



ETERNAL SILENCE

By

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Eternal Silence

I

In 1844, Democrat James Polk defeated Whig Henry Clay to become President of the United States. In 1840, Chicago, Illinois was the ninety-second most populous city in the United States. It had been originally settled in the 1830's although its first settler, French-Haitian Jean Baptiste Point duSable had built a farm at the mouth of the Chicago River in the 1780's.

Dexter Graves was an hotelier who had led the first colony to Chicago, consisting of 13 families, arriving here July 15, 1831 from Ashtabula, Ohio, on the schooner Telegraph. Now, in 1844, he lay weak and sickly in the bed in his small dwelling at 42 State Street. His young five-year old son Henry stood beside the bed holding one of his father's hands. "Do not worry, son," Dexter comforted the boy in a weak raspy voice. "Your mother will take good care of you. And I will be watching over you from heaven. Nothing bad will happen."

"Don't you worry, Father," Henry responded with feeling. "I will look after Mother. I will be the man of the house, you know. And I will take care of the horses, too. I will take care of everything." (The Graves had a livery right next door to their house.) Henry squeezed his father's hand as if to reassure the older man that his son would, indeed, be the man of the house. However, Henry wondered about what his father had told him about watching over the family from heaven. Was there really such a place as heaven where people went after they died? Henry was not sure. Oh, his father read to the family from their worn Bible every Sunday and everything Dexter Graves read to his

family sounded a bit scary but beautiful nonetheless. However, young Henry wondered about the truth of everything in the Bible.

Many years later, in 1909, Henry was a relatively old man of sixty-nine. Life was very different than it had been on that long ago day in 1844 when his father lay on his deathbed in the small family home on State Street. For one thing, Chicago was now the second largest city in the United States – a bustling, booming place with streetcars and elevated trains as well as automobiles. The Graves' livery was long gone. The United States had experienced the extremely bloody Civil War some thirty-five years ago. Chicago was now home to huge stockyards run by wealthy meatpacking barons like Philip Armour and Gustavus Swift. Steel mills near the city belched out smoke through their large smokestacks. Chicago had seen labor unrest – like the Haymarket riots in 1886 – and the rise of a notorious red light district presided over by two famous sisters – Ada and Minna Everleigh.

Through all the years, Henry had married, had a family, ran a successful business and belonged to a respectable church. Yet, he still had doubts about what lay ahead – what happened after a person died. His doubts troubled him. Henry decided to commission a memorial for his long-dead father. He hoped that perhaps doing this might ease his qualms about the existence of an afterlife. He had heard of a famous Chicago-area sculptor named Larado Taft, who had produced artwork for the Columbian Exposition among other things. In 1909, Taft was a lecturer on art at the University of Chicago. Henry Graves sought Taft out and commissioned the sculptor to create a memorial statue for Graves' father, Dexter.

The resulting sculpture – which Taft called “Eternal Silence” – did little to allay Henry’s fears about death and the afterlife – far from it. Henry felt a chill when he looked into the eyes of the completed robed figure. If anything, Henry felt more doubtful than ever that the Bible’s promise of life everlasting was a real one. He would have to die to find out.

II

The young couple walked slowly around the grounds of Graceland Cemetery. It was an idyllic, sunny day in May, 1942. However, life for many was far from idyllic. America was just beginning to recover from the Great Depression and now troops were being sent to Europe and Asia to fight against the Axis forces in World War II. The young man had just received his draft notice earlier that week and was scheduled to leave – and leave his wife of just a few short months – in just a few days.

“Ah, Kathleen, dear, don’t worry,” consoled the young man whose grandparents had come to Chicago during the potato famine in Ireland in the mid-1800’s. He, Gerry O’Malley was a sandy-haired, nice-looking young man. He and Kathleen had grown up in the same neighborhood, Bridgeport on the near-southwest side, gone to the same Catholic schools, the same Catholic church, had gotten married three months ago in that very church, and now lived in their own small bungalow in the neighborhood. Gerry had received his draft notice and thus, he and Kathleen – an equally attractive red-haired young woman of twenty-one – were spending as much time together as possible before Gerry went off to fight in the war. Neither was sure why they had selected Graceland Cemetery as a destination on that sunny May Saturday but after taking a bus and the elevated train, here they were wandering around the cemetery grounds.

They had just started on their walk through the cemetery when they came upon a forbidding statue of a robed man with dark eyes looking out forebodingly at them. Even the name of the statue was ominous – “Eternal Silence.” Kathleen could not help herself; she started to cry softly. Gerry wrapped his arm tighter around the young woman’s waist, pulled her toward him and kissed her tenderly. “Ah Kathleen,” he reassured her, “everything is going to be fine. God will watch over us and see that after the war is over, we live a long life together with lots of children and grandchildren. And if - God forbid – I don’t make it back, God will watch over you and you will have a long and happy life.” Kathleen managed a small smile and the couple walked on.

