

# After Jack Died

by Michael Chin

Gerald Chin was cold, lonely, and conscious of his own mortality after Jack from the crew of old timers who whiled away mornings at McDonald's passed away. Gerald wasn't especially close to Jack but liked him more than most of the breakfast crew, not least of all because he was the one who'd invited Gerald into their circle in the first place. He had been Gerald's son-in-law's uncle. Whatever that made the two of them, it had been enough to establish a connection, and enough for Jack to recognize a fellow senior citizen in need of connection.

After the funeral, Gerald decided to make some changes to his life.

After a lifetime of thrift, keeping his house heated only up to fifty degrees in the coldest nights of winter, using his coffee grounds twice, clipping coupons from the Sunday newspaper, Gerald gave into an indulgence. His kids were long out of the house and his daughter never brought the grandkids to his place anyway. He was divorced. It was time to keep himself warm.

He bought a space heater on a deep discount for sixty bucks—a big hunk of metal, shaped like a satellite dish, designed to radiate heat in one, specific direction which was all that was necessary to warm one, specific person.

The space heater was heavy, but he managed to balance it at a precarious perch in the shopping cart, tipping it into his car, then grappling it—by slow steps, with lots of breaks—from the trunk of the car, through the garage, into the house. He'd have to be careful about turning it off when he wasn't using it, because he knew space heaters could be fire hazards. It might be a drain on electricity, too but he figured he could lower the

thermostat to forty degrees, just warm enough to keep the pipes from freezing, and otherwise rely on his new acquisition.

He set up the heater on the coffee table, facing the sofa where he ate most meals, watched TV, and read the newspaper. As its silver color first turned to glowing orange, he thought it was sort of beautiful.

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Gerald drank his morning coffee two or three, sometimes four times a week at McDonald's. A small indulgence because he missed being around people sometimes, and feared his social skills deteriorating past the point that his grandchildren would feel awkward around him.

There was Harry, always with something to rant about. He was a big man by every dimension, big bushy beard and shaggy gray mop over his dome. One breakfast was never enough. He'd have his Sausage McMuffin, two hash browns, and a large coffee, then if there were younger people nearby, offer them a fiver—they could keep the change—if they went back to the counter got him a McGriddle or a couple of the little apple pies from the warmer. One reason to miss Jack was that he used to keep Harry in check, turning the conversation away from politics and news to ask about somebody or other's grandchild. Jack was a big eater, too, on the premise those mornings at McDonald's were his only opportunity to eat outside his wife's supervision, and she'd always nag him about cholesterol and all the gobbledygook his doctor had told him to watch out for.

Scrawny Bill deconstructed his Bacon, Egg, and Cheese Biscuit to eat each component separately. Mark always asked well before the eleven o'clock changeover if he could get a burger and fries. Gladys and Marjorie always showed up as a package deal—riding in the same car, splitting between them an order of Hotcakes. The best Gerald could figure, they lived together and he had a hard time imagining either existing as a separate entity. From what Gerald could tell, he was the only one who got up early to exercise and eat cold cereal and a banana, then make his way over for a sense of community over a cup of coffee, without the clogged arteries to go with it.

Harry always made a mess with scraps of English muffin in his beard, hash brown flecks scattered over not only his sleeves, but the sleeves of whoever sat nearest to him. There was a permanent tinge of grease on his fingers. The day after Gerald bought his space heater, Harry was stuck on the Pledge of Allegiance. “If the liberals have their way, they’ll ban it from schools.”

There were grumbles of assent, because even if you didn’t agree with Harry, it was easiest to go along with what he said.

“All because it says, *under God*,” Harry went on. “Well, I’m sorry, I thought we had the freedom of religion. Are they going to tell the Muslims they can’t wear towels around their heads, too?”

Past Harry, there were a couple of cool-looking kids—hipsters, he thought he’d heard his daughter call the type—the boy with a close-cropped beard, tight-fitting flannel, and skinny jeans, the girl with thick glasses, black hair streaked with purple, jeans with great big holes that must have left her knees freezing. They had flyers printed out in neon yellow and pink, and the best Gerald could tell they were asking the manager behind the counter if they could hang them. They didn’t look happy with the verdict, shaking their heads. The boy spoke softly into the girl’s ear, surely something about how they shouldn’t have bothered with a burger joint anyway.

