

# No Word for the Sea

by DIANE GLANCY

*Wear warm clothes.*

Those were the words Solome heard from the next table. She had nothing but warm clothes in her closet. Winter was most of the year in Minnesota. Sweaters and trousers in logging-camp brown. Kerosene yellow. Lumberjack check. Wood-stove black. She could push the restaurant voices away, but she listened to them as she watched for Stephen.

Solome remembered a look on her husband's face when they returned from a trip to Crane Lake. He wasn't sure where he was. She had seen that look before when they were in a new place, but they were home.

"We're in our house, Stephen," Solome had assured him.

He knew it anyway, but there was a momentary— what?— blankness?—confusion? It happened to everyone.

The memory of Crane Lake and their cabin five hours north of St. Paul rested a moment in her thoughts. She remembered thinking Stephen would be president of Cobson College. The thought returned like small waves lapping the shore. Her husband, Stephen, was provost of the college, and could become president when the current president left or retired. But Stephen had been depressed. It happened suddenly, but with certainty. He had been a history professor, chair of his department, dean of his division— then provost— still going where he was going. What was bothering him? They had worked all their married life for their children and their place in St. Paul

among friends and colleagues. Why had she never looked beyond possibilities? What was this *bad news* she felt cornered in her thoughts?

Solome read the menu in the restaurant.

Imagine tables close as clothes in a closet. Two women at the next table talking. Imagine someone’s mind wiped clean as the next table in front of her. With a chill Solome remembered Stephen’s mother saying she found her father’s work-tools in the dining-room drawer. She had remembered his distance at family gatherings.

In the restaurant, the conversations were unrelated to one another, yet all sounded together. Imagine the conversations lifted above the knives and forks like rigging in an inland harbor. Imagine seeing no one she knew in the downtown St. Paul restaurant that overlooked the Mississippi River. Solome thought of the miles the water traveled from Itasca, its headwaters, to the gulf in New Orleans. At least she didn’t have to explain Stephen’s absence to anyone.

Imagine a country without its own language. Well, it had a language; it just wasn’t its own. It came from across the ocean, tossing boats, stirring waves. It was itself made of other languages, bits and pieces meshing over history, reverberating in the restaurant.

When had her husband begun? Begun what? A journey into forgetfulness. A journey into his own language, into words that did not follow their order.

Solome looked at the menu again. Should she leave or stay?

Sometimes she’d ask Stephen about something and it was as if he was already separated from the land. It angered him when she caught him like that. When did Stephen fall into his roily language? What did that mean? She didn’t know. Or he would repeat the same question. Where was the shore he was headed? It was as if he spoke behind a seawall.

She called him on her cell phone, but there was no answer at the office or the house.

Solome and Stephen had been married thirty years. They had three children. One daughter, Gretchen, was working toward a Ph.D. at Columbia. The other, Susanna, was married and had a baby. Mark Stephen, their son,

born twelve years into their marriage, was a freshman at Cobson College. Solome and Stephen had a resonance and a history. They shared a family. A people. A country. They shared a language, broken as it was.

She sat in the restaurant a while longer. Finally she ordered. She would eat by herself if Stephen didn't show. She remembered in school how she'd once been called Solo.

Solome had a name from the Bible. But her mother had misspelled it. In the Bible, it was Salome, the mother of James and John. But there was another Salome, the daughter of Herodias, who had asked her mother what she should ask, after she danced for Herod. Herodias told her, the head of John the Baptist. There were reasons— she had left her husband for his brother, and John said a man should not take his brother's wife. Herodias held a grudge, and had an answer ready for her daughter.

Why had Solome's mother named her that? She had like the sound of it, she said. The word meant, *clothed*. But Solome felt clothed with two different women.

In the Bible, Salome had asked her mother what she should wish for, but Solome decided what she wanted. She hadn't asked anyone. She wanted a husband, children. Then a job. What she got was a longing for something more.

