

Remarks on John Rees; by Bill Rees at his funeral, December 8, 2004

Of the various gifts of God, to which St Paul refers in First Corinthians, my kid brother was treated to the gift of laughter. My Johnny spread joy throughout Connecticut the way another Johnny spread apple seeds. As a result he was very popular. The phone in our home was always be ringing and was always for John. His customers when he worked for Bell Pump anxiously awaited his visits to hear a new funny story or to have a common event transformed into a hilariously experience. His humor was very personal and situational; he was more spontaneous like Will Rogers than scripted like Alan King. When asked by a doctor if he slept well, he replied he was a professional sleeper who did not count sheep, the sheep counted him. When another doctor asked him to hold his arms out in front of him and noticed the tremor he had from birth, which was made worse by a current treatment, he quipped: "I guess my circumcising days are over." He later wondered where such thoughts came from, which just seemed to pop into his head. "You know, Bill, people can make big money dreaming up stuff like this." At a convalescent home one night before the lights were turned off, a nurse came to ask him if there was anything he needed. "Yes," he answered, "there is. Come over here and let's have some pillow talk." She mumbled something about his being a dirty old man and stormed out of the room. The next day his wife, Mary, that paragon of devotion, came to visit and to help. The nurse reappeared to say: "I told your wife what you said last night." "My wife?" he replied innocently, "She's my daughter." Realizing it was a joke, she began to laugh. John had turned a sick bay into a festival, which he had done a few years before, when his bed in the Yale New Haven Hospital had a malfunction and began to emit some smoke. He described it as a bonfire for months, embellishing it each time. He even managed to amuse his radiologist, a serious but somewhat dour man. "You can blame yourself for being so busy. You are well known throughout the world. You are so famous people come to see you from everywhere to get well." The doctor remarked: "You are a funny man; you are very funny man" and smiled.

Now, at the end, at his funeral, what would John have us do? Weep? Absolutely not. He would think he failed in his mission. He would want us to do the reverse, like reenacting *Finnegan's Wake*. In his last novel, James Joyce recorded that Finnegan fell off a ladder and died and at his wake the Jameson whiskey flowed freely. There was dancing and there was singing; so much so that Finnegan sat up in the coffin to join the fun. John would want us to be inebriated not on Jameson's but on JohnReesyims. He would want us to share with one another the happy moments we had in his company, like the time a neighbor brought him a dish of chocolate chip cookies, when he took one in his hand and said: "If I eat this I will not be able to stop until your mortgage is paid off." He would then be with us in spirit.

Do we really want him to sit up in his coffin like Finnegan, even if his cancer were miraculously cured? If we do, I submit that we are thinking more about ourselves than about him; more about our need for his fellowship and his good cheer. We should remember there is a small aneurysm still in his brain, a tiny time bomb ready to explode, and a carotid artery in his neck ready to close, and while we saw his laughing on the outside, he was often crying on the inside, continuously humiliated by the madness of the world. Rather, we men and women of faith should believe he's in a better place and be able to say: "Amen, brother, your race is won; your suffering is over; your Purgatory has ended; your stain of Adam has been washed away." We men and women of faith should say that God is good; that His mercy endures forever; and that in His loving kindness He will deliver John to Abraham's bosom, where he will rest in peace with the saints and holy martyrs in Paradise.