“Next thing you know, they’ll stop teaching history altogether,” Harry said.

On their way out the glass doors, the hipster boy looked both ways, ripped a piece of blue painter’s tape from the roll he wore around his wrist like a bracelet, and stuck one of the flyers to the door, permission be damned. The McDonald’s was busy enough that if none of the workers happened to be watching when he did it, they probably wouldn’t even notice it until someone changed the trash liners closest to the exit, and even then, Gerald didn’t think half of them paid enough attention that they’d notice an unauthorized flyer. It was the kind of move Gerald’s daughter would’ve called *punk rock* when she was young and punk rock was cool, and Gerald tried to be supportive and tried on the vernacular now and again, only to cast it aside when she rolled her eyes.

The old timers prattled on, getting off the Pledge of Allegiance and onto some TV series Gerald had never heard of that Gladys and Marjorie seemed more invested in than the rest of them. Gerald typically nursed his coffee, listening to all of them politely, chipping in when he could. After all, the eight-ounce cup cost fifty-four cents at the senior citizen discount rate, and so cost a lot more per sip than the cups he poured at home out of the Folgers Classic Roast grounds he bought from Shop Right. McDonald's coffee was a luxury item. But that morning, he couldn't stand to wait, he finished and told the lot of them he had to get home early. No one tried to stop him.

Finally, Gerald made it to the doors, to the flyer still intact, and read the bold print advertising an *OPEN MIC NIGHT* with a photograph of someone—he couldn't tell if they were a man or woman, screaming or maybe singing—into a microphone. Gerald supposed all the ambiguities were by design, to suggest any person might do anything on stage, as the smaller print, bullet point list indicated musicians, stand-up comics, and poets alike were all welcome.

Gerald had always mused he might have a poem or two in him.

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The coffeehouse was called Volcano and Ash. Inside, the place was alive with colorful tapestries over the wall, old timey music playing the pops and crackles of a real record player.

Inside the door a skinny kid with big, curly hair and wire-rimmed glasses asked him if he were going to perform. When Gerald nodded yes, the kid asked his name and typed it into a tablet.

Gerald bought a cappuccino—an indulgence to be certain, but he figured if even a cup of coffee would cost him three dollars, what was a dollar fifty more? He added that he wanted it decaffeinated, but he wasn't sure the barista heard him, and felt self-conscious about repeating himself. In contrast to McDonald's, he was one of the very few old-timers in this establishment—the only others he saw were a group of three white people, all of them with instruments—a guitar, a violin, one of those little guitars—maybe a ukulele or a mandolin?

In truth, Gerald expected to be the oldest person at an open mic night not scheduled to start until eight at night, when people his age were settled in their recliners at home, basking in the glow of the television, or else readying themselves for bed. But Gerald had spent the night between hearing about the open mic and going writing poetry by the buzzing warm glow of his space heater. He tried writing about his daughter and her daughter, but it all felt too saccharine. He tried writing about the bicycle he'd ridden as a child, but couldn't remember much more than was captured in old photographs when he was a little too big for it, stooped over the handlebars and grimacing for the camera. Finally, he settled on writing about a bouquet of purple and orange flowers he'd bought for his ex-wife one Mother's Day. He didn't buy her flowers often, but she'd really liked them—enough that he thought about buying her flowers more often, except he hadn't. He had no illusions his rhyming couplets were any good, but trusting that his old Chinese man ethos might make whatever he read aloud sound profound.

The cappuccino came to him, not in the paper cup he'd expected, but a real mug, wide as it was deep, bearing ceramic weight. He wondered if they'd charge him extra if he accidentally broke it. It came on a ceramic saucer, too, to make it easier to carry. The cup was filled to the brim with a white heart swirled into the foam. He lifted it from the counter and concentrated very hard on keeping it level as he made his way to an open little table. He was a long way from the stage, which he figured was a good thing. If he chickened out, he could see himself making a quiet exit, either out of the coffeehouse altogether, or at least to the restroom nearby where he'd hide until they stopped calling his name and moved on to the next performer. He sat back and tasted his cappuccino which wasn't sweet at all. He decided on his third sip it was very good—much better than the coffee made at home or the kind they served at McDonald's.

