

Beyond the Rainbow

Julie Mars, *A Month of Sundays: Searching for the Spirit and My Sister*
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The suffering of those we love is arguably the sorest test of our faith, a greater trial than anything that might befall us personally. And when that suffering ends, death leaves behind a deep silence composed equally of the dead person's inability to tell her own story, and all the survivor now knows to be true, but cannot, in sorrow, find words to say. Julie Mars' *A Month of Sundays* is a memoir of seven months spent as primary care-taker for her sister Shirley, living with / dying of pancreatic cancer, and of Mars' search for her own faith after her sister's death. Its genius is that Mars refuses to let silence engulf her, or swallow up all traces of her sister's life on earth. Instead, Mars goes forward (how hard that alone can sometimes be!), and in what eventually reveals itself to have been a prescient act of self-preservation, she actually sets the 'ground rules' for her own period of mourning:

I will go to church every Sunday for thirty-one weeks: a month of Sundays. I will dress up and arrive a half hour early to take a picture with Shirley's simple camera, which I have taken from her farmhouse. I will enter the church five minutes early and sit somewhere in the middle. I will open my heart to the spirit.

Part of the curious value of this undertaking is that, because of Mars' wide-openness to experience and her reluctance to dismiss any possible meaning, you're invited to translate the moments (miracles?) she describes along the way into your own parlance. Mars' sister Shirley, a 'pillar of love', worked for many years in a nursing home, where she befriended a resident who suffered from gigantism. After her death, the man, terminally ill himself, vividly reported receiving a visit from Shirley, who comforted him and calmed his fears about dying. Did she really come back, an apparition from beyond the grave, to soothe her old friend's terror? Was it a medication-induced hallucination? Or was her kindness to him in life, and his

memory of it, the source of the encounter he related? Mars defers to you to settle the question in your own mind, and in so doing, acknowledges the irreducibility of such moments and their power – so heavily dependent on our way of seeing – to change our lives. Interestingly (coincidentally? miraculously?), the two men depending on Shirley to welcome them into Heaven, her father, John Kress, and Bill Dwyer, her giant, died on the same day.

Though it pulls no punches regarding Shirley's condition, the book is by no means unrelievedly somber. As in life, there is humor here, even in the most difficult days, as when Mars and her niece mistake Shirley's 'I'm gonna go!' for her last words, when in fact she only needs to urinate. Mars is a fierce noticer of what needs to be noticed; indeed, one might wish for a more muscular word to express the level of her engagement with her surroundings and all the opportunities she finds for meaning to enter her life. She movingly describes the sweet sacrament of eating a bag of jelly beans 'by the handful in Shirley's car' while 'all around [her] flowers are bursting forth like fireworks,' her sister's funeral just days away. She has an eye for the serio-comic (half saintly, half clownish) essence of our existence, as in the accidental real-life juxtaposition of two videos on her shelf: 'a documentary of the life of Mother Theresa [...] right next to *Up in Smoke*, by Cheech & Chong.' And she offers us a heartstanging yet affirmative image of the love that outraces death in her description of 'the little yellow sailfish,' a boat that Shirley, knowing she would not be there to ride in it, bought 'on time' for the family as a parting gift. With Mars, we feel the inseparability of loss and joy as we watch it 'cut across the lake' 'like a sunbeam,' months after Shirley's death.

The music Mars encounters on her Sundays is marvelously various, from 'Zippity Doo Dah' (yes, really!), 'As Time Goes By,' and New York jazz, sans smoke and liquor, to beloved traditionals such as 'I'll Fly Away' and perky new offerings like 'Life is a Blast!' But the most moving hymn to possibility in the book is the song and dance of grief and joy she and Shirley's six children perform to a particularly meaningful (for them) version of 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow,' sung by a '750-pound Hawaiian who died young,' 'Israel Kamakawiwo'ole, otherwise known as Iz K':

Robert [Mars' husband], Shirley's kids and I sat in the living room and, after the first few notes, we jumped to our feet and began to hula. We made big sweeping gestures above us to indicate the rainbow. We flapped our arms to look like 'bluebirds, way up high.' We developed hand and arm motions to mean lullaby, lemon drops,

chimney tops. We played that song (my nephew Jimmy made a tape of it) a hundred times during the Final Dive [the last days of Shirley's life].

On Christmas night, after Shirley finally passes away, Mars and her niece and namesake Julie, 'without thinking twice, put "Some-where Over the Rainbow" into the tape player':

We blasted it, top volume. We stood facing Shirley in her bed, shoulder to shoulder, and we did our whole routine. For her. In the song, there is a line that says, 'That's where you'll find me.' We changed that to, 'That's where we'll find you,' and we both pointed at Shirley in perfect unison, like the Supremes. And when, in the 'Wonderful World' part of the song, Iz K sings, 'they're really saying, I... I love you,' Julie and I looked right into each other's eyes. We didn't turn it off until we saw headlights coming down the dirt road.

It's these private ceremonies, these endearingly odd and utterly personal expressions of love, that, paradoxically, make *A Month of Sundays* universal in its appeal. Everyone has lost or will lose someone she loves. People become silly at the saddest times. A ritual can be whatever comforts us, a song that even one other person 'gets,' too, and will agree to sing with us when we most need to hear the sound of another human voice. Hand motions. All together now. Mars lets us know that while spiritually making your own way may have its pitfalls (you're at the mercy of your own, sometimes insufficient, energies, for example) you also remain free to customize your own meaning, as Shirley's children do when saying farewell to their aunt Julie, who stayed with their mother until the very end.

I was sitting on the floor in the living room when I heard the kids whisper, 'Should we do it now?' And then, everyone started to sing – to me:

Happy trails to you, until we meet again.
Happy trails to you, keep smiling until then.
Happy trails to you, till we meet again.

– the theme song to the old Roy Rogers Show, which I loved as a kid, and which I sang to them and they sang back to me every time I came or went from Shirley's house during the hippie years, and after. At every little ending.

They formed a line, starting with Billy's son, Alan, and filed past me. Alan placed a cooler in my lap and

opened it. Then Andrew, Billy's older son, filed by and put a one-pound bag of peanut M&Ms in it. One by one, they marched by, still singing 'Happy Trails.' And at this little end, I had:

a cooler
two one-pound bags of peanut M&Ms
one one-pound bag of plain M&Ms
a six-pack of caffeine free Diet Pepsi
a road atlas
a bag of food for my dog, Maggie
the latest Mad Magazine
gas cards to pay for my whole trip back to New Mexico.

And, of course, Shirley's car to make the trip in.

'Grief, like life, ends,' Mars observes, with characteristic clarity, near the conclusion of her odyssey, 'and there's not a damn thing you can do about it.' It has its own season, its own number of Sundays, different for each of us. The spirit, Mars ultimately finds, is not located in a particular building or set of prescribed beliefs, because it is everywhere. Because it is within us, though, like the gradually deteriorating 'Shirley candle' Mars lights every morning so her sister 'can find' her, we may be cracked into 'jagged pieces' and held together with 'blue rubber broccoli-bands.' Near the end of the book, the candle shatters irretrievably, as it should, because it is no longer needed. Mars herself has become the bearer of its light, her extraordinary love (the kind so miraculously borne along the street in the heart of almost everyone you see), the vehicle of her sister's survival. 'With a short-handled shovel, left by [her] sister in her flower garden' only a year before, she buries 'the red shards' of her grief under a maple tree, a 'volunteer,' growing not far from Shirley's bedroom window.

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