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### **Journal Entry #5: Saying Goodbye**

My memories of Saba are very blurry and suffer from the fact that I did not know at the time how fiercely I would want to remember him. My grandfather lived halfway across the world, and at the time, I didn't speak his language well enough to understand him beyond the rudimentary talk of food and scenery. He was a strong bear of a man who had grown, in his old age, to look very much like the baby he must have once been; his eyes were watery and gentle behind the thick lenses of his glasses. He made the best scrambled eggs I had ever tasted, which as I vaguely remember, he served to me every morning in a goblet. When I ate his potato pancakes I could taste what my mother had been attempting to duplicate all along.

"I've brought you here through intellect and art; from now on, let your pleasure be your guide; you're past the steep and past the narrow paths" (Purg. XXVII, 130-132). We sat on a bench in the park and he told me stories about bringing refugees from a tattered Europe to Israel after the Second World War. He asked me about school and about what I wanted to do in life. I was only ten, a stupid age when you can sit there with a man who fought the Nazis, helped found a country, and reared your own mother and do all the talking. I do remember, though, that he smiled at me and patted me lightly on the shoulder. I see us from behind sitting there, like a Norman Rockwell painting, so I know I can't totally trust the memory, but I remember it anyway.

Part of the pain of death is that its threat underlies every emotional commitment we make. The more you trust and care for a person, the harder the inevitable moment when that person is no longer there. Virgil tells Dante from the very beginning that his role as guide is finite: "If you would then ascend as high as these, a soul more worthy than I am will guide you; I'll leave you in her care when I depart" (Inf. I, 121-123). Still the moment of disappearance is difficult for Dante. It is interesting that the Pilgrim

does not notice Virgil's disappearance until he needs the security of knowing that he is there.

Unfortunately, like Dante at the top of Mount Purgatory, many of us don't have the privilege of a satisfying parting with the people we love. By the time we realize what the person meant to us, all we can do is hope that they knew in some unspoken way.

"But Virgil had deprived us of himself, Virgil, the gentlest father, Virgil, he to whom I gave myself for my salvation; and not even all our ancient mother lost was enough to keep my cheeks, though washed with dew, from darkening again with tears" (Purg. XXX, 49-54). The last time I saw my grandfather I was on a class trip to Israel, caught up in the excitement of being away from my family for the first time. He was in the hospital, and I hated the smell of his hospital room. No one told me that I would never see him again, so I didn't really take a good last look. Now I only remember his face in sections. We got the call in the middle of the night and the next day we were on the plane to Israel, to the funeral, to the long days sitting in the house while his friends payed their respects.

I went back to Israel this summer to visit my family and friends there, including my grandfather's companion in the last ten years of his life and my adopted grandmother, as my real grandmother died when I was a baby. Sitting at the table where he used to play with me in the morning, I listened to her talk about her failing health and the loneliness of being largely confined to the house. I realized that I had been given the opportunity to do what I hadn't had the foresight and maturity to do when I was younger. I asked her questions and listened to her stories and gave her many hugs. And the last day, before I went home, I went to visit her again, just to give her one more kiss on the cheek. She and I both knew that it might be our last time together, but that parting wasn't sad. It was a closure, but not an ending.

"Do in me preserve your generosity, so that my soul, which you have healed, when it is set loose from my body, be a soul that you will welcome" (Para. XXXI, 87-90). Dante grows up too. He will not let Beatrice slip away without a clear moment of closure, of thanking her for what she has done and letting her know, in a humble way, that he will live out what he has learned. Most importantly, Dante gets to watch her go. "And she, however, far away she seemed, smiled, and she looked at me. Then she turned back to the eternal fountain" (Para. XXXI, 91-93).