When the meal came, she ate by herself in the restaurant. When she finished, she paid for it and left.

Stephen was walking along the street, several blocks from their house, when Solome drove up. She braked and pulled to the curb. When he didn't notice, she honked. “What are you doing?” She asked. “You were supposed to meet me at the restaurant.”

Imagine a language that could absorb all the shipwrecks, all the landings, all the changes, the disruptions and upsets. Imagine a language that could reach anywhere with its sound and meaning. If Stephen could just speak, he could cover his absence in the restaurant, which he now remembered. He could explain it, make it understandable or acceptable or tolerable. He wanted a language with boundaries that were never settled, as if the language were water, both changing the shore, as it was change by it.

“Didn't you wonder where I was?” Solome asked. “What did you do for dinner?”

Stephen could say he had amnesia. He could make light of his forgetfulness, but that wouldn't work.

He hadn't even remembered to take Brown, the dog; Solome would have to walk him later.

Did Stephen want to ride with her?

He'd rather walk, he told her, and Solome drove on. Stephen followed, crossing the street, walking toward their cul-de-sac, the houses circling like a squall.

Why hadn't he remembered, he thought as he walked. What had he done for dinner? He'd fixed himself a sandwich, never wondering where Solome was.

The next morning, Stephen remembered he was walking when Solome drove up, angry. Why hadn't he been at the restaurant? What was he thinking when he left his office? He didn't know. Somehow it slipped away. What had he done that day? He felt stupid. It was a feeling he felt more often. The clear space in his mind. The place where nothing came. No thoughts. No ideas. He was in meetings— finance and long range planning. Further cut-backs had to be made. He had to remember the numbers. The reasoning. He had lunch with a board-of-trustees member. Tenure review. Allocations. More policy decisions. He could list them. He often felt irritable. His job frustrated him. It was going by fast. His family— he didn't always have time to give them the attention they needed— Mark Stephen protesting something on the commons didn't he know his father was provost?

What was the name of those bushes on campus he liked the smell? Lilacs. His secretary said.

He sat in his office with the door closed. No, he had given his family everything he could. But he felt angry over their demands. What were they demanding? Their weight on his shoulders. Yet he liked them. He felt pleasure with his family. How could there be contradictions? Confusion. Stephen also thought of the presidency of the college. But the president wouldn't leave until retire. He felt it slip past him. Not because of anything or anyone he could blame. But because of something within himself. He could retire— be through with this. The *on the spot*. The *what would he say next?* They were looking at him in a meeting.

There was this frustration. This fuzz. He wrote out the report he would give at the faculty meeting at the end of the day. It took him longer than he thought. His calls were backed-up. His e-mails. His appointments.

That evening, on a walk with the dog in Hill Park near their house, Stephen and Solome saw a plane turning on the horizon until it was gone. Solome mentioned a recent plane crash that had been in the news.

Stephen couldn't remember. He was thinking of something else, long ago, but he didn't tell his wife. The little black box he carried was his childhood. It would survive a crash. What was he thinking? What crash? He worried about his memory. He didn't want to think about it, but he knew something was happening. He felt like he was experiencing— what?— something different than it had been. He felt a darkness in his thinking. It sat on him with its weight. He couldn't move it. He didn't know what it was or where. He grew more sullen. Quiet. But it was the black box —the memory of his early years. The repeating without knowing. You've said that Stephen, he heard Solome say.

The word, Alzheimer's struck them at the same time. Where did it come from? He remembered his mother wondering if her father, Stephen's grandfather, had died of Alzheimer's before anyone recognized what it was. Stephen suddenly thought of a day that would come he would be in a small room looking from a window waiting for someone and he wouldn't know who they were nor recognize them when they arrived. The word and the thought that followed didn't often come, but once in a while, as he sat in his office, or in a meeting, the dread came over him. He was slipping as his grandfather had slipped and died before anyone knew the A. word. What had his father died of? Heart attack. He had been young. Maybe it hadn't had time to show. Maybe the thought of it had crushed him.

