

## *Death in the Family\**

*This is a layered crypt, written over a period of more than forty years, covering the deaths of all Kay and my immediate forbears and other family members more or less as they occurred.*

by Fred Vaughan

My grandparents on my father's side died around 1950, but I had not known them at all.

My grandfather on my mother's side was, by unsynchronized coincidence, named "Fred". He died in November of 1968 at the advanced age of ninety. My grandmother died a few years later at age 86, her daughters spending her last few months arguing over the little bit of nothing she and my grandfather had accumulated over their lives.

Jack, my brother-in-law and best man at my wedding, died June 2, 1970, after a protracted illness. He was twenty-four.

No one else in my immediate family nor Kay's had expired outside those bounds. Both my parents as well as Kay's are still living septuagenarians and all our siblings (except of course for Jack who was Kay's younger brother) and their spouses are still alive, as are all the younger generation in both families. Of course my mother's brother "Little Pete" died at the tender age of eight with the Spanish flu, but other than having much later been assigned his first name, Russell, which neither of us ever went by at any time, he has had no real significance for me. Other aunts and uncles have died respectably late in life, but with none to whom I was particularly close.

I am vaguely aware of a lengthy sequence of history throughout which suicide, slaughter, rape, and pillage have been the norm of civilized man that has determined the mix in the gene pool, but in spite of the unique positions we occupy atop these decaying mounds of tragedy and violence, we have precious little insight into the nature of death and grief. The unspectacular range of variation that one typically observes with regard to human actuarial data might seem to reduce the intellectual significance of the subject. When compared to lifetimes of typical astronomical objects at a higher level or radioactive decay at the lower levels of our reality, where in both cases many orders of magnitude variation are typical, it is indeed a narrow range. "Death" of any natural phenomenon is, of course, just a far-flung implication of thermodynamics. This is true in spite of right-wing right-to-life counter claims that humanity exists from conception onward forever into either eternal bliss or damnation.

But however subjective our situation with respect to death and grief, these are undeniably significant issues – for us. Even my total dearth of qualifications on this topic that I have elaborated above does not humble me to silence on this issue; it merely alters the form taken by my utterance. My incantations are certainly of small scope rather than being definitive proclamations. That is as it should be.

For lack of a close friend for which travel across two western states might have been warranted for such an occasion (other, of course, than for Kay, who by sex and other involvement was precluded from the honor), Kay's brother Jack had been saddled with the role of best man at our wedding. Our subsequent, even if infrequent, friendship justified that designation *ex post facto*.

He was a 'cowboy'. There was general applicability of the old western ballad that begins:

*"Jack, he was a cowboy  
With a heart so brave and true,  
And he learned to love a maiden  
With eyes of heaven's own blue."*

But in spite of the several similarities, the Jack of which we speak had also exhibited many characteristics that were less than admirable. His athletic abilities were not matched by academic prowess so that after a brief college experience and a frustrated time during which he 'hammered' several rowdies, Jack married his high school sweetheart and settled down as a ranch hand for his father-in-law. Within a year, an appendicitis

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\* The first section of this was written in the early to mid 1980's. Subsequent sections were written years apart as death continued its dealings.

operation revealed instead the presence of Hodgkin's disease, which had up until (and including) that time, been totally incurable.

During the ensuing four years, his wife, his immediate family, the religion in which he had been raised, and the medical staff at the Stanford hospital in Palo Alto became the predominant facts in Jack's life. On four occasions over those four years, including the time of initial discovery and when he finally succumbed, Kay's entire family re-united around his bedside. Each time but the last Jack recovered to better health and the family disembarked only to be recalled again later. On one of these occasions when my work kept me from attendance, Kay had been virtually attacked by her family for not consenting to the proposition that Jack's sudden change for the better constituted a bona fide miracle of a magnitude sufficient to bring her back to 'The Truth'. The Truth being, of course, the name members give to the otherwise un-named and supposedly 'nondenominational' religious sect to which they subscribe.

