Ora

'The light,' they say, 'is near to the darkness.'

Job 17:12

Jerusalem, June 1971. I had not come to the Holy Land as a tourist. Several weeks earlier, I learned that my sister, Carol, was in an Israeli psychiatric hospital, diagnosed as schizophrenic. My parents told me that her doctors said that a visit from me might help her return to reality. We had always been close. I was then twenty-three; she was twenty-five.

Carol had come to Israel a year earlier, after she finished college, a Bachelor in Fine Arts from Cornell. She had been a painter all her life, in love with colors. Most of her work was "abstract"; which to me meant that you couldn't find any definable stuff in it. It was never abstract to her; it was the thing itself – colors forming, melding, surprising each other as they burst in and over. "It is their relationship," she would explain to me. And she would show me a painting and ask me if I liked it. I'm a "stuff" kind of person. Although a writer, I find even poetry mostly inscrutable. Somehow, I managed – or she allowed me – to dodge the question.

Carol had come to Israel to find a new life. She was not a Zionist; her identity as a Jew was typical of the suburban town outside New York where we grew up. Not impassioned. But she had found something there, in the people, the colors, the not-suburban town, that drew her. She spoke of Israel more or less the way she spoke of

Emerson whom we used to playfully argue about. "You have to feel it," she insisted. "Either you feel it or you don't." In the 1960s, that won the point as well as anything.

She felt it. During the first six months, she learned enough Hebrew to get through rudimentary conversation. She had had a few love affairs (we were never shy about sharing adventures). She had rented a small apartment in Jerusalem that was also her art studio. She was painting continuously. She changed her name to "Ora," which is Hebrew for "light," and, of course, the middle part of "Carol" read the Hebrew way, from right to left. When I look back at our letters from that period, which were long and philosophic, I remember it always felt silly to address the Carol I had known all my life as "Ora." But she would not have it any other way.

There were no clear signs of madness in her letters, although they stopped coming during the weeks before I heard the news. When we talked once on the phone, there was a strain that I did not understand. I assumed it was one more thing that she "felt," and I didn't. So I was not prepared for the person I met when I arrived. Thin, vigilant, brittle, she accepted my hug but could not return it. When we went out to eat, she told me that there were things she could see, but I wouldn't: what people said, a stranger's glance, the numbers on a bus or a bill or a restaurant's address. She was living with a kind of "mindfulness" to which some might aspire. She was awash in significance and meanings. But they all portended threat. A prophet of God—which she now thought she was--accepted this. Either you feel it or you don't.

Years later, Carol (she was "Carol" again) told me more about what had happened. During the weeks before her first psychotic break, she had started to paint

compulsively, almost around the clock. She wanted to capture all the light that she saw. And, in Jerusalem, she saw it everywhere. And then painting became her enemy. She was seeing too much and it was making her crazy. She couldn't stop painting, but she had to stop. It would be years before she felt strong enough to risk painting again.

For me, before I knew any of this, it was simpler. My sister, whom I loved, was gone. She was crazy, and I knew it. But these were the days of R.D. Laing and "anti-psychiatry" and everyone has their own reality and who knows. I had never been with a psychotic person before, let alone someone I'd known all my life. Maybe I was missing something. And I did not want to become another one of her persecutors (which, it was clear, she was anticipating). And I was there because I was supposed to help "bring her back to reality" (she was not the only one with delusions). So, with the person whom I already knew better and who knew me better than anyone in the world, I tried a kind of "interfaith dialogue." Which, in retrospect, was both a very loving and a very silly thing to do.

One morning, about five days into the trip, I told her I couldn't meet her; there were some things I needed to buy. This was a lie. I simply couldn't take the strain of being with her. The numerology of everything, the threats of everywhere, and my feelings of helplessness and anger toward Carol for being crazy were more than I could bear.

It was one of those Jerusalem days in which the sun is so bright that it is itself almost unbearable. The light of Jerusalem is famous. It is part of what brought Carol there and why, as Ora, she tried to become it and paint it until she couldn't anymore. It is

not like the light of Florence, also famous, but much gentler. The light in Jerusalem, reflected everywhere in silica and sandstone, comes back hard to the eye. I cannot help but see something vicious in it. Or, like the mistral, perhaps something so unremitting it can drive you crazy. Or, like God, something so encompassing that it can command you to sacrifice your beloved Isaac or Ishmael just to see if you will do it. The Sun God tolerates no shade, no shadows, no idols, no nonsense. The Sun God tolerates no other gods before it.