Several months had passed. Gerry sent letters to Kathleen when he could; he was stationed in northwestern France. He wrote of the horrors of war – of seeing his fellow soldiers die in battle, of his misgivings about killing enemy troops, of the lousy food and cramped living quarters. Gerry told Kathleen plaintively that he waited for the day when he was back in Bridgeport eating her delicious Irish stew. Kathleen wrote to Gerry about the drudgery of her life; she was now working as a stenographer in an office in the Loop for a small financial business. She found her typing and other duties to be quite uninteresting but she needed the money and this job was a fairly good one. Many young women she knew were working in the stockyards and Kathleen considered herself very fortunate to have secretarial skills.

On the weekends, Kathleen spent time with either her own family or Gerry’s family or both together since they were all very close. They all went to mass together on Sundays. One gray, cold Saturday in the middle of February, 1943, Kathleen was dressed in a fairly nice skirt and sweater and was brushing her long red hair in

preparation for a trip to the Loop with some female friends from the neighborhood.

They would go to Marshall Field's and walk around – nobody could really afford to buy anything – and perhaps stop for lunch at the lunch counter at the nearby Walgreen's Drug Store.

There was a loud rap on the front door of her small bungalow. Who could that be? She was meeting her friends at the bus stop on South Halsted and 35th Street. She went into the living room and unobtrusively stood at the side of the front window and looked out to see a young man in a military uniform standing on her front stoop. Kathleen's heart started to pound and her head began to throb. Should she pretend that nobody was home? She thought, perhaps, the uniformed soldier might have seen her walking to the window so she took a deep breath and walked to the door.

As the soldier quietly said the words she knew were coming, Kathleen started to cry quietly. "I am very sorry for your loss," the soldier told her stiffly but not unkindly before he turned and walked away. As he left, and Kathleen started sobbing more loudly, she suddenly had an image in her head of her trip with Gerry to Graceland Cemetery before he went to war. She remembered the sinister statue they had seen and even remembered its name – Eternal Silence – and remembered Gerry telling her that even if he did not make it back, God would watch over her and she would have a long and happy life.

Kathleen was not sure she wanted a long and happy life without the love of her life, Gerry. Still, she was a devout Catholic and did believe there was life after death. She knew in her heart that someday the pair would be reunited and be together eternally. She forcefully pushed the image of that imposing statue from her mind and

walked over to the small desk in the living room on which the telephone sat, and picked up the receiver to begin making the calls to family and friends letting them know about this horrible tragedy.

III

It was a warm but cloudy and gray day in June, 1984. Ronald Reagan had been elected seven months previously to his second term as President of the United States. Scores of progressives railed against Reagan's policies – such as his idea of “trickle-down” economics and his antipathy to a woman's right to choose. The twenty-something man and woman now entering the gates of Graceland Cemetery were not thinking about politics at that very moment. The young man had dyed black hair, arranged with the aid of hair gel, into short spikes on the top of his head. He was dressed in black – a black jean jacket, black pants and black combat boots. His girlfriend's hair was dyed an odd shade of red and her nose was pierced with a silver nose ring. She, too, was dressed in black – short black jacket, short black dress, ripped black stockings and black boots similar to her boyfriend's. Both sported scowls on their faces and had the then familiar style of snarling young people but, in truth, they were probably a fairly nice pair.

As the couple – Erik and Brenda – who shared an apartment in a run-down building in Chicago's uptown neighborhood – made their way into the cemetery, one of the first things to really catch their eye was a statue of a robed hooded man who peered ominously out at visitors. The small sign in front of the statue said it was called “Eternal Silence.” “Whoa,” said Erik admiringly, “that is so cool!”

“Oh yeah!” agreed Brenda. She suddenly started clicking her fingers and intoned: *“You’re dead now. Shit. You’re going to hell.”* These were the beginning lines of a eulogy from a then-in-vogue movie called *“Liquid Sky.”* (The female protagonist in the film had a strange power and everyone with whom she had sex, died immediately afterwards. When the woman’s sometime lesbian girlfriend found her with her first victim – an older male lover – the girlfriend said a very strange eulogy for the man.)

Brenda and Erik were not at all religious – not unlike many of their generation. Many young people at that time were rebelling against their upbringing in middle class families and Brenda and Erik exemplified this trend. Each had grown up in a Chicago suburb – Brenda in fairly well to do Deerfield and Erik in the more working class town of Joliet. They were not frightened by the hooded man whose eyes were ominously peering out at them – to the contrary, they were almost elated by the eeriness of the figure.

