



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“Stay, illusion!”

-William Shakespeare,
Hamlet, Act I, Scene 1

About once a month, someone will come to the reference desk, looking for a quotation for a special occasion. Frequently it's a wedding, but it can also be a birthday, a graduation or even a funeral.

I was reminded of this last week when it became clear that my mother was going to die soon and, as we all sat by her bedside in the hospital room, my father began to quote lines from various writers, including Keats and Shakespeare. As I listened to him and looked around the room at my family, I started thinking about all the ways literature has tied us together.

My mother, had she been able, would have added lines from plays she directed, particularly Chekhov or Beckett. My sister-in-law was reading Graham Greene stories, because my father had brought a copy to the hospital and she wanted to support him. My brother had brought a book to read to my mother and it was lying on one

of surfaces, alongside a stack of crossword puzzles and a copy of MENSAs brainteasers, which one of my daughters had spent some time reading aloud for everyone's amusement.

We are a family that has thrived on book discussions and the shared love of particular genres, especially novels, poetry, drama and, my mother in particular, mysteries. My mother's closet, which holds many of her clothes, is also known as the "mystery closet," because one side of it has bookshelves lined with mysteries, mainly paperback. In it you can find all of our old favorites, like Dorothy Sayers, Ngaio Marsh, Rex Stout, Margery Allingham, Ruth Rendell and P.D. James. In fact, my stack of books in the hospital room was from that closet - comfort reading, I guess you could call it.

Over the few weeks when my mother was in and out of the hospital, I had many telephone conversations with my dad and several of them

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involved some literary reference. When we finally realized this was the end, he started searching his mind for relevant quotes, hoping, I think, to find some line that could sum up the life of someone he loved. I was struck by his reservoir of lines and words and how many of us turn to others to find the words we want.

During that last week, someone asked me what my mother was dying of and I suppressed the impulse to say “life,” because that’s what it seemed like. And that immediately reminded me of one of my mother’s favorite Chekhov lines: “I’m in mourning for my life,” from *The Seagull*.

In a way, you could say these quotes are not unlike oral history. Many of the lines in my head are only there because they have been recited to me, not necessarily because I have actually read the original poem or play or novel. They have

been woven into our lives, just as you would tell a childhood story over and over again.

I am grateful to have these words in my life. I’d like to say they give solace, but I think it is more apt to say they provide the companionship of others’ losses and a different vocabulary for the simple emotion of grief.

Today’s book review is *Year of Grace*, by Margaret Hope Bacon. This novel, which is published by the Quaker Press, is about a woman, Faith, and the last year of her life. It takes a story that could be maudlin and presents, instead, the thoughts and actions of a feisty woman who struggles to understand her life and what it has meant.