There were other poets to read before Gerald. The first—who doubled as emcee—delivered lines with rhythmic, dramatic pauses and had the audience snapping along. Gerald didn't know if the poem were very good—it certainly didn't rhyme, and he couldn't follow what it was about—but the applause suggested people liked it. Gerald's pulse beat fast and hard—he could feel it in his neck, some combination of nerves and the

cappuccino. It wasn't decaf, was it? A young duo performed—they might have been the ones who hung up the flyer at McDonald's, but there were a lot of couples who looked like them at Volcano and Ash. The boy played acoustic guitar. The woman started singing before she transitioned to a rap. Gerald couldn't discern what she was saying but had to concede it was impressive how many words she strung together between breaths.

His drink definitely wasn't decaffeinated. He'd be up all night, but more pressingly, he was a jittery mess, a schoolboy again awaiting a presentation at the front of the classroom, certain his leg would shake and his voice would tremble and the other boys would make fun of him later on. And he had to pee.

The emcee called Gerald's name.

He stood, taking the cappuccino first, then thinking better of it and setting it back on the table at a wobble so a little sloshed over the side onto his hand. He took a step forward, then realized he'd forgotten his notebook on the table and doubled back for it. The emcee called his name again, and Gerald wondered if he truly couldn't see him, or if he were offering him an out in his disconcerted state.

Gerald couldn't remember if the performers before him had held the microphone in their hands or left it in the stand, but made the decision to leave it in its perch, if only so he wouldn't fumble with it and the notebook.

He said hello and remembered that he had vaguely considered affecting a more pronounced Chinese accent than he naturally spoke with to simultaneously add a sense of mystique and gravitas, while also implanting the suggestion he was still learning English to compensate for his clunky verse.

Indeed, his verse was clunky, if heartfelt in its tribute to Jack, whom his first poem, the elegy, made it seem as though he'd known better than he did. The sentimentality rang false in his own ears as he read the words aloud for the first time. Then he read lines that rhymed *clam by the bay* with *like a horse to hay* and was mortified at the faces the audience must be making, grateful the spotlight shone too bright on the stage for him to see past them and observe anyone chuckling or making side comments.

He stopped after one poem, though he'd intended to read three. He wasn't sure if it were his underwhelming writing or its delivery, or the abrupt way in which he left the stage after he'd read, but the applause was slow to come, albeit louder as he walked, peaking, perhaps, as he reached the bathroom where he proceeded to pee out all of that cappuccino and wash his face with shaking hands and soaked paper towels, waiting for his pulse to at last steady, experiencing a small rush at the experience being over and having survived it. And maybe he hadn't done so poorly? Maybe he could find the community he'd been after in these younger, hipper people, if only in the context of open mic nights. That could be enough.

When Gerald emerged from the bathroom, it wasn't a young poet or musician on stage but the elder trio—two women, one man—with their string instruments. They played something like folk music on their string instruments, the man on the ukulele—Gerald felt suddenly certain that's what the little instrument was—sang, and the women joined him for harmonies one at a time, all together on the chorus for a song with a folksy, Irish lilt. The word *Celtic* sprung to mind, though Gerald couldn't be sure that was a right. The first poet from earlier on tapped Gerald on the shoulder and told him he'd read well, and Gerald nodded his thanks, unable to take his eyes off the stage.

The trio was composed and professional, and Gerald recognized that his age might not excuse his own lackluster performance, because here were these three, their arthritic fingers never faltering on the frets, their voices even and easy.

After they'd finished, the guitarist—her name was Mary Lou—gestured toward an empty chair (she'd been saving it for her son, who'd stood her up), so Gerald took it, and they fell into an easy chatter while the emcee called up the next performer. Mary Lou reminded her compatriots that Gerald was *the man who read that lovely poem*. Gerald tripped over his words to tell them how good their songs had been, and before he'd asked for it, Mary Lou had foisted a CD upon him—a plain white disc with a green Sharpie shamrock and the words *Irish String Trio*.

It was all so easy, to sit with them and talk between performers. To split a big chocolate chip cookie from the glass counter four ways—Gerald couldn't even track who'd bought it, whom he should pay his fair

share to. Easy enough for Mary Lou to give him her cell phone number and tell him to give her a call.