My role as Antichrist grew in importance with my in-laws during this period, except of course, with Jack for whom religious persuasion had remained one's own business.

Finally, in May of 1970 Jack was hospitalized again and this time to the cancer ward on the 'other' side of the hall at the Stanford hospital. They were short of beds on the left side they said, but Jack knew. It was part of the routine he had observed during his stays at the hospital. Friends who moved to the 'other side' of the hall never came back. The family knew too, yet hoped, and yes, it is fair to say, 'prayed' otherwise.

We arrived several days after his admittance, having picked up Kay's mother on the way south, since she had had to return home to take care of something or other and Kay's father would not leave the bedside. The last several hundred miles on the way down, she discussed her dread of Memorial Day that had been the coincidental date of death of her mother and several others in her family. [Coincidentally, years later, her sister Primrose died at nine o'clock the night before Memorial Day 2004; she was 91.]

Kay's father had had a recliner placed right next to Jack's bed in which he would sit for many hours at a time. Jack's wife Linda either sat on the bed by Jack or in a straight chair nearby. Kay's sister's family, I, other even less direct relatives, and friends populated the lobby most typically. One or several of us would occasionally go in to see Jack to spell off the closer family members. But his father was always there, a brooding presence. Those who went to cheer Jack would come out to the lobby with tears in their eyes when doctors were 'tapping' his lungs or administering medication.

I remember vividly how on that last day, Kay's sister had come out laughing. She discretely whispered something to her husband after which he also chuckled. It was considerably later and in less detail that I was informed of the nature of this so untimely humor:

Jack had been sleeping and suddenly awoke laughing. His father, fearing that Jack might be delirious, asked what was 'wrong'.

"I dreamed I died and went to heaven," Jack said.

The bleakness, imminence, as well as supposed religious overtones of that reality resulted in an awkward questioning from the older man of why that had seemed so funny to Jack.

"Because Fred was there!" Jack replied, still laughing.

Yeah, well...

Obviously, the day did not proceed further down such a frivolous avenue. Later I was informed that Jack had asked to see me. I went immediately of course, not really wanting to. His wife sat on the bed, his father still the foreboding figure in the big chair at the foot of the bed. Jack motioned for me to sit down in the straight chair nearby. I did. He leaned forward clasping his young wife in his arms, facing me while he hugged her tightly, eyes opened, facing me.

"You understand," he said.

I didn't at all, but after he had told me again that I did, in fact, I said, "Yeah," still wondering even as I left the room with tears in my eyes, having had at least the honesty to have said, "Goodbye." I had figured it would be easier on him and everyone else if I told him that I understood. Certainly I could figure it out later.

I never have.

Then the doctors told Jack it was the last time they would tap his lungs. It had become a requirement every hour or so by then. I did see Jack one last time then as he was hunched over with the doctors performing this last service of entry through his back. At that point he knew exactly how long he had to live.

As I watched I wondered about the indignity of begging for extra minutes of breath. It was not like one might beseech a deity whose rank might somehow seem to ennoble that entreaty. The hospital staff had prolonged his life no doubt, and they learned procedures on Jack that would later save other lives. But had this final deprecation been worth it? When modern medicine interferes with life's natural course into death, does it not pick up the responsibility to maintain dignity to the last life-lengthening breath? Turning someone

'off' or letting someone die three minutes earlier than it is in one's power to avoid seems a terrible responsibility. It is one I refused with regard to my father; fortunately his wife who loved him very much seemed to have had no qualm in doing it, believing the lingering would be worse for him than the stopping – but that would not be for another forty years or so.

The next day as Jack's wife threw her arms around both Kay and I, it occurred to me that what Jack might have been trying to express was his desire that I watch out for her well being. But reflection immediately indicated that she was someone for whom I had no legitimate protective role. She would go home to her father's ranch where she and Jack had lived. She had immediate family. As it turned out, I might have been able to have contributed in some way, but I doubt whether Jack had foreseen that.

