

GEORGE BOWERING / Melody

Most of the time I don't look at the obituary pages, because I know I'll look at the birth dates and get all upset because so many of them are later than my own. You ever notice that? But sometimes lately I have looked at them, hoping like hell I won't see anyone I know, and maybe secretly a little thrilled at the prospect.

Prospect, is that right?

Sometimes I do see someone I know, or someone that the people I know know better than I do. I usually get a little more knowledge about the person's life than I formerly had. One day last spring, I remember it was spring because when I picked up the newspaper I saw the first daffodils near our front porch, I found out that a sculptor I kind of knew had a PhD in Economics. I had always thought he was a kind of street kid who stuck to his art and made it in a medium way.

Daffodils were called asphodels in the olden days. I suppose someone knows how and when the letter dee got in there. Asphodels and daffodils have been used in poetry since who remembers when. I wandered lonely as a cloud. Asphodel, the greeny flower, said some other poet. You know that daffodils are in the narcissus family, and they were supposed to spring up around the pool where Narcissus drowned after staring at himself too long. That's poetry. They are also in the amaryllis family. It seems as if all those ancient Greek flowers were related to one another.

Anyway, the main thing about asphodels is that they grew like crazy all over the Elysian Fields, where dead people had to live after crossing over into Hades. So you see.

Anyway, it's late fall now, and what I see when I open the front door and bend over to pick up the newspaper is a lot of brown maple leaves. When I do that I usually think—well, that didn't take long!

So I came in and sat at the dining room table with my first cup of coffee and the newspaper. First, as always, I did the *New York Times* crossword. It was Wednesday, so it wasn't all that hard. With my ink pen I told it that the hero of the Polo Grounds was Ott, meaning Mel Ott, who, when I was a kid,

held the National League record for lifetime home runs. 511. Cy Young had the record for wins as a pitcher. 511. Looks like an important phone number.

Then I read the sports pages, which in late fall are pretty boring. Baseball has been over for a month, and hockey and football are all over the place. Basketball is just not as interesting as it used to be when it was about teams. Then I read the first section and the second section and so on, and finished up with the white comics. This day, as often happens, they were across from the obituary page. On Wednesday there was usually only one obituary page.

The usual stuff, bad poetry, which is all right because it is kind of sweet that human beings will try poetry at such a time, don't you think? I checked the dates, I read some of the bad poems, and I gave a moment or two to the survived-bys. And I had a look at the photographs. You're seeing more and more photographs on the obit pages nowadays. Sometimes the survived-bys will put in two photographs, one from when the person was young, and another one from recent times.

But the photograph that started all my trouble was a recent amateur headshot of someone named Melody Danton. Under the picture was a little verse: "Death is a hurt no one can heal, / love is a memory no one can steal." Then a simple list: "Your loving husband Roger, Mom, Dad, and family." Just above these words I read: "In loving memory of Melody Danton / July 25, 1962–Sept 12, 2010."

She had died two years ago. But I could not put the paper away. I looked and looked at her face. How, I asked I don't know whom, can this woman not be alive?

It was not the first time I had noticed how alive the people looked on the obituary pages, but then I usually fold the paper and put it with the week's other papers, and head upstairs to work, or at least look at my e-mail. On this occasion, and what a stupid phrase that is, I looked and looked.

I am not good at describing people's appearances. I always give up rather than mention eye colour or hair style. When someone asks hey, did you get a load of that woman in the red dress at the Stevens's party, I always have to confess that I don't remember what colours anyone was wearing. I am not very good at colours anyway, but I don't know—I can never figure out what

use it is to try and describe someone. Maybe if he walks around with a hatchet buried in his skull, okay, I will mention that.

So I will not try to tell you everything I saw in the little black and white amateur photograph of Melody Danton. But while I was sitting with my elbows on the dining room table and my chin on my fists under my cheekbones, I looked at an open friendly face that seemed more and more as if Melody Danton were looking back at me.

And as if she were just beginning to smile.