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It was the least likely of results, Gerald knew, that his half-baked scheme of going to the open mic night might cure his loneliness, just as readily as his space heater had cured the cold.

But he'd called her the day after the open mic. She teased him about being old-fashioned for not sending a text message, and he started to apologize when she suggested he come by her house if he liked jigsaw puzzles, and though he'd never been much for puzzles, he took her up on the invitation and whiled away an afternoon seated catty-corner to her at a big oak table, sliding around the little cardboard pieces to recreate the picture from the packaging Mary Lou had propped up against a wall, depicting a hamlet on top of a hill overlooking the sea. Gerald found the process of puzzle assembly confounding, trying to tell the shade of the green grass from the green-blue water. He mostly focused on the edge closest to him, trying by trial and error to fit pieces to one another along a straight edge. He drank the cup of coffee she'd poured without asking him—a rich, dark roast. The whole house smelled of cinnamon.

Mostly, he talked with Mary Lou, first about music and then about their respective children and grandchildren, and the lives they'd lived before they were ancient. He found Mary Lou more insightful than the McDonald's crew. It was easy to talk to her, and she reminded him of his ex-wife for how, even after they'd split up, they'd maintained an easy rapport when they found themselves at their children's weddings and reminisced without the day-to-day pressure of having to cohabitate with one another.

Maybe it's because of those similarities, if not in how they looked or their life histories, but the more important matter of how easy it was to sit with them that Gerald recognized something like a schoolboy crush manifesting in his desire to say witty things or set himself up to tell a story of something interesting he'd done that might impress her.

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One afternoon of puzzling gave way to more. Mary Lou texted Gerald one night around nine, when he was winding down in front of the television, to ask if she could come over and talk, and though he was reticent about the dusty state of his house, the half-eaten boxes of generic cereal that lined the kitchen counter, the space heater set up to keep one body warm, it felt rude not to welcome her into his home.

It turned out Gerald's concerns about the state of his house were misplaced because, though Mary Lou came over, she didn't come inside. She waited in her Buick, the motor running, so Gerald threw on his winter coat and galoshes and went outside.

She lowered the window and said, "I hope you don't think I'm rude staying out here. It takes a car forever to warm up this time of year, and I hate to have to turn it off and on again. You understand?"

Her breath formed foggy gray clouds. Something like cigarette smoke, but softer. Gerald climbed into her car, conscious he was underdressed if they were to go anywhere, then conscious he'd left the space heater running unattended. He tried to determine if he should run back inside but felt certain Mary Lou would take it as a sign he didn't want to sit in her car, and she'd go. And in that moment—The Temptations crooning "My Girl" softly over the radio, heat pumping out of the vents, Mary Lou's face looking younger in the dashboard light—there was nowhere in the world Gerald would rather have been.

"I get so lonely," Mary Lou said. "You get married, and after a while, all you want is an hour to yourself. Little do you know, it's only going to get harder when you have kids. But then the nest empties out and people die—or you get divorced." She paused to take a sip from a travel mug. "And you're alone, after you've gotten used to always having someone around."

She told him about her husband, in a way that made Gerald momentarily jealous. But jealousy was a young man's game, between living parties. Even as a younger man, he'd learned not to be jealous if his wife referenced an ex-boyfriend. Because hadn't he had ex-girlfriends and schoolboy crushes, crushes on actresses on TV? What mattered was who

sat with you in that moment—who you chose to be with and who chose to be with you.

And Mary Lou had chosen him to talk about her late husband leaving his stinking socks on the floor—and not next to the laundry hamper to demonstrate some cursory attempt at putting them in the right place, but in the living room, the bathroom, even under his spot at the kitchen table sometimes. The man was a slob who always promised to do the dishes but hardly ever did, who left cookie crumbs and coffee spills to settle on the couch. But he was tender, too. He didn't mind watching whatever program she liked on television as long as he got to have his arm around her shoulders. They fell asleep like that a lot of nights toward the end.

It would've only been natural for Gerald to tell Mary Lou about his own ex-wife, but he told her about Jack instead. He told her about a time Gerald had forgotten his wallet at home and was caught slack-jawed at his own idiocy at the front counter and thought he'd have to double back home to get the money, but Jack had been in line behind him and paid for him. It was only fifty-four cents, but it represented something more. Gerald had tried to pay him back the next morning, but Jack acted like he didn't remember what he was talking about. Gerald was sure he *did* remember and that was the mark of a good man, to not only help a friend but never hold it over his head, to barely accept thanks.