After getting cross with Kay, thereafter, I would sometimes think that the pantomime had been meant to signify the relative insignificance of minor points of principle when compared with the overwhelming value of love. But it would certainly have been a stretch to infer as much.

Within three months I was myself hospitalized after having been convinced for a week that I would most surely die. When I did finally consent to Kay taking me to a doctor, he insisted on immediate matriculation to the local hospital. An ulcer had reduced my blood count (I can't remember the metric) from a normal of near fifty to a mere twenty-one. Nothing mattered to me in my weakened condition, not our nascent horse business, my engineering job, nor the new horses that would arrive right after my hospitalization. Even news concerning my parents and friends meant little to me. Even death itself, which had occasionally bothered me for years previously (actually the fear of annihilation prior to achieving significance, however ridiculous that may sound) had very little sting. That being a moot point, of course.

Kay and Nola (my eldest child, who now struts ivy covered lanes at the university, but was less than a year old then) were all that mattered, and that with a strange mystical warmth. I think there may be something here of what Jack thought I should have understood.

I don't know. I still don't understand.

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The previous part of this article was written a few years ago – in the mid-eighties. My how time does tip-toe by – so like a mourner peeking timidly at the open coffin, then hurrying by.

Kay and my parents are all still alive, our fathers no longer septuagenarians, however, their 1909 vintage continues its aging process. Both have had major operations in the last few years. One is now on dialysis three times a week, his multiply by-passed heart and terminal cancer no longer the major problems. The other, having lost most of his stomach, parts of his pancreas, and other organs, and has survived over thirty years of carving away at the various cancerous developments in many organs.

Our mothers seem right now the worst off though, mine having phoned just recently (April 1990) to tell me that her condition is incurable and her life of very short duration, their naturally not being able to take back any of the more than nine years she has already lived on "borrowed" time. Now our laughing at her comment to the effect that "people would be amazed if they knew all that was wrong with me" seems crass. Hypochondria has little to do with whether one will soon die.

On the Friday before Memorial day, Kay's mother was told that despite the heart condition that has required two 'jump starts' to date, she must undergo surgery for stomach cancer the day after the holiday. Kay has been with her and her ailing father most of the time since, having once watched the irregular squiggles on the heart monitor go flat and been shoved out of the way by stampeding nurses running to the sound of the alarm, who then thumped her mother's unwilling heart back to its laborious chore. Kay and her mother faced each other momentarily, wide-eyed as if to say, "Whew! That was close."

And who said:

*"Tomorrow, or even the day after tomorrow if you're busy having fun,  
Is plenty of time to say, 'I'm sorry, mother.'"*

Kay and I, and our children have been most fortunate to have had all four of them all these many years. My unpleasantness with in-laws suggested earlier has considerably ameliorated over the years. All four of this older generation that we love are the same intelligent, useful people they always were, but now, alas, they are dying. And so our lives right now seem somewhat less than fortunate.

But if you are into "real", death is, at least, *real!*

Today (July 17, 1990) my mother said, "I will never get out of this bed again," as she crawled with considerable help into the hospital bed that has replaced her recliner in the family room.

*"Childhood is," in fact, as Edna St. Vincent Millay continued, "the kingdom where nobody dies that matters, -- mothers and fathers don't die."*

At this point I am convinced that the tragedy of death has very little to do with the youth with so much promise, or egocentrics who care primarily about 'achieving significance' before 'passing'. It has much more to do with the assuredly unilateral significance of *all* men having been "created equal," when everyone, but primarily only fools, know that it isn't so.