Imagine speaking someone else's words. A mother's. A husband's.

Solome was on the phone calling members of the Faculty Wives Club when the past rolled into her memory again. She was telling the wives about one of the other wives, who had just had surgery. She was ordering flowers, making conciliatory comments. The college had turned a corner toward downsizing. She was the provost's wife. She was a diplomat smoothing the way. What was that game in which a woman pushed something like a teakettle on the floor and two other women rushed ahead of it, sweeping the ice clean and slick? *Shot put* came to mind, but that wasn't the name.

Imagine an American memory. The Minnesota winters. Sledding parties. Skating parties. Shoveling after a blizzard. Then summer baseball. Hot dogs. Paul Bunyan.

Imagine a woman’s black gabardine evening bag. A daughter looking at it. Imagine earrings in a dresser drawer. Two mounds of sequins like the sun on an afternoon lake. Why would she remember the mound of sequins that were her mother’s earrings? Why did those images stay in her mind at times? How often did she think of the past? And who was Solome with a misspelled name, a name from others, a language from others? It all harbored in Solome’s memory, that gift she wanted to name again and again.

Solome stood in Stephen’s study. Stephen’s secretary had called. Had he left his briefcase by his desk? No. Solome couldn’t find it. Had he left it in the car?

Solome looked at the photos on the shelf. There was the family lined up in front of the Depot Museum in Duluth: Stephen, Solome, Gretchen, Susanna, Mark Stephen. There they were in front of an antique store in Stillwater. In front of Paul Bunyan in Brainerd. Was that the trip Stephen was supposed to leave with them, but some meeting had come up at the college, and Solome had driven ahead with the children? Later, Stephen had taken the bus to Brainerd. He had gotten off the bus with a confused look on his face, but Solome was there to meet him. *Here we are*, she had called him. She remembered the relieved look on his face as he walked toward her and the children.

There was the family at the Black Hills and Mount Rushmore on their South Dakota trip. There were the photos of the family at her parents’ cabin on Crane Lake; her father with a fishing pole in his hand. Sometimes his absence still caught her off guard.

There was Brown, the dog, with snow on his nose.

The wedding of Susanna and Brian, their son-in-law.

The baby Susan. Her first birthday party.

The photo of Solome and Jane Mead, a friend since high school, who was like a sister.

The photos of New York on their visits to Gretchen.

There were photos of several trips Solome and Stephen took to Europe. There they were in Madrid.

Papers jumbled on his desk. Moved by themselves. What was there wasn't there any longer. Looking at something what was it?— what did he have to do? Thinking of the word he needed but couldn't find. Everything tumbling. Get a grip. Get ready for the meeting. Say. Where's the briefcase? Call Solome. Look in the car. Not there. Not there. Can't go to the meeting without papers. Secretary— print out minutes again. Get lunch and bring it to me. I don't have— I'll eat while I prepare for the meeting. Then the candidates for sociology and religious studies departments. Get their resumes. They're in briefcase.

A Thompsonville chest-of-drawers. A stain mark down the edge. A letter to the company. A man coming from the furniture store, deciding there was nothing wrong, not offering to repair or replace it.

Imagine an American house.

An American dog.

A husband confused about the day. In need of his briefcase.

Money paid for a flawed piece of furniture.

Imagine wanting something and wanting something. The feeling never stopped barking; gnawing like a squirrel in the attic, like their dog, Brown, that didn't stop barking.

Solome lived in America, yet the neighbors acted like they were in a country where they turned each other in. What could she do? It was as if part of her crossed through the walls of the house and settled in the dog, and she called out for someone and called out for someone in the dog's bark.

What could she do with a dog that stayed chained in the backyard? She asked her Thursday afternoon discussion group. Jane Mead suggested putting him to sleep. Brown had dug a trench along the back of the house in frustration, uprooting a flower bed and an old toy buried long ago by one of the children. Her yard man would fill it in again.