Every once in a while something happens, you notice something, something that you know right then is not just ordinary business. These things usually happen while you are doing something you do every day. A name is said on the radio. There is a package just outside the front door. Okay, I thought, tomorrow I will just remember this obit as a particularly effective one. I won't mention it to anyone on e-mail. I won't remember her name after an hour or so at my desk.

But you know that didn't work. Otherwise I wouldn't be telling you all this. I thought about that face all the rest of the day. I cut the obit notice out of the paper and taped it to the upper right corner of my computer. I wasted a few hours in total, I guess, just looking at it, my chin in my hand. I looked at it again the next day, and I read that poor little couplet over and over, long after I had it by heart. I was spending more time looking at a tiny picture of Melody Danton than I was on my e-mail and the short story I was supposed to be writing.

If only I could have met Melody Danton. She might have had a coarse sense of humor, or she might have liked reading books about vampires. Then I would have been able to stay away, or forget her altogether. She might have watched hit television shows or worn a New York Yankee baseball cap. But all I had was that little picture of a face that seemed to be sending vectors of fondness right at me.

On the fourth day I decided to find out more about her, if only to learn something that would set me free from her gaze. Was she fond of Las Vegas, maybe? Did she say "begs the question" when she meant "raises the question"? What if I found out that she was totally loving and totally lovable, and I

had missed her whole life, the forty-eight years that other people had enjoyed? All those thousands of tiny moments. I can see her with a bowl and a wooden spoon, having just spooned the cake mix into the pan, that lovely look on her fair face.

Where to start? I wished that Roger and her parents had been as detailed as some of the notices you see. "Patricia attended Lord Byng High School and U.B.C., then took a position with West Coast Cedar Homes," etc. etc. But these were new deaths, of course. Melody's was one of those annual notices purchased to show that the family hasn't forgotten. All I had to do was have a look through the paper of two years ago.

But what could I do without going there? First I looked around the Internet, to see whether she had ever done anything to make her the slightest bit famous. The only real hit I got on my search engine was a blog for people involved with TED, an organization for individuals who wanted to spread their ideas at conferences. It was something I might want to look into later, but right now I was in search of a real woman. Well, a woman who had passed away without my noticing two years ago.

So what about the phone book? In the last few years the phone book had become three or four different kinds of phone book, with white pages, yellow pages, blue pages and lord knows what else. It was getting so that I couldn't figure out how to look up a person's telephone number. But I gave it a try. In our kitchen, I found out, there are four thick telephone books, and guess what? They are all for business names. Some of them have yellow pages and white pages, but they're just two ways of looking up a business. If you are a person instead of a business, I can't phone you from my place.

Unless I get onto the computer. Ah, christ! Okay, if you type "telephone numbers" into the appropriate box on the screen, the machine will find you a page that features black fingers walking in a yellow space—just like the phone book. From there it is not too long until you have persuaded the machine that you do not want to look up a business. You can find telephone numbers for those people who have somehow listed them. I typed in "Danton," and the name of the province, and up came four numbers for the whole shebang. After that the D'Antonios start.

One of the Dantons lived way up in 100 Mile House. One was in Vancouver, and the other two were in Surrey. The one up north had one of those first names that could designate either sex. The three others all went by initials, and one of the initials was M! Okay, I thought, it could be that no one changed the name on the phone number after Melody passed away. It could be that these were men's phone numbers, though it is my experience that when you see initials before a phone number they are there to ward off those cretins that call up women and talk dirty to them.

I decided to go to all the hassle of looking up the original obit notice. The Internet is good for something once in a while, and almost makes up for its many crimes on one of those occasions. It took a while, but I learned how to use my bedimmed wits to "access," as they say, the paper's back files. I knew that she had died on September 12, so I checked out the paper for September 13, but just found a dozen other newly dead. On September 14, there she was—the same photo. I stared at her face for maybe ten minutes before reading the words underneath. As it turned out, I didn't learn much more than when I started. About all I got that I hadn't had were the names of her parents—Thomas and Louise Cater. I was hoping that I would have found out her place of birth at least, but no such luck. And I guessed that "family" in the later notice did not include any children. Roger and Melody were apparently without issue.

