

LYNN FREED

*Gloria Mundi*

Sometimes, after my daily dose of radiation, I would stop at a small bath store near the hospital to buy a bar of soap, perhaps, or a bottle of bath gel. I liked the little shop; it was holding its own among the retro hippie emporia of the neighborhood, no hint yet of tea tree or patchouli or tie-dye.

Looking back on that time now, I wonder whether I was drawn to soaps and gels because, unlike, say, a belt or a pair of shoes, they could be counted upon not to outlast me. I don't know; I didn't go in search of a belt or shoes, and was in no mood for metaphors of mortality.

Down in the radiation suite, beyond natural light, it was as if a scrim had been lifted, revealing a just perspective on everything. I would look with keen interest at the other victims, wondering whether, like me, they had come to a new understanding, an acceptance—at times, even a celebration—of the temporal nature of all things.

Which was not to say I had not always known that nothing lasts. My twelve years in an Anglican school in South Africa had built in daily reminders of the impermanence of the things of this earth. So, too, did the poetry we read, the histories, the Bible itself. I would listen, I would read, I would understand. And then, when school was over, I would go back into my life, feeling immortal.

Still, as a Jew, I rather envied Christians their faith in an afterlife. Every morning, in prayers, we sang hymns, glorious hymns, Heaven all around us. "Everything shall perish away," sang our Zulu maid, daughter of a Methodist minister, with a lusty cheerfulness that made perishing away seem like joyful anticipation.

But for me, peddling off to Hebrew School three afternoons a week, there was no such assurance. Jews, as I came to understand it, didn't pay much attention to Heaven; when we died, it seemed, we disappeared. What did matter was to remember our earthly history, to observe our laws, and, never mind what the Almighty allowed to happen to us, to praise, glorify, exalt and extol Him regardless—He-whose-name-

was-so-terrible-it-was-never-to-be-uttered.

Meanwhile, my mind would wander away into the future, that time that seemed so slow in coming, when all this would be over, school and Hebrew school both, and I'd be free. But to be what, I would wonder? And where? And how? And even though I knew that the Almighty tended to smite those who disobeyed His laws, being smitten didn't worry me too much, sitting there on that hard bench with other fractious and smelly children, all of us worn out after a long day of it.

So, I would stare out of the window in what I took to be His direction and implore Him to get me through this and out into the real world as quickly as possible. If He did, I promised, I would praise, glorify, exalt, and extol Him every day of my life. *Sh'ma Yis'ra'el Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad.*

But then, out of nowhere, could come a thought to make my heart jump in terror: at any moment, death itself might snatch away my mother or my father. It had happened to others, it could happen to me. And for this even the thought of Heaven would provide no comfort. I wanted both of them here, on earth, alive, and if someone had to die first, I wanted it to be me. Then, at least, there would be no question of being left behind.

And so I kept a firm eye on them, taking comfort from their insouciance in the face of life's terrors as I saw them—doors left wide open to the night, windows too—and even from the way my father drove, like a madman, cornering on two wheels, pushing the old DeSoto to 108 mph on the open road.

When, finally, he did die, not in a car crash but, at the age of eighty-five, from lung cancer, still I was left—quite adult now, quite mindful of mortality—more shocked, more desolate and bowed down than I might have been as a child. It was as if childhood itself had died with him, home as well—a childhood and a home that, without thinking, I had counted on to carry me through to the end.

Then, a year after his death, anomalies showed up on a routine mammogram. Biopsies followed, blood tests, MRIs, CT scans, X-rays, a lumpectomy, and six weeks of radiation. People who claim to know how one thing leads to another had no doubt of cause and effect: some were for the death of my father, others for a divorce I'd battled through

some years before. Stress, grief, loss—these were the words invoked when laying blame for an illness whose cause was (and remains) unknown.

But grief is not a cigarette, and neither is stress. And none of the remedies offered by the grief-and-stress brigade—meditation, yoga, exercise, “mindfulness,” supplements, diets of every description—none of these seemed able to turn me from a person who worried things through to someone who could take things as they came.

Nor, I found, my brush with mortality notwithstanding, was I to be transformed from someone who could take pleasure in a bar of triple-milled French soap and, over time, in more enduring purchases—a pair of sandals, perhaps, linen sheets, an Indian miniature painted on ivory, an antique ivory doctor's doll—into an ascetic, or at least someone who would consider shopping trivial in light of the greater scheme of things.