*"Your tea is cold now. You drink it standing up. And leave the house."*

About a month after my mother's funeral Kay and I brought my dad back from the other side of the mountains where he had stayed for a week or so at my sister's. Before going up to the house, he wanted to stop by the cemetery that sits on the slope, facing west across Puget Sound into the beautiful sunsets. So we stopped by my mother's grave. The easels with their dead flowers had fallen over, and the squares of turf that the grave diggers had replaced on the fill over the coffin had seemed to shrink in the hot dry summer sun such that they no longer fit together. And on the top of her grave was a large pile of dried-white dog shit. The indignity struck me very passionately. I kicked it to get it immediately off of this sacred site, but it was not dried all the way through and much of it stuck to the toe of my shoe. I thrashed my leg irrationally to be rid of it, and finally had to wipe it off in the dried grass away from the grave. My throat ached with grief; I walked off a ways until the tears quit coming. Then we got back into the car and headed for my dad's lonely home.

I developed the habit of phoning my Dad every day or two after Mom died. I learned to know him a little, his soft-spoken under-stated approach to communication – his one-liners. My forced habit became a pleasure. Every time we would go to stay a day or two with him or when he stayed with us a day or so, there would be tears when we parted.

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Kay's father who had been the same age as my dad died at age 84, just weeks before our daughter Nola was to be married. Ever since his open-heart surgery when he had been seventy, he had walked three miles or so a day at a pace which was too fast to be quite comfortable for me. He had a few more surgeries, then eventually his kidneys quit, and he had to have dialysis three days a week for too many years. He became more and more exhausted after dialysis, eventually coming home on one of these days to sit on the couch across from his sickly wife of nearly sixty years, both tired to the bone and looking off sadly into the distance – the past. When she again focused on him, his eyes had rolled back like a stricken warrior in *The Iliad* of Homer where death is typically signaled by the phrase, "and his eyes rolled back..."

My father-in-law and I had never been philosophically similar enough to fully appreciate each other. I had become accustomed to the unfairness of considering him a rather dour stuffed shirt. God knows what images of me had filled his head. I am sure that Antichrist was a persistent one of them. So it was only gradually that we had become somewhat better friends. Kay's mother had been someone I could understand much more easily – even her disdain for me. We understood each other! Norm and I had problems with it.

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Years go by, of course. Long times turn into short times.

A couple of years after Mom died, Dad decided to drive to my sister's, taking several days rather than the usual one. Up across the North Cascade Highway and on down through the Methow valley, then up the Okanogan where he was raised, then across the northern border of Washington to my sister's home at Loon Lake. Of course he didn't tell us of the side trip up into Canada to visit a woman at Penticton. Quite the sly old man really! Then while he was at my sister's he called to tell us of an upcoming wedding. Who was she? What was her background? How long had he known her? She passed the tests although she was 23 years younger than my Dad – much closer to my sister and my age than his. I told a friend about my Dad. He commented how great that was and that his mother (who was exactly the same age as my father – 83!)

had been alone for ten years since her second husband's death and that she also was going strong, having just recently bowled a 200 game. He said he thought it would be good if she married again and I said, "Oh, no you don't! She's way too old for my Dad!"

So the first of June just under two years from the date of my mother's death he married and happily it has been a most enjoyable time for both of them. His major cancer surgery obviously had been very successful; every year his checkups are positive (or negative, whichever is the better). I missed talking to him every day more than he missed talking to me, I think. The frequency has gone down to once or twice a week now – still enjoyable conversations.

In 1994 when we were in England for several months, my father and his wife came over for three weeks to tour with us. We saw the sights, sailing over to Ireland and then across to County Clare in the West, and up over the rocky Burren (from the Irish - 'bhoireann' meaning a stony place) to Bally Vaughan. Sean was with us, so we got our three-generation picture there at the road sign with the Gaelic spelling of our name – Beacháin. (Several years later, Sean, his son Carrick, and I would do another.) Dad has been married seven years and was 90 years old this June – 1999.

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Kay's mother bought a house right next door to Kay's sister in Oregon and lived quite comfortably most of that summer, finally having to 'kidnap' her mother from perceived delinquency at the rest home to take care of her herself at her mother's home. But I'm a good cook and I used to sort of like Top Ramen.