Just to see whether it would be of any use, I looked up the name Cater at canada411.ca. I was very speedily informed that there was no such name listed in British Columbia, but that there were Caters galore in the province of Quebec. Two pieces of information that discouraged me. I was unlikely ever to find Melody via her probably French-Canadian family. I would have to see what success I might find through the Dantons.

Of course, the Dantons were probably French Canadian. Quebec was probably full of Dantons.

I would have to phone my four Dantons. Unfortunately, I am a telephone-shy person. I would wait a day, to try to think what to say to these people. In the meantime I took a good long look at that little black and white picture.

It took me a week to get up the nerve to phone any of the Dantons I had found numbers for. What a relief I felt when the first one I tried, the one in Burnaby, didn't answer the phone. I didn't even wait for the invitation to leave a message. I'd try another one tomorrow, I decided. Whew, I added.

Actually, I waited for two days and then tried phoning the Danton in Surrey, at a cell phone number. I tried it twice, and both times got an automated but full-throated female voice telling me that the number I had dialed had been discontinued, or withdrawn or cancelled, or some such verb. I thought that I had better try it again to make the verb clear. But this time an older female voice answered, and I don't know whether she was speaking French or English or some other language. Had I dialed the wrong number this time? Or the previous time? Unfortunately, I had already drawn a line of ink across the number, and could not be sure whether I was looking at a 5 or a 3.

I just said "Sorry, I think I have a wrong number."

"No problem," the voice said in a kind way, and in English.

Now what? I could either contact canada411.ca to get a clean printout of the numbers, or I could ask my wife to have a look at the number I had crossed out.

In any case, I decided to wait till tomorrow, so the woman, whether a Danton or not, would not be worried. Phew again.

But in the later afternoon—well, just a block away, on the corner of 10th Ave., there's a handy print shop, where I sometimes go to get silly little jobs done. So I took the obit, picture and words to the print shop to have it, what do you call it when you get a card or something encased in plastic? First I had trimmed it a bit more with my desk scissors. Took them about five minutes, and now I had a little black and white newspaper picture of Melody Danton to carry around with me. Even on the way home from the store I took it out of my shirt pocket just to check that they had got it right. I stopped walking for a good minute and a half and looked at that wonderful face. She didn't look any the less alive for being inside airtight plastic.

Then in the morning, or rather about noon, after all my delaying tactics—I read every section of the Thursday paper, read all my e-mail and answered

some of it, and then answered some older messages, threw some really old tax records into the yellow bag, ran the day's envelopes through the shredder—I took a breath and called the other Surrey number, also a cell phone.

"Hello," said a pleasant old guy's voice, throat being cleared at the same time.

"I'm probably on a wild goose chase," I said. "I'm looking for someone named Melody Danton."

"You say Melody?" It was hard to tell whether it was going to be a yes or a no, probably a no. "No one named Melody in our family."

"Ah, I figure I'm on a wild goose chase," I said. This wasn't so bad once I'd got started. "She died about two years ago. I used to know her back in Montreal in the early seventies."

"Nope. No Melody in our family. But you know, what was that, about 1970? That's about when our family came out from Montreal . . ."

"Yes, 1970, 1971."

"So how old was she when she died?"

"Oh, well, late fifties, I guess."

"Quite a few Dantons in Montreal, I guess," the nice old guy said. He had a kind of friendly working class voice, the kind you find in smaller towns all over the country.

"Well, thanks," I said. "I didn't think—but I figured I'd give it a try. Thanks."

It wasn't all that much of a relief when we hung up. Not that I would ever be able to do a job in which you had to call people up on the telephone. As bad as the job I had for one day when I was a kid, going from door to door trying to sell tomatoes. I wound up giving them away for a dollar, and didn't have that job any more.

Laminated, that's it.