I needed to be by myself. Without planning, I walked from the Jerusalem YMCA – a hostel well known to be the best deal in town – to the Mount of Olives. And, still without planning, I took a turn and found myself in Gethsemane.

Gethsemane in June is a riot of color. Had Jesus arrived a few weeks later, and stayed longer, he might have plea-bargained. Amidst the lushness, the blooming, this was no place to meditate and die. It was a garden of a sort I had never seen, a passion of a different kind, and particularly in the city of sandstone which reflects rather than refracts. Washing out degrees and distinctions, that is why Jerusalem has much more light than color.

In Gethsemane, there was both. And I remembered things Carol had said about color and imagined that I was beginning to understand. Not stuff, but colors themselves, and their relationships. Perhaps this was what I had come to find. Perhaps this was what I needed to crack the code to get my sister back. Perhaps some Force that she would understand had led me there.

Even the garden became too bright to linger in, and so I went into the church that was adjacent. I didn't know its name or significance at the time. Only later I learned it

was the Church of All Nations in commemoration of the many countries that had contributed to its construction in the 1920s. It is also known as the Basilica of the Agony in commemoration of the Passion. Inside, there is a large rock on which it is said Jesus prayed the night before his crucifixion. The building itself is ecumenical in style: domes on all sides that could be taken for minarets, along with a Byzantine exterior. Earlier, there had been a Byzantine church on the site.

Coming in from the brightness of the garden, when I first entered the church I saw nothing – total darkness. I felt my way along a wall and to a bench. It took a long time for my eyes to adjust. And all I ever really saw was a diffuse light of purple blue that seemed to come from nowhere. Then I saw what appeared to be windows high up, which were the source. I later learned these were made of a translucent alabaster intended to reveal the interior only gradually. My own revelation, I imagined, was itself coming gradually. "You have to feel it." I convinced myself that maybe I did. I never noticed the rock or the mosaics depicting Judas' betrayal and Jesus' arrest.

When I saw Carol the next day, I was excited to tell her about the experience in Gethsemane. I thought this could be the start of a new bridge between us. But she was much too preoccupied with the voices and the numbers to hear anything I said. The rest of the trip was taken up mainly by my inventing reasons to limit our time together, looking for help from Carol's Israeli psychiatrists and not getting any, and counting down the days until I could leave. Call me Judas. Call me Ishmael.

Children of light; children of darkness. It is always in the light that the blessed live; and in the dark, the accursed. "For the Lord God is a sun and shield," says Psalm

84. It is said that the Dome of the Rock was once so bright that it was impossible to look directly at it. Saul was blinded by a brilliant light on the way to Damascus and could not see anything for three days, at which time, as Paul, he saw everything. "The Egyptian god H(or), in Greek as Horus, is from the same root as ora, a source of light. "God is the light of the heavens and the earth," says the Qur'an. "Light upon light, God guides those whom he pleases." "And God said, Let there be light," says Genesis. Thus ending (by creating) Day One.

The only part of the Yom Kippur service that ever really moved me, besides the haunting Kol Nidre, was its ending as sunset approached. The autumn light came into our synagogue at soft angles at that hour. The border between light and dark seemed more interesting – and, to me, more holy - than either one alone.

Too bad we don't hear more about the Children of Twilight or of Dusk.

Heavily medicated, Carol was brought back to the United States about a year after I saw her in Jerusalem. This time my parents went. They had arranged for her to be at a hospital outside of Boston, where I lived at the time. Carol later told me that she thought I resented this, being put in the role of having to care for her again. She was not entirely wrong. And yet, it was wonderful to have dinner together every Sunday, and, over eight years, we shared our thoughts and reflections again. In our family, no one had a monopoly on madness. She and I had been the "groundlings," exchanging ironic asides while the others lost their heads. That was a large part of how we got through childhood, helping each hold on to as much reality as we could shelter.

