

GRAVEYARD MEETING

I like these cold winter mornings. When I used to teach *Great Expectations* to 10th grade Honors English students, we talked about Dickens's use of the word "rimy" to describe Pip's morning on the moor when he first encountered the convict. My coverless dictionary defines the word rimy (pronounced with a long i) as *frosty*. As I walk my dog along Peltier Avenue at seven in the morning and observe the ice on the windshields, the word comes back to me. "A rimy morning," I say out loud for the pleasure of tasting the sound. I remember reading one metaphor-drunk writer describe the glaze of ice on a window as "ferns of frost"; another wrote "feathers of frost." To this alliterative catalogue I silently add my own: "filigrees of frost."

There are still a few Christmas trees lying against the curbs. *Alpine cadavers*, I say to myself and laugh at the absurdity of the phrase. As I look at the expiring trees I suddenly half-remember some lines about happiness from a J.B. Priestley novel I'd read 30 years earlier. What are they exactly? When I get back home, I'll have to look them up.

I cut through the Presbyterian cemetery and visit the grave of my former next-door neighbor Ralph Preston who died in his 90s in a white clapboard house yards away from mine. Sometimes I wonder if I'm the only person who still visits this small flat stone hidden back near the train tracks. Here's old Ralph (April 12, 1908 — June 14, 2000), his wife Jean, and their daughter Nancy-Jean who, I calculate, died at 42. And, as I look around the cemetery — the stones, the squirrels, the silence — the whole world suddenly seems a web of loss and love. "I miss you, Ralph," I say. On summer nights, with the front door open, I used to see him reading in the reclining chair in his living room. Never a television set; always a book: his white hair caught in light of the high-intensity reading lamp. Ralph told me stories about the man who built my house, Clayton Hollander. Ralph delighted in my former dog Alice, and he came out to the garden to play with her and eye Lynn's cleavage whenever she leaned over in the garden to weed.

Returning along the cemetery path I encounter one of my neighbors, an exuberant woman dressed in a black winter coat and bright red ski cap. "We meet in a graveyard!" I announce. She replies, "Isn't this the quietest, loveliest, most peaceful place in town?" For reasons I cannot fully explain, I am suddenly deeply happy. We are the only two living humans in this wide expanse of mossy, rimy headstones. We stand exchanging pleasantries. Neither of us is in a hurry.

Back home, I spend a half hour searching the Priestley novel (*Bright Day*) until I find the lines I half-remembered earlier: *I experienced that feeling — common in childhood, rarer in youth and almost unknown later in life...of cosy enchantment, that sense of having snugly at hand, under the same protecting roof, almost all of this earth's most precious persons and things; which is the secret of a child's Christmas.* It strikes me that most of my adult life has been an attempt to remain alert to such enchantment — in all its brevity and elusiveness.

Later, at lunchtime I drive over to Jersey Mike's sub shop. I order half a veggie sub on rosemary-parmigiana bread. The radio in the store is playing *All You Need is Love*. I notice that the server, a stout guy in his twenties, has a tattoo that looks like a digital readout on his right forearm. The number reads 3:17.

"What's that mean?" I ask.

"It's the birthday of my grandmother," he says. He touches the tattoo with his latex-gloved finger, and his voice unexpectedly breaks with emotion. "She...was the most important woman in my entire life." And for one irrational moment, and it *is* irrational, I am flooded with the same certainty that had seized me in the graveyard: that I am standing in exactly the place I'm supposed to be standing — at this precise time, this song pouring out of the speakers, this tattoo in front of me, this incomprehensibly complex web of loss and love stretching around me: *that sense of having snugly to hand...almost all of this earth's most precious persons and things....* John Lennon sings: "There's nowhere you can be/That isn't where you're meant to be." And for a moment he's singing directly to me.