The dog didn't bark while she was there. Once, in a dream, during a nap, she'd heard barking. She woke and knew what the neighbors meant. But why had they called the police? Who was it? Not the Grunswald's. They were friends. Possibly the Morgan's. More probably the Bernard's whom Solome hardly knew. Or someone on the next street.

What did Solome want? Her business was the house and children, but now the walls were moving close to her and she was unable to beat them back.

When Solome was in high school, her parents had bought a small cabin on Crane Lake, five hours north of St. Paul, near the boundary waters on the border of Canada. The shore was eroding, though they didn't know it at the time. “Fitting,” her mother said. She kept the cabin after Solome's father died, though she seldom went there. “It's probably been eaten by mosquitoes or fallen into the lake.”

But the cabin had not fallen into the lake. Solome went there when she needed solitude. Sometimes Stephen went with her. Her mother wasn't interested in the cabin any longer, nor the children, though Mark would go occasionally with some friends. Solome's mother thought of selling it, but Solome asked if they could hold onto it when her mother mentioned selling.

Solome belonged to the Faculty Wives Club. She had a small job. On Wednesdays and Fridays she worked at the Minnesota Historical Society. She volunteered, actually. She worked in retrieval in the research library, going into the stacks, bringing back requested material. Sometimes she looked through the books, reading about subjects such as Ojibway winter spirits. Solome liked the cool, gray metal stairs, the battleship gray floors. The *ordered-ness*. The *fire-proofed* structure. But Solome felt nothing she wanted to feel. She could plug the longing now and then. Dream of an actual job with responsibility and satisfaction. That was the American dream.

There was Stephen's briefcase— in his closet. She called him at Cobson. Did he want her to drive it there? Yes.

She had raised three children. She had served in PTA and Brownie troops. She had made some of the girls' clothes. She grew, changed, took risks. She chose yellow wallpaper with turquoise flowers for the dining room. Maybe garish was the word for her risk, in that case. She was present with Stephen at dinners and social gatherings. She was the visible wife of the provost of Cobson College. Solome knew what to say to others.

Salome, the mother of the disciples, James and John, had been at the tomb of Jesus with Susanna, Joanna, who was the wife of Chuzas, Herod's steward, and other women who had been healed of spirits and demons, including Mary Magdalene. What were demons?— whatever it was pursuing Stephen?

But Solome’s ordinary American life was blessed. She didn’t need to worry about demons. There were no tanks in her street. No gunshots in her neighborhood. No fear for her children’s lives, though American cities were not safe and at night she hurried toward her house along the lighted sidewalk with the dog. She wished sometimes they lived farther out in the suburb, and why couldn’t they move? They’d been in the same house nearly twenty-five years.

Where did the mind go when the circuits shut down?

She looked through the photo albums of trips and outings, birthdays, scouting and school programs, the high school graduations of their three children.

What was missing? God, what was it? God? Late one evening when she was waiting for her husband to come back on a plane after a conference on retaining faculty, before she started to the airport to get him, she was passing through the t.v. channels and she saw an evangelist on television. He preached a sermon and said she needed Jesus in her life. There was a woman listening who needed to be saved. Accept Jesus as your Savior. Solome sat in the chair and repeated after the evangelist, Lord Jesus Christ, you died for my sins, I accept you as my Savior.

Now she had an American religion. What difference would it make?

While Salome had asked Jesus if her sons, James and John, could sit by his side in heaven, Solome asked Jesus to be by her side.

Well, now she had Jesus. What next?

The sin would disappear from her life, the minister on television said. What was her sin? She was faithful. Punctual. Conscientious. Consistent. What had she done that Jesus had to die for her on the cross?

When she picked Stephen up from the airport, she said nothing to him about her television evangelistic experience.