People who live with schizophrenia (Carol never wanted to be called “a schizophrenic”) very rarely recover. As with other chronic illnesses, many are able to contain and cope through support and medication. They themselves live in a twilight world in which the voices are never far away. When they hear them, they learn not to listen. Or they talk back. Or they talk with their friends or their brothers.

None of this should be sentimentalized. Living with schizophrenia also deserves a church of all nations and a basilica of agony.

At the end of August, 2000, I got a call one Friday morning in Michigan. I had moved to Ann Arbor at the end of the 1970s. Carol and I saw each other a lot less, of course, and I was not good – I was, indeed, very bad - at keeping touch by phone. Still, the old closeness was there when we spoke or saw each other, even if there was that frightened, brittle part of her as well.

The voice said: “I am sorry to have to relay this. Your sister Carol has died.”

She had been found on the floor of a bathroom early that morning. There was no sign of cause. She had been living for several years in a “halfway house” that she loved. She was close to many who also lived there, her illness brothers and sisters. For the past few years, she had started to paint again, and had signed up for art classes that were to begin the next week. She had put together a portfolio that she was sending to galleries, and some of her work was for sale in Boston restaurants. Again, it was about colors mixing and melding.

The autopsy showed nothing. But toxicology, which came back a few weeks later, showed an unusually high level of the antipsychotic drug, clozapine, which she had

been taking, and which, it's now known, can cause sudden cardiac death. Was it an impulsive overdose? An accident? The result of an interaction with one or more of her several other drugs? There were many bottles full of pills in her room, some prescriptions just filled. If Carol had wanted to kill herself, she had a lot of options.

I will never know. There is a general belief that suicides are always clear in retrospect – there was some sign, some indication. That is probably not true. But, whatever it means, even looking back no one close to Carol could find any such signal. If anything, she seemed to be looking forward in her life. But one should never underestimate the power of impulse. And of many years in the company of loneliness and shadows.

My wife and I "made arrangements." My parents had both been gone for several years. My older sister and Carol had been estranged from even before Carol had gone to Israel. I had an uncle in New Hampshire who knew a Jewish funeral home in Boston. That was what we arranged, the rest to be decided when we arrived.

I went there to "view the body." Her face was cold, of course, and she did not look peaceful. Her mouth, stitched closed, could not break into one of the ironic asides that I still expected from her. I could not help saying what she would have anticipated me to say under the circumstances. "Carol, we have a problem. You're dead. And I'm not sure what to do." After a couple of beats – she had perfect comedic timing – I heard her saying in my head: "Well geez, Hank. We should probably have a funeral."

Because it was Labor Day weekend, we had some extra time to think things through. Carol's religiosity had included a little bit of everything since she had lived in Boston. Like many others in that city, she was a Jewish-Christian-Buddhist-polyspiritual kind of person. In general, she went wherever she felt warmth, which had become more important than light.

The funeral home told us about a new Jewish cemetery well out in the Boston suburbs, not far from Emerson's old haunts. And, indeed, the Jewish cemetery was immediately adjacent to an archetypal New England cemetery, which had, among its interred, Revolutionary War veterans and the full nineteenth-century panoply from Whigs and Democrats to Victorians (with a Civil War obelisk marking the divide) to those who died into the century just passed.

Because the Jewish cemetery section was so new, one could pretty much pick the spot. And so my wife and I strolled around it in the waning September afternoon, talking about the advantages and disadvantages of the "view" Carol would have (keeping in mind her horizontal plane) from this plot versus that one. "View" is important. Almost universally, we imagine it is for them rather than for us. It is a way of persisting in our care.

We settled on a plot midway between sun and shadow. Facing East, wonderfully tall elms and oaks shaded it until about noon. Then the sunlight crept in slowly, dappled, careful, as the afternoon progressed. Even later in the day, there was enough give in the branches that the light was constantly modulating, so that a change in the breeze could easily transform it.

Saul/Paul would not have been blinded nor enlightened here. Amidst the unpredictable shade and shadows, Abraham might have given things a second thought, and Jesus might have sustained the possibility that he really was forsaken after all.

It was a good place for lingering reflection and communion. And for the sanctity of beloved uncertainties and good-byes.