

Memento Mori

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As Professor Ken Rivers eased himself into the large, antique, stone-pine dresser in the spare room, he felt a growing sense of peace. Over the last few months Connie had put him under such pressure with regard to cosmetic surgery that if he hadn't been able to hide in the dresser occasionally he probably would have had a complete breakdown by now. He ran his fingers over the mild, reassuring wood. He knew that hiding in the dresser represented, in Freudian terms, a return to the womb – but if it helped him to cope, why shouldn't he hide?

He listened. Had the front door opened? Connie was supposed to be at her third year Shakespeare tutorial until four, but often the tutorials finished early. Many students found her manner domineering, and wouldn't stay for the whole three hours. The absenteeism was accentuated towards the end of semester when students took time off to finish their already-overdue essays.

Deciding not to run the risk that she would catch him in the dresser, he climbed out and brushed some motes from his charcoal suit.

The door opened. "Oh, Ken. What a relief." Connie cast a pile of lever arch files and textbooks on to the spare bed and made an exhausted, exasperated sigh. "Honestly, I don't know why students bother to enroll in units if they're not going to attend tutorials. I had a really interesting discussion planned on the subject of whether, given Kant's *Third Critique*, we can still talk about the 'timeless beauty' of Shakespeare's sonnets

and only two students deigned to attend! Of course, both of them were exchange students, so I had to do all the talking. I can't think how they expect to pass. They just have no interest in looking to the future."

Ken smiled weakly. "I think you'll find most students are too politically savvy these days to swallow arguments about timeless beauty. You might just as well talk about God."

She peered at him as though over the top of a pair of glasses. Long ago she had worn glasses but radial keratotomy had obviated the need for them. "Is this yet another way of trying to get me to drop the subject of cosmetic surgery? Really, Ken, for a philosopher you're remarkably conventional sometimes." She clicked dismissively, her red eyebrows curving like rearing snakes. "People spend thousands of dollars on holidays, which are over practically as soon as they've begun, yet they agonise about spending a bit of money for something with years of benefits."

"But I don't see why I should have to go under the knife. I want to grow old gracefully."

"You're saying 'gracefully' when you mean 'gradually'. There's nothing graceful about decay."

"Well - and I've asked you this many times, without getting a satisfactory reply - why do you want me to change my appearance? I'm the same person I always was."

"Oh, so the idea of timeless *beauty* is nonsense, but the idea of timeless *personhood* is not!" Connie was triumphant. "Call yourself a philosopher!"

"I'm just saying what they believe." Ken felt hurt - deeply hurt. Connie had many times criticised his physical appearance but never his mind. It was the last bond between them, really (apart from sex - he had a very high libido and found her, when she wasn't being obsessive about cosmetic surgery, overwhelmingly sexually attractive). Numbly, he realised that he was staring at the crotch of her slacks. Normally, this would have aroused him but now its Y-shaped creases reminded him of a skeletal hand. No doubt her mocking mood was responsible. He wondered absently whether she'd had yet another *contre-temps* with the Dean.

She gestured to him much as she would to a very young child. "Look at me, Ken. I've had cosmetic surgery many, many times. How old would you say I looked? Thirty-five? Thirty? And yet I'm in my late fifties! Wouldn't you like to share in that experience? You could start off with a minor procedure, like lower-lid blepharoplasty. Surely you don't want to be a memento mori for me!" She went to the dresser and looked in its mirror. Patted her rich, dyed-auburn hair, which framed her attractive, elliptical face. "Yes, I could easily pass for thirty."

"I find the whole idea of dwelling on age almost astrological." Surprised, almost alarmed by his boldness, Ken pressed on, "A year simply marks the amount of time the sun takes to pass through all the constellations of the Zodiac, its apparent radial motion." Again he smiled weakly. "Perhaps some of the more New Age students have been influencing you, my dear."

Connie narrowed her already thin lips, then licked them. She enjoyed a verbal duel. "But that's just the point. Age measured in years is irrelevant. All that counts is quality of appearance and quality of intellect and we must strive to maintain both."

"In that order, no doubt." He made a vague motion with his hand. "We'll talk about this some more later, if we must. I want to do some work on my paper now."