Then there was the occasion when we spelled off Kay's sister, taking care of Kay's mother for a month or two in our home. The bedroom is right next door to ours. She gagged and puked up her food sometimes if she ate enough to mention. She would sit there and look at her food like she was praying that it would just go away. Sometimes she would scold me weakly for eating so fast.

Once she was incontinent on the carpet from our front bedroom to the main bathroom in the hall. Another time in the morning before we were wide-awake, she stumbled over her walker and bumped her head on the wall as she was falling. When I arrived on the scene, Kay was hunched over this little wrinkly prostrate figure with two protrusions that looked like flimsy pepperoni sticks that were shaking terribly from shock. She survived that and so did we – barely. When her tired heart finally stopped for good (well, you know what I mean) in her eighty-second year, it was at Christmas time. We rushed down to see her one last time the day before Christmas Eve.

Kay had scheduled an extended family celebration for Christmas, with guests coming for many days over the holiday. But we knew Kay's mother's death was nigh at hand on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of December 1996, so we purposed to rush down to Oregon after I got off work in spite of the bad weather to see her one last time while hopefully she was still conscious. "Rushing" was, in fact, what I was doing – in heavy rush hour traffic. With many guests coming the next day we would have to return the couple of hundred miles that night. Then I saw the too-familiar red and blue flashing lights of a Washington State patrol car coming up behind me. Resigned, I pulled over to the shoulder, rolled my window down, took out my driver's license and waited for the trooper to check out my vehicle via radio and come up with his flashlight, which he then shined directly into my face.

"You don't look like Mario Andretti," he said.

I was somewhat taken aback by this humorously complimentary but prickly comment and didn't respond. You don't say, "Oh, please Officer, my mother-in-law is dying," after an introduction like that.

So he continued, "The roads are very slick, and I was going 85 in this heavy traffic trying to catch you!" Not finished yet, he added, "You were in all four lanes zigzagging through traffic; sometimes you used your turn signal, sometimes you didn't..."

He paused for a moment, pointing the flashlight over at Kay. "Is this your wife?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, quite subdued, but happy to have gotten one right answer.

"Have you bought her any jewelry for Christmas?" he asked. To my negative response he appended, "It would have been a lot cheaper than the ticket I'll have to write you. Have you bought her *anything* for Christmas?" he asked.

"No," I confessed sheepishly.

After taking my license to his car to check it out, he returned and said, "Don't you think your wife could use some new jewelry better than the State could use that money?"

"Yes," I said, groveling now.

Then he handed me back my license saying, "Well, why don't you go out and buy her some then and try to keep your speed down!" He turned to walk away.

Quite emotionally stirred at this, I reached out my arm and said, "You are a credit to your profession, may I shake your hand?" He grabbed it and shook it with a smile, and then I was immediately smashed against the door handle as Kay was coming up over the top of me to extend her hand also to her gentleman benefactor of the law!

"Merry Christmas!" she said, or some such inanity, which being interpreted is, "Oh, thank you kind Sir!" He took her hand and smiled, as would a true knight.

I must confess that I did not manage to get Kay any jewelry before Christmas, but thereafter she received beautiful opal earrings compliments of *The Law* of the State of Washington!

Kay saw her mother while she was still coherent, and we headed back for our somewhat muted Christmas celebration.

Her mother died on the 27<sup>th</sup>, the day of Nola's birthday.

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Well my dad and his wife proceeded happily. He built a new porch on their home. He built a garage. They sold their home and moved into a new one up overlooking Mount Vernon that had been the centerfold in the 1956 Better Homes magazine. It is still nice.