And if, once the radiation was over, the purchases I began to make again were to outlive me, I could take pleasure even in this. In fact, the whole idea of transience took hold of me like a sort of rapture. *Sic transit gloria mundi*, we had learned in school. *Memento mori*. “Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!” we'd recited. “Ah! Vanitas Vanitatum!” we'd read, “Which of us is happy in this world? Which of us has his desire? Or, having it, is satisfied?”

And though, at the age of fifteen or sixteen, I understood quite well the truth and scope of Thackeray's words, ambitious as I was and wild for life, I enjoyed an unquestioning faith that the things I desired, both material and immaterial, would deliver a measure of satisfaction. Satisfaction, delight, hope—even the choosing of a new pencil box at the start of a school year could bring fresh immediacy to life.

It was with just such hope that, more than forty years later, the radiation treatments behind me, I went in search of something new to wear for an upcoming book tour. What I wanted was a change of look, something in keeping with the wisdom I thought I'd acquired during the soap-buying times. The writing of the book itself had straddled the long vigil over my father's dying, and I had finished it just before the offending mammogram. So now, a year later, there I was again, with what felt like familiar purpose, back at the racks, the shelves, the dressing rooms of desire.

My mother had practiced just such purposefulness when she was out on a hunt, clipping along in her stockings and heels, mouth set, watch consulted, as if the whole business of shopping were to be put behind her with dispatch so that the real work of the day—a play to stage, a cast to assemble—could begin.

But she didn't fool me. I knew perfectly well that shopping was work too, joyful work. To search among the limited offerings available in a far-flung country—to go in search of, say, an evening dress in which to take a bow, something classic that would endure when the fashions changed, or a good pair of Italian shoes, ditto, Sanderson linen for the lounge curtains that had perished in the sun, and, if there was time, to hurry down the lane to the little antique shop where Mr. Potts, who lent her props for her stage productions in return for an ad in the program, might be persuaded to lower the price on a lovely Georgian cigarette box, because how many years had they known each other? she would ask him, and then turn away to examine a pair of silver grape scissors so that he had time to consider—to spend a morning like this and then come away in triumph was to breathe the very oxygen of life.

The fact is objects of desire have always seemed to bring with them what I can only think of as promise for the future—not only in the having but also in the seeking of them. And if the search produces nothing, or if, once something is found, the promise turns to dust after a day or so, well, still there has been the sport of it, the anticipation, the pounce, the triumph over the deadening brake of common sense.

And yet, having made it back onto a real shopping street after all those months of abstinence, I felt as if unmoored. There I stood in front of a three-way mirror, trying too hard to love the look of myself in a breathtakingly expensive designer suit. I had chosen it over all natural inclination, but, somehow, the new way of seeing life had left me unable to see myself in any familiar way. Or even to dismiss the sales lady's loud approval, which would once have left me untouched. "Understated," she said, circling, "Timeless." And, staring at myself in the three-way mirror, pale and rather thin, I wished, oh, I wished that my mother were not old and demented or, even if she were, that her astral spirit were there to say to me, "Darling, take it off, it makes you look like an undertaker."

But she was not there, and, forgetting completely that I had never warmed much to understatement, and certainly not to the timelessness of mud green, I bought the suit, and wore it a few times during the book tour in the spirit of a cross-dressing undertaker. And then, when the tour was over, I retired it to the back of my wardrobe, where, happily, moths found it, making it easier to throw out when the time came.

And although the times for throwing out began to bank up more regularly—to take hold, in fact, as a sort of ideal—on the shopping streets themselves I was returning to myself. Strolling in and out of the shops, it was as if I'd never suffered any sobering reminders of perishing away for all the rapidity with which hope could return at the sight, say, of a cheerfully lined basket, marked down now because the overpriced little French boutique was going out of business.

I stared at it. Another basket? Was I not already rich in baskets? But if I was, so what? Almost every night now I woke in panic, 2 a.m., 3 a.m., alone in the darkness. *Timor mortis conturbat me*, I would tell myself, *Our pleasance here is all vain glory*.

What, then, in the greater scheme of things, could a French basket matter? This small pleasure? This brief dart of hope?

Nothing, that I knew. Standing there in the bright light of day, I reminded myself that summer was coming at last; I could use the basket to carry cutlery out into the garden when friends came for lunch. Or I could go to France myself. Or to Italy. Or to Greece. I could install myself on my favorite Greek island. Already I could imagine the view down terraced hills to the Aegean. Already, sandals were perching in shoe store windows like brightly colored swallows.

And the long gray winter was almost over.