In the airport, forgot which gate looked at pass again and again. Thought of meeting. Disinterested. Only wanted to leave. Why didn’t I care about this? Always careful in meetings and information dissemination.

Stephen was Solome’s friend, her long time companion, but now she sensed a collision with life as she knew it. No, life as she knew it was colliding with what she didn’t know. Didn’t want to know. She hardly was aware of it, but she was stepping off a continental shelf. Maybe it was a recognition that moved in her sleep, deep in her dreams. Could Solome continue without Stephen? What had she ever done without her husband? Could she face herself before God alone? Oh God, what could she do? There was a landscape like a Salvador Dali painting in her head when she opened the Bible. “The Lord shall descend from heaven with a shout; and the dead in Christ shall rise first; then we who are alive shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Wherefore, comfort one another with these words.” I Thessalonians 4:16-18. But what comfort was that? Solome thought— Being yanked through the sky when she didn’t want to go. She closed the Bible.

Sometimes she numbered her duties to herself. Her book of numbers. Cordiality was part of Solome’s fabric, her veil. She remembered her line of duties. Her children always had been ready for school. She had been at home when the children returned from school. She oversaw homework. She *got them ahead*. She hosted parties when her husband was chair of the history department at Cobson College. She hosted more parties when he was division dean, and when he became provost. Once, she had planned to continue to host parties when Stephen was president.

Sometimes everything numbed her. She called Reverend Croft, her minister, and made an appointment. “My faith is boring. I can’t connect.” She wanted more from church. How could she tell him that? What was she doing? After their talk, a woman with the last name of Forman called Solome and asked her to their Bible study group. What conspiracy was in the church? Solome agreed to come before she knew it. She would go just once to see who these strange people were.

It wasn’t church, but the Bible and the reading of it. Maybe that was the barking dog. There were words that demanded to be heard, to be paid attention. She was a Christian in a Christian nation. But she didn’t know what that meant. She was a nominal Christian in a nominal nation. What was it like to be a believer who walked in faith? Was she in or out? Hot or cold? Maybe that’s what Brown wanted. Meaning in his life. The dog was part

of Solome out there in the yard. Digging trenches for her war with worry and her war with the stillness of the house where she was now alone.

Two of her children, Gretchen and Mark, were in college. One daughter, Susanna, whom they called Soos, returned home after her marriage and the birth of a daughter, Solome and Stephen’s only grandchild. But after a few months, Soos had reconciled with her husband. Sometimes when Stephen worked late, or had meetings, she began to feel her life was her own.

What if, in the middle of this new feeling of self-direction, her life turned a corner where she didn’t want to go? What if the walls of her house were pinching together? Slowly, of course, so slowly she hardly noticed. What if her outward course reversed? The fear gripped her. She couldn’t stand the thought. It was not what she wanted. What if it was some sinister force? Solome realized she was sweating.

On Monday evenings, Solome went to Bible study. She wanted to grow stronger in her faith. What did that mean? She would rely on what the Bible said, rather than on her circumstances? She would have to examine her life.

Gretchen and Dennis were coming. No they had called they might be coming but it wasn’t settled yet. What was his last name? Solome tried to remember. Dennis something. Yes I know but what. I don’t know, Stephen, Solome said. We’ll find out soon enough. What will I say to him? Why’s he coming? In the end, they postponed.

Solome took the dog for a walk. She would stop to talk with Hetty Grunswald, her neighbor. Later, she would talk with her friends on the phone. She called Soos everyday, or stopped by her house. She talked to her mother nearly everyday on the phone. Sometimes, on Wednesdays and Fridays, her mother met her at the Historical Society for lunch and they spent time in the exhibits. Sometimes Soos and Susan came also. Then there were the calls to Gretchen in New York of an evening while Stephen sat in his chair. Sometimes it seemed as if Stephen was purposely disengaging, losing interest in their lives. She could sense him preparing to leave, not her as his wife, but leaving his own life; not dying yet, but slowly taking his hands off the wheel. It couldn’t be time for the end yet.