When he was sure that Connie had left the room (and he felt that he would be able to have at least a couple of hours by himself), he gathered together some books, a pen and some sheets of foolscap. Then he eased himself into the dresser once more and prepared to write. Her allusion to Kant had made him wonder whether he could write a kind of philosophical treatise to come to terms with his dilemma concerning cosmetic surgery. The writing would be in his usual style: a style like that of fiction, with him as a character. He'd call it "Memento Mori", after a dry poem he'd written a few years ago about Connie's ideas. He might even use the same pen-name he'd adopted for the poem. The point of writing this way was that the ideas would emerge almost as though in dialogue form. He estimated that he could produce at least eight pages on the subject.

Ken jumped. His glasses must have slipped from his nose! Where were they? He glanced absently at the grandmother clock. Five o'clock.

Suddenly realising that he shouldn't be able even to see the clock without his glasses, he gave it his full attention. It had been fitted with an electric movement, which he always felt didn't suit the house's decor; and he could perceive part of the battery wires in sharp relief against the wood. What had happened? He regarded his hands and was astonished to see that all their grey hairs had gone. They were smooth and bore no trace of age-spots.

Feeling a sudden cold panic that the dreaded breakdown might at last be upon him, he climbed out of the dresser. Immediately, he knew that he had indeed undergone a change. His body felt lighter, more spritely. Was this typical of mental breakdowns? He turned apprehensively to face the cheval mirror on the other side of the room and was astounded to see that the familiar stooped body with its too-baggy suit, benign expression, widow's peak and bespectacled watery eyes had been replaced by the wiry frame of a boy in his late teens.

He turned, as though expecting to see the owner of this youthful body standing behind him, his own mature body transparent. But he was the room's only inhabitant. He looked down at his legs, kneaded them. They were skinny and clad in jeans rather than a suit. He moved closer to the mirror, tantalisingly repelled by the rather impish expression that stared back at him. Oddly, he felt as though he were rereading a book that had once been very familiar to him.

And then he knew why. The figure in the mirror was Ken Rivers as a seventeen year-old.

"Connie." His throat was dry. "Could you come here please? Something has happened." Fumbling for the steel door knob, he made his way to the kitchen. Connie, he knew, would be flinging saucepan lids and vegetable strainers about, preparing her usual post-tutorial chilli omelette.

"Yes, what is it? I'm flat out here."

He stepped into the kitchen. "Look."

“Oh!” Her face appeared simultaneously startled, entranced and strangely piqued. “Who are you?”

“Ken. Your husband.” He felt an annoyed desperation. “Please help me, Connie.” He held his head. Had his thoughts too taken on a youthful naivety, a brashness? But didn’t such questioning, by virtue of its mature and restrained reflectiveness, answer the question in the negative? On the other hand, his thoughts had been mature even as a seventeen year-old.

Connie made an arch expression. “This is unexpected, but welcome.” She went to him and he was struck then by how old she looked. It was as though she had never had cosmetic surgery at all. But after the shock of his own apparent transformation, this amounted to no more than a mild surprise.

She ran a hand up and down his leg. “Which of my courses are you enrolled in?”

“Connie, please don’t mess around. I’m glad that you like my new - or is it old? - appearance but I think I’m having a breakdown.” He held his head, confounded. “Can you actually hear what I’m saying?”

“It was the unit on Iser last year, wasn’t it? Or were you there when I delivered my paper ‘Realist Fiction: Conventions and Clichés’? Don’t worry, you won’t be the first student who’s made a pass. I like guys in their late teens. You’d be astonished if you knew how old I am! But we’ll have to go somewhere else. My husband is around somewhere.”

“You... you’ve committed adultery?” Suddenly, Ken realised that she wasn’t joking.

“My philosophy is that no person is the same two days in a row, so you might as well have the odd fling with people who are obviously different!”

For a few moments Ken merely stared at her. Then he hastened forward, violating her space. “Whore! Why must you continually mock me? Sex and love are inseparable!” He attempted to grasp her hands with his, trying not to become aroused as he did so, but they felt unfamiliar and his emotions were strangely getting in the way. Alarmed, Connie reeled against the stove. She seized a heavy strainer and swung it against his head.

Ken staggered off the floor, the room appearing to tip back and forth as though it were mounted on a see-saw. He steadied himself with a kitchen chair. How long had he been unconscious? His head was still pounding, so presumably Connie's blow had been quite recent.

