”

He looked up, nodding, “Yes, of course. The only thing worse than death is no death. It would be a nightmare if a beautiful symphony or sunset never stopped. A horror. Wouldn’t it?”

“That’s right. Flowers that don’t stop blossoming become grotesque, like film stars with too many facelifts. That’s why wonder, beauty, and poiesis come from seeing with the eyes that also know death.”

The man suddenly looked very sad. Amelia wondered what she had said to hurt him. After a long pause, he spoke.

“Three months ago, my wife died. I was not a good husband. I was always, you know, looking around for the young blossoms.” He pulled his glasses down his nose and illustrated his point with a wandering gaze. “What she had to put up with! I didn’t see the beauty in the face of my own wife. Now I pay the price. I can’t look at myself in the mirror without disgust, thinking, ‘you’re just a dirty old man.’ ”

Yes, he did seem to have an eye for young blossoms, reflected Amelia. Still, she felt his sadness deeply. “I’m sorry.”

The man continued, “You’re absolutely right, we make ugliness and cruelty whenever we don’t see beauty.” He paused again, staring at his leathery hands. “There’s a poem by Rumi, do you mind?”

“No, please.”

He closed his eyes as he recited, “This human shape is a ghost made of distraction and pain. Sometimes pure light, sometimes cruel, trying wildly to open, this image tightly held within itself.”

They remained silent for a moment before Amelia reached for one of her books, *The Force of Character*, by James Hillman. “I got this book because a teacher of mine told me it’s about the beauty of aging. I haven’t read it yet, but I think Hillman talks about how in youth our beauty is pure biology, but as we age it becomes art. Every blossom announces its being, just like a baby does, but it doesn’t tell a story. The older the face the more it tells you of what the person did with their life, the more it reveals ‘the image tightly held within itself,’ as Rumi puts it. I’m guessing Hillman calls that the character. When there are cracks and wrinkles in a face then soul can leak through.”

The man laughed and put his hand to his face. "I'd better be careful, or soul's going to leak everywhere."

"Too late," Amelia said, warmly

Suddenly the man's face fell. "Maybe that's why I can't look at myself in the mirror. I see all my regrets and cruelty leaking through the cracks. I told a student once that I'd never met someone as stupid as him. I can never take that back. It hurts me terribly, but never as much as it hurt the student. And mind you, this was an ethics class." He shook his head.

"Ouch!" sighed Amelia

"Yes, these are things to live with."

"I understand. I once tried to give my cat her medication. I kept sticking it in her mouth and she kept spitting it out. Eventually, I got impatient and just stuck it down her throat. She started coughing, then frothing at the mouth. It looked like she was dying. She wouldn't let me come near her for weeks. It was excruciating. She lived but she was never the same again. I still live with that. She reminds me every day of the cost of not paying attention."

"Excuse me." It was the delicatessen owner. "I'm sorry Ma'am, but your credit card was declined."

"I'm still learning, I guess." Amelia mumbled as she rummaged through her pockets.

"And, if you don't mind..." continued the owner, a little annoyed, pointing to the clock. It was well past five and all the other chairs were already stacked on top of the tables.

The retired ethics professor quickly pulled out a ten dollar bill and stuck it into the owner's hand, muttering something in Italian.

"Thank you." Amelia said, sheepishly.

"Don't mention it. It's the least I can do. My son, our host, has no manners, the food here is a disgrace, and the tables are...deadly," he winked.

"Listen, you were kind to sit and talk to an old man. It's been a pleasure young

lady. I know you will write a brilliant paper.” He wrapped up his bread, shook Amelia’s hand and turned toward the door.

“Wait!” There was something Amelia had wanted to say. The man turned. “ I just wanted you to know that...well, I know there’s nothing I can say that will make your wife’s death any easier, but... I do know that when I look at you, I see a beautiful face.”

The man held her gaze in silence, his eyes shining with light and grief and beauty. “Ciao bella!” he said, and left.

On her way home Amelia’s mind turned to her papers. It was as if she’d met with a muse. She knew exactly what she would write when she got home. Suddenly, she felt the harmony, beauty, and order of cosmos. If she hadn’t felt sick, if she hadn’t canceled her plans, if she hadn’t gone to the library, she would never have had this magical encounter. The silky filaments of meaning which gently link all things through time and space, glistened for a moment in the late afternoon sun.