Solome lived in America where there was a heaven and an earth. But there was something coming for Stephen. They both felt it in the night. It was a new territory neither of them wanted to enter.

She remembered once at her parents' place at Crane Lake, a large boat docked. A woman in a black swimming suit ran toward her parents' cabin where Stephen worked with her father to screen the porch. She watched the woman run toward her husband like a dream that followed sleep into waking. Soon the woman realized she was running toward the wrong house, and turned to the house next door.

“Who was that?” Solome asked her mother.

“She's the daughter of a woman who looked in on the old couple,” her mother said.

Yes, the people who lived in the next cabin with their retarded daughter.

Solome watched Stephen return to his screening after a woman in black ran toward him in the afternoon, a black butterfly, ready to carry him away, to unthread him from her.

Their son, Mark, wanted to develop his own course of study at the college. He joined some students who formed a protest group. It bothered Stephen that his son's name was in the college newspaper. His colleagues must talk about it behind his back.

The students had sit-ins. Marches. They chalked the sidewalks. There were demands for multiculturalism.

“You don't know what you need to know,” Stephen said to Mark.

Solome heard them talking in the other room. She knew they were disagreeing.

Sometimes Mark stopped by the house on weekends. His returns were nothing more than a meal to serve, his clothes to wash, his room to clean after he left, and a few sharp words with his father who was becoming more and more, what was the word— irascible?

“Why do you stay at Cobson and embarrass your father?” Solome asked when Stephen had gone upstairs.

“You could go to another college if you want to act like that,” Solome confronted Mark before he left.

“I want to go to Cobson,” Mark snapped back. “I like the climate there. My friends are there.”

“What you do reflects on your father.”

“Ideas change. I can’t be your boy scout any longer,” Mark said and left.

Once there had been a common Indo-European language with words for winter and horse, but no word for the sea.

*Wear warm clothes*, Solome remembered.

Once she had taken a course on language. She still remembered it, or some of it. After the common language, there had been closely related Germanic languages that formed the basis of English, which formed the basis of her American language. There had been links to Sanskrit, Greek, Latin. There was a Norman conquest; there were the Anglo Saxons. Imagine a language that could move over, make room for others. Imagine new words joined to the old ones, crossing to other worlds, spreading like the sea.

The English and American language wasn’t as rigid as other languages. New ideas were given new words, maybe new words were given new ideas. There were openings for possibilities: abstractions and complex thought.

Christianity also had added words: cedars of Lebanon, camels, myrrh. Even language had been converted by Christianity. There also was the story of the Tower of Babel in the Bible, where language was purposely mixed.

Solome felt the piles of language like laundry yet to be folded. She felt cardboard. Artificial. What was her language telling her? She didn’t like herself. No, that wasn’t it.

Where were all the facts she had once memorized?

Where was all the *wood* she had chopped? *Chores* she had done?

What if she had had the opportunity to develop a career the way Stephen had? What if she hadn’t been clamped off? Was that how she saw her life?

On Monday evening, the Bible study group met at her house. The members took turns hosting the group. Solome decided to make a dessert. There were three couples, two unmarried sisters named Forman, and a man who came without his wife. The minister and his wife also sometimes attended.

The group was amazed at the Savard’s house. Solome could tell by the way they looked at the room. Didn’t they know she was the wife of a provost? She wished it were something she could hide. The man who came without his wife was the only one who didn’t seem impressed.

Mrs. Croft, the minister’s wife, told Solome she could do anything as she tasted her dessert. Flattery should have been her name.

The Bible study group was a fast-paced crowd, Stephen told her with irritation when they left.

“Do you want me to quit?”

“Do what you want.”

The minister’s wife had a drifty presence. She could be everything to nearly everyone. Solome admired her resistance to getting stuck in one place— Her wide berth.

Solome was who she was. But who was she? And why did she have the feeling she was on the swift current of

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