On Friday I didn't have to make one of the phone calls, because I got an e-mail requesting that I revise a little bit of prose I had written to accompany a poem that was going to be in an anthology of poems about other poets. It took me a while to do it, but only because I could not figure out how to work on the files they sent me, and had to start all over on the little bit of prose. But

I considered that to be writing work, a day properly lived, so I didn't have to make a phone call to a Danton and report it here.

On Saturday I fiddled and dawdled, and eventually put in a long-distance call to the Cariboo. I got a British woman's voice on the answering machine, and left a little message about phoning later to ask about Melody. That got me off free for another day. I thought about writing a fictional phone call, but rules are rules, even if you make them up yourself, especially if you make them up yourself, maybe.

In any case, I worked up the nerve to call again on Sunday, and after five or six rings, just when I was getting ready to hang up, the same woman, I think, answered. I introduced myself, and she handed me over to her husband. I introduced myself again, and when we began talking I knew that the northern Dantons had discussed the question of a Melody Danton. We had a pretty good breezy discussion, in which I learned that the British name Danton had once been French, having arrived in southeast England during and after the invasion of 1066. I told him about Quebec and the Dantons there, and we smilingly offered our apologies, mine for bothering him, his for not being able to help.

"She would have been your girlfriend, then?" he asked.

"In a manner of speaking," I said.

Next day another little writing job came in on the Internoise, and I was able to put phoning off for another day. But the day after that, after I had done all my tidying, all my easy e-mail, the thing I sometimes do with my especially bad toenail, I worked up the nerve to make another call. I had two numbers left, and one of them was out of commission. I decided to give it one more chance. There was no sweat on my eyelids, but my pulse rate and my blood pressure were both up, even though I was expecting an automatic announcement of failure. But somewhere a phone rang six times, and then a recorded voice told me about its owner's regret that she could not be there to talk with me. She then said some lovely things about my well-being, and performed an unlikely combination of wistfulness and perkiness in her goodbye.

When I pushed the red End button on my phone, I was short of breath. I vowed then to give this telephoning business more thought.

On the one hand, I had been reading *Pig Earth* by John Berger. In an introductory chapter he wrote, “. . . the writing becomes, as soon as I begin, a struggle to give meaning to experience.” That’s on page 6.

Well, I had to agree with him about struggle, and I was at least open to the idea, or maybe hope, of meaning—maybe not giving it, but possibly finding it. That’s not the main reason that people make telephone calls these days, but if you are nervous the way I am, you need some kind of push.

I do remember something that Chris Danton in the Cariboo had told me. He said that in recent times there are quite a few Dantons showing up in the Vancouver area. I hadn’t thought about it at the time, but now I came to wonder whether he’s talking about his kids migrating from the north down to the Coast.

So you see where I am heading? If he doesn’t know anything about a Melody Danton, it’s a pretty sure bet that his kids won’t either.

That was just what I needed. I wouldn’t have to get up the moxie to make any more phone calls to people I don’t know. The anxiety was not worth it, and in fact I could feel it slipping sideways off my shoulders.

And really, what is so special about falling in love, if that’s what this was, with a woman you will never be able to meet? Haven’t you ever seen a woman sitting at another table or shouldering her snow-touched fur coat through a revolving door, and felt a sudden sense of loss because other people get to talk with her and share memories with her and you don’t, and you know that this could happen if you were in, I don’t know, Zagreb instead of here? I look at pictures of my wife when she was a college girl with a long single braid and a tanned face, and I yearn for her.

Still, I see all those photographs on the obituary pages, and yes, I do see so much life in the faces there, but then I can turn the page. I can’t do that with Melody Danton, not by a long shot. I know almost nothing about her. I will never find Roger Danton, not that I would ever want to. I don’t know the first thing about him and I am jealous of his many days. I have that little amateur picture encased in plastic, whatever you call it, and no, I am not in love with a dead woman, not in love. It’s just—that look on that sweet face. It’s awful to have, but you can’t just toss it away, can you?