Gerald apologized for telling such a facile story, about a connection so meaningless compared to Mary Lou's late spouse, but she put a hand over his and reassured him. She said Jack sounded like a wonderful man.

Some nights—as Mary Lou's driveway visits became a habit, and Gerald got better at remembering to turn off the space heater before he came outside—Gerald thought he might fall asleep in the car. It wasn't because he wasn't engaged with what Mary Lou had to say, but because it seemed there was no end to her stories, to the conversation she could keep. Always a familiar tune on oldies radio, always the whir of the heater.

Ever the caretaker, ever the mother, Mary Lou recognized when Gerald was too tired to go on. She told him she was tired and sent him back into the house.

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The doorbell rang. Gerald had been awake for a bit—he had trouble ever sleeping past seven in the morning, regardless of how late he’d stayed up talking with Mary Lou—but he was still in bed, still resting his tired bones. Gerald figured it was one of those few remaining door-to-door salesmen, so he didn’t rush, easing himself up, and taking a moment to straighten his bathrobe over his pajamas.

The doorbell rang again.

If anything, Gerald slowed down, pleased with himself at not being bothered. Let the salesman see what his dogged persistence would get him.

Then the knocking. Thunderous. The *Hello? Hello?*

Gerald recognized the voice.

Harry was still there when Gerald got to the door and threw his hands in the air. “You’re alive!”

Gerald knew he probably ought to invite this man—ostensibly his friend—in out of the cold, but something felt wrong about that intimacy when even a real friend like Mary Lou hadn’t made it past the driveway yet. Besides, afternoons out of the house puzzling and late nights in her car had left Gerald further behind than usual on his housekeeping.

To his relief, Harry didn’t invite himself in or try to bull his way through, only explained that they’d missed him at McDonald’s those past three weeks (had it been three weeks?). “At our age, you never knew when someone might kick the bucket. Gladys and Marjorie reminded me you live alone, so I figured I’d better check on you.”

Gerald tried to piece together how Harry had known where to find him at all but remembered those blustery mornings when someone had driven him that short stretch from the McDonald’s parking lot back home, and other times when someone drove in the same direction and might have seen him unlocking his front door.

“You’ve gotta make sure you’re having breakfast. You’re already skin and bones, right?” Harry clapped Gerald’s shoulder. “You’ve gotta keep some meat packed on.”

Gerald thanked him and exchanged a few pleasantries. He wondered how many days had gone by before anyone noticed his absence. He wondered how much of his time Harry would take up that morning, too.

“You’re one of us,” Harry said. “We’ve got to look out for each other, right?”

Gerald felt himself warming a little. For annoyed as he could be with the fat, old fool, there was a sense of concern under everything Harry said. Maybe he’d felt responsible for Jack’s passing, or at least felt the loss every bit as profoundly as Gerald had, because he, too, had lost a man he considered one of his own.

Before long, they were wrapping up, though. Particularly when it was just the two of them, there was only so much to say. Harry did look past him, though, and commented on the space heater on the coffee table in front of the couch where Gerald had left it the evening before, before he turned it off in a hurry and scurried outside to meet Mary Lou in the driveway.

“Those things are great for keeping warm,” Harry said. “But be careful. They can burn your whole house down.”

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Late at night, the same day Harry had checked in, Gerald sat in Mary Lou’s car and she played a song from an unreleased CD by the Celtic String Trio.

He recognized the song. Bruce Springsteen. “I’m On Fire.” Reimagined with Mary Lou on lead vocals and the group’s signature lilt of the Irish mandolin. Pretty, Gerald thought.

Gerald should’ve guessed Jack’s shortness of breath and terrible eating habits foretold he’d have a heart attack. The increasingly common nights when Gerald and his ex-wife had nothing to talk about suggested a divorce loomed. It was easy to see, in hindsight, the way life foreshadowed what might happen if you only paid close enough attention to the clues.

He’d look back on the whole day as chock full of foreshadowing. If the words of Harry and Springsteen alike warned him the space heater



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