We celebrated his 90<sup>th</sup> and 95<sup>th</sup> birthdays in style. Before and between and after he had cancerous growths removed as a matter of course that never seemed to concern him very much. For his 96<sup>th</sup> birthday we re-issued the book he had written years earlier with updates he had given me and comments from various members of the family and the more remote family history and genealogical tables. I put one of my drawings on the cover. It was the only picture my father had ever asked me to draw. It was him standing by an old tree on a hill overlooking the islands in Puget Sound at Washington Park west of Anacortes.

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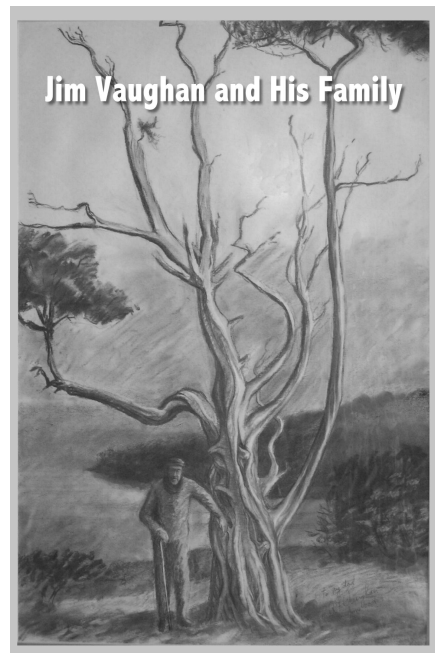
My sister's husband Bill died in May of 2007 due to the miserable complications of prostate cancer. He was 75. There was a sadness for me associated with my sister's loss that would be hard to explain other than having on several occasions watched the protracted struggle into death, Bill's body just a shell under the sheet when they carried him away.

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My father fell a few times and was hospitalized for an infection, but always he was back home using the walker he had finally accepted using. It seemed as though reaching 100 was going to happen.

Then he fell and hurt his back. Apparently, it was a pneumonia condition that had brought that added weakness about, so although he was not immediately hospitalized, in a day or two he was taken in with his condition deteriorating rapidly thereafter. Within a week he was dead. That was October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2007. He was 98.

They moved my parent's dual headstone off to the side of where the graveside service took place. I'm sure it is back in service over the two of them again. I remember how appalled Kay and I had been when my parents had bought their plot and headstone inscribed with their names and dates of birth, and even without closure, they had agreed upon the epitaph, "They loved to serve." The whole thing had seemed so... so... you know. It still does.



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I still don't understand anything about death, but I do understand that I am now on the front lines of this lemming rush.

When I die, instructions are, "Burn him!" Then if anyone wants to, they can surreptitiously empty the Folgers coffee can, full of ashes into Puget Sound somewhere between Anacortes and Orcas Island or into the garbage; I know that it does not really matter.

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Well, the Covid 19 pandemic happened and the definition of conservative and liberal seemed to take on a new meaning. My sister, firmly in one of those two alternatives accepted the conspiracy that vaccines are somehow worse than, or a catalyst for Covid. I don't know which, it makes no sense. I had had four shots in total; she refused to have any. Within days she was gone. I talked to her briefly on a Saturday at the hospital, I could not get access to her room or information thereafter. On Monday she died. She was 85 and in one sense it was miraculous that she had lived so long with her ailments, but still.

After the funeral I told her son Ted that if he or any of his family did not want the oil painting I had done while at her and Bill's house over Christmas in 1961, that I would like to have it. He graciously brought it over while we were still at Nola's who lived so close to Darlene. The picture is of Darlene and Bill with one of their friends overlooking the ocean waves during a storm somewhere around Longview. Mom and Dad had taken the minister Mabel Sill down to Texas that Christmas, so I spent my Christmas vacation from university classes at their place. I had started dating Kay during fall quarter and was uncertain about so many issues involving love and life and ... I think the picture is about that.



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After Kay's grandmother dies, her father stated, "Now I am an orphan." Well, now I have been orphaned and am, in fact, the last of the generation. My turn is next. I won't be reporting on that.