

JACOB'S FINAL DESIRE

January 20, 2016

Our home stands on a hill. During rainy season water gushes in the center of the road, streaming mud and pebbles, filling gutters. Rain unobserved and unmeasured slips downhill between houses set on rock, no basement structure. Between house and rock live ants and roaches nesting in darkness until water floods them out. Each house separates one from another with external walls elbow to elbow, above and below ground.

Wall paint bubbles in the bedroom and kitchen, our rooms furthest uphill. Tentatively, I touch one of the blisters. Beneath it, the brick feels wet. When my eyes move up the wall, at the height of a tall man, another bubble, and then another. Brick absorbs like a sponge.

Rain falls between five and seven P.M., June through October. Quiet hours indoors. I stream news on the internet, or monitor the insidious rise of layers of paint. I wait.

Hello, is this Jacob? This is your favorite cousin!

What, is that you, Tony?

Yes, it's me, Tony! I was down in Puerto Escondido at a wedding and decided to drive up with my wife just to see you. But the car broke down, I lost my wallet with my credit card and I need a new transmission! Could you please wire a thousand dollars to my bank account? Of course I'll pay you back!

When I returned home from lunch with a friend, Jacob greeted me, beaming with excitement.

Guess who's coming! Tony! With his wife Sarah! They'll be here in an hour!

He smiled broadly, vibrantly. He rubbed the leg sores under his sweat

pants, scuffed his feet, swollen around their soft cloth slippers.

Confusion all around; it took me a minute to sort it out. Nely answered the phone, the nurse who speaks no English. The male voice on the other end of the line asked for Jacob, and she handed the phone over. Jacob didn't quite understand, except that Tony was nearby and driving up to Oaxaca.

Oh no he isn't.

I tried to explain to Jacob, whose communications these days consist largely of one word answers to simple questions. Are you hungry? Are you thirsty? Yes. No.

Tony is much younger than Jacob; he's the son of Aram, Jacob's favorite uncle, who died several years ago. Tony heads a physics department in New York. Jake assures me Tony is coming. Jacob's need flows. Any minute!

Finally, I took Jacob by the hand. Well, ok, let's do your shower so you'll be clean when they arrive. Nely helped me manage the shower, manage the hot water, manage shampoo, towels, skin cream for his never-ending eruptions of shingles. I thought Jacob might forget, but he didn't. He referred to Tony several times. During supper, he stood up periodically, to peer through various windows. By then, lamplights revealed only closed black metal doors across the street, a few parked cars. No passersby.

After supper, we guided Jacob to his rocking chair, where he gently moved to and fro, gazing out, occasionally turning the pages of the latest National Geographic resting on his lap. Nely turned on his tablet, then navigated to YouTube and a black and white film starring Roy Rogers and Trigger. Man gets girl, man gets horse, bad guy goes to jail. Jacob watched for a while, then remarked, This is silly. This is crap. No further comment. I turned it off. The living room was half-lit, revealing no breaks in the wall above the level of streaming rain. Behind their cut tin lampshades, the bulbs held steady. A calm evening. The night nurse arrived. Jacob didn't budge. Nely departed. The gate closed behind her with a metallic clack.

At ten o'clock, I told Jacob that I didn't think Tony would get here tonight. He nodded. I said, I'm going to bed. He nodded. I kissed his forehead and he replied, Goodnight Sweetheart. I left Jacob with the nurse and went straight to the bedroom, to release the stifled tears.

Perhaps it would be better if I told Jacob that there was an accident

on the highway from Puerto: a huge gas tank fell off the road and exploded. Oaxaca roads cave on precipitous sides, bad shoulders. Common accidents. I could tell him no one was injured, but the road is closed to traffic. If Jacob still remembers that Tony is coming, I'll tell him that Tony emailed me, heartbroken that he won't make it to Oaxaca because of the road closure. I'll tell him that they've decided to fly from Puerto to Mexico City, and from there to New York, so that Tony can return to the university in time for his duties. Or maybe I should say they have to get back for Sarah's classes. I don't know whether Sarah teaches, or has ever taught, but I need a strong story. The night nurse Flor, not given to lying like me, said we should wait it out: he'll forget. It's true, Jacob rarely remembers much from one day to the next, but he remembered when his daughter Wendy was coming. He opened the guest room door, looking for her in the morning. I saw his joy.

And sure enough, he remembered that Tony was coming. I dumped the accident story and tried to get closer to reality. Tony's not coming. You must have misunderstood. He nodded. By midday he wanted to telephone Tony to ask when he would arrive.

I don't have Tony's phone number, nor one for Jacob's brother. I'll send Wendy an email to ask for Tony's number.

In the email. I explained the situation to Wendy. I never look forward to her visits, the house is too small to accommodate four people: the two of us, a nurse, and the housekeeper who doesn't leave until three in the afternoon. The guest room, separated from the house, accumulates stains on its coral colored wall. That's the wall abutting the neighbor's, uphill. The run-off leaves the room damp and cool. The bright paint doesn't warm it, nor do the bright towels and shower curtain in its private bathroom. I don't want Wendy's bulky goodwill. Jacob wants her.

She phoned at six o'clock. Jacob grinned during her call, although he repeatedly changed her name from Wendy to Frances (Wendy's dead mother) to Tony to Aram. A constant designation of Sweetheart. Smiles flowed inside his disconnected mind, illuminating his face like a jack o' lantern candle until Wendy concluded the call. Jacob sat down peacefully to eat supper. He didn't get up to look out the window. A gentle drizzle moistened the patio.

Jacob said, Tony's not coming. Sometimes people call, but it's almost

always a scam.

On Tuesday, Jacob sat outside in the patio. Cool, but not wet. The kalenchoe bloomed red and yellow, the nopal lay down sun-bathing, spreading their flat ears. The nurse brought juice for Jacob in a plastic glass. I said I'm going for my exercise; I'll be back in an hour. That's fine, he replied. I'll stay here and wait for Tony.

On Wednesday, he came to my workroom to ask if the phone call he heard was from Wendy. No, I replied, that was the nursing agency boss who's coming for her money.

On Friday, I sent Tony an email at the address Wendy provided. His prompt reply read, I'm so sorry we couldn't get there, but maybe soon. Sarah is fine, the children are fine living on their own. I like my new position at the university.

I printed the email and handed it to Jacob. It's from Tony. He can't make the trip right now. Maybe in the spring. The window in Jacob's face closed.

In winter months, the weather here remains mild. Clouds related to other storms pass by, blurring the sun, sometimes all day, but without rain. By January the ground kicks up dust. The brick walls feel dry beneath my hand. In daylight I note how the stains recede, like Jacob, like Jacob's final desires.

—Nancy Davies. All rights reserved.

This story also appears in my upcoming novel *The Missing*