He sat on the chair. Everything that had happened seemed oddly remote. He was surprised to realise that he found the revelation of Connie's adultery even more shocking than the transformation of his body into that of his seventeen year-old self. It was like a blow to his very existence, he thought, a denial that the person he referred to as "Ken Rivers" had any kind of continuing link with his earlier selves – selves that she had found desirable and to which, presumably, she had once been committed.

He held his hands in front of him and with an infinite relief, which was nevertheless tinged with a stabbing sadness, saw that they were the familiar gnarled appendages again, the fingers like the wrinkled larvae of some large moth.

So had he imagined everything?

"Connie...!" He paused, wondering what to say to her. Would she still be angry with him? But it was he who should be angry with her – assuming of course, that there was any element of reality in the events he remembered. And perhaps there wasn't. Reality, he had often taught, was inter-subjective, the product of people, not just of one person.

There was no reply. Gingerly, he stood, began to wander around the kitchen, opening cupboards as he went. All the cooking utensils were in place. There was no evidence either of Connie's post-tutorial chilli omelette or of her attacking him. He picked up a couple of folded pieces of paper she must have dropped. One was his "Memento Mori" poem:

Memento Mori
by
D.K.

Between the eyes,
Eternal perfect circles,
And the teeth,
Jagged like tombstones in their temporality,
There is pale clay for the cosmetic surgeon's craft.
Cosmetic surgery is cheap;
Cosmetic surgery is chic.
Yet you, my aging love,
Reject it;
And every evening with a numbness not of anaesthesia
I see your jowls sag lower,
Your cheeks retreat,
Drawing your skull towards your skin,
Thus cruelly condemning me to life with a memento mori.
A few defining lines,
A few quick cuts:
And time would be redeemed.
Alas!
The only cuts are to my soul.

He tried to remember if he had been alluding to the well-known "otherness", and thus inevitable decay and aging, said by theorists to characterise the semiotic reader-writer relationship. Giving up, he looked at the other piece of paper. It was Connie's class attendance list, with only two names ticked. He smiled to himself, feeling a sudden warmth – surely it was not just a sad empathy? – for her. He mused that he really did owe her something for putting up with his conservativeness, his imaginings. Apart from her obsession with cosmetic surgery (he smiled to think he had even considered the possibility of her adultery) she was an ideal wife. Experiencing a slight arousal, he adjusted his trousers.

"Connie...!"

He stepped into the laundry and was startled to see, crouched beside the washing-machine, a girl of about nine. She was wearing a red dress and a rather old-fashioned hair ribbon, in the shape of a moth, with strawberry emblems. "Who are you?"

The girl said something but he couldn't quite make out her words.

"I'm sorry. You'll have to say that again." Ken peered at her, trying to seem kindly. There was something familiar about the girl. The highly-curved eyebrows, the elliptical face, the thin lips, a certain lack of grace....

And then he knew. It was Connie as a child. He remembered seeing in an album years ago – was it over at her mother's? – a photograph of a girl with an identical hair ribbon. She was unmistakably the same person.

He crouched down to her level. "You're Connie, aren't you?"

The girl avoided his eyes, muttered something. She clearly didn't want to talk, although this was obviously due to petulance rather than apprehension.

A part of him wondering how he could accept her transformation so calmly (was *this* the breakdown?), he said, "Did you know, Connie, that one day you and I are going to be married? We're what's known as an ideal couple, absolutely suited to each other in a timeless, transcendent way." He knelt back. "But I suppose you're not familiar with the meaning of those words? Although I know you were an intelligent child."

The girl said nothing, folded her arms.

Suddenly overcome by passion and an awareness that at last the subject of cosmetic surgery would not arise, he reached firmly for the child. Began to kiss her. She struggled, but he held her even more tightly.

"Don't mess about, Connie. Love is eternal, a union of persons, stretching from the beginning of time to its end. Even the Church appreciates that." Ken placed his lips firmly on the child's, eased them apart with his tongue. Against it, her reluctant teeth were like tiny smooth river pebbles. He reached for her nonexistent breasts. Then, grasping her wrists behind her back with one hand, he slowly began to undo her dress with the other.