They had gone to their local branch of the Chicago Public Library a few days earlier to look for books about the cemetery. As their black clothes might indicate, Erik and Brenda were fascinated by things related to death even though they were pretty sure there was no afterlife. Still, they had once tried to hold a séance with some friends (they were unsuccessful in contacting anyone “from beyond”) and were enthralled with spooky movies or anything seemingly haunted. They had read a little about the statue but were unprepared for the reality of actually seeing it up close. They had never heard of either Dexter Graves or Larado Taft and were going to Graceland not because the couple was fascinated with Chicago history but because they were fascinated with death.

“So, whaddaya think?” asked Brenda as they stood contemplating the statue.
“Do you think there might be life after death?”

“Nah,” Erick replied although the slight tremor in his voice belied his seeming certainty. “You’re dead now. Shit – as the eulogy goes. And I don’t even think you’re going to hell. There is no heaven or hell!”

“Yeah – you’re ‘prolly’ right,” Brenda agreed. “Still, it would be cool to go to a heaven and meet people like Jim Morrison or Janis Joplin!”

“Nah,” Erik repeated, “not gonna happen!”

The pair looked intently at the hooded figure for a long time, each lost in his/her own thoughts about life and death. Then in unison, as if awakening from a trance, they looked at one another and moved on down the roadway.

IV

In 2012, a not-so-young returning female college student was taking a class at the Chicago university she was attending in which she was required to make a field trip to a “sacred or liminal” space. The woman, Jen Rosen, decided to visit Graceland Cemetery because she had always wanted to go there. She had been to another relatively famous Jewish Cemetery – Waldheim – in Forest Park – but wanted to see the gravesites of such notable Chicagoans as Marshall Field and Potter Palmer.

She decided to take a tour of the cemetery first so she would know a little bit about some of the people buried there. The first gravesite at which the tour group stopped was a sculpture showing a person peacefully looking upward and surrounded by his family. The tour guide explained that the sculptor wanted to show an optimistic

picture of death – showing that a person is reunited with his/her loved ones in the afterlife..

The very next gravesite the group stopped at was that of Dexter Graves with its foreboding statue by Larado Taft. Jen was taken with the way this statue did, indeed, show that death is unknowable. She had never heard of Dexter Graves but had seen some photographs of sculpted works by Larado Taft in the south hallway on the main floor of the Harold Washington Library.

Jen continued on the tour but that statue continued to haunt her. When she returned to Graceland Cemetery a few days later to walk around on her own and write up her notes, one of the first gravesites at which she paused was that of Dexter Graves. She stood, pondering the statue and its meaning for a long time.

Jen did feel that death is unknowable. She used to say, rather emphatically, that she was an atheist. However, her friend Dick asked her, “But, Jen, do you KNOW?”. She had to admit that she did not know if there was a God or a heaven and hell and thereafter, referred to herself more truthfully as an agnostic. She hoped there was something after death but was doubtful.

Still, she figured that if there was a heaven, she would be there. She certainly did not feel that one had to be religious to go to heaven. One merely had to be a good person and do good things while alive. She thought that even someone who spewed vitriol about religion – Karl Marx – would be in heaven because his ideas – however unworkable they might be – were well intentioned and designed to help people, particularly the working class. She argued her point animatedly with a very nice guy in her building – a black guy who was very involved in his church. He insisted that the

Bible said that only those who believe in God would go to heaven. Jen was sure the guy was wrong so asked a friend of hers – an Episcopal priest – for his opinion. He opined that nobody knows for sure who will go to heaven. That, the priest told Jen, is for God to decide.

Even with those reassuring words, Jen was still fearful of death. She was still convinced that if there were a heaven, she would be there after she died but she was doubtful that there is any life after death. Jen hoped those with real faith were right but she just did not know. She just did not know.

Religious groups talk about an afterlife with some certainty but differ on what an afterlife will be like. For example, the Anglicans must have had some doubts about eternal life when they wrote, in *The Book of Common Prayer: We commit his body to the ground; earth to earth; ashes to ashes, dust to dust.* Religious people – including the Anglicans – may hope for eternal life, but in truth, death is probably dust, the body decomposing in its burial place, eternal silence --- for Dexter Graves, for Henry Graves, for Loredo Taft, for you, for me,

DISCLAIMER: While the information about Chicago history and some things relating to Dexter Graves are factual, and some of the incidents in the final section of the story are based on fact, everything else is fiction.