

## Echoes of Spring

Spring is emerging and beckoning in a rush of softening soil and blossoming flowers, every metaphor, every seasonal cliché bursting around me like a fireworks display. The sky is clear blue, clouds swept away by a cool morning breeze. The sun is delightfully warm as it bathes my face through the windshield. And because of this (or perhaps, in spite of it), I find myself muttering increasingly vile imprecations as I rub the sunlight from my eyes and steer my five-year-old Toyota into its usual parking space at the Mossback Mall.

It is two minutes before ten in the morning, and it suddenly occurs to me that I'm going to be late for work. But then it also occurs to me that, for the first time in a long time, I really don't care. It is truly a beautiful day, and I could be outside working in my garden or taking a long neighborhood walk with my wife. So, as I sit behind the steering wheel of my car, bracing myself for eight hours of tedium in a store without windows, I ask myself whatever possessed me, after retiring from thirty-five years of teaching high school English, to take a job as assistant manager in a mall bookstore for eleven dollars an hour.

It really isn't the money, I tell myself. After all, between my wife and me, our retirement income is adequate for our modest needs and wants. The mortgage on our house has been paid off for years, our two daughters are well-established in their own careers, and the three grandchildren have enough toys and clothing to supply an entire village in some small African country. No, it isn't the money. I really do accept that. It is perhaps as Charley told Linda at the end of *Death of a Salesman*: "No man only needs a little salary."

How true that is, I think. After three years of flea markets and short trips driving around the country, retirement suddenly seemed confining, stifling, almost suffocating. I mean, how many times can a man mow his lawn, organize his tools, paint his garage floor, sweep loose grass from his sidewalk, before he begins to question his reason for being? And when he starts to search for religious affirmation as though the fate of his soul is all that matters to him, he has to know he has way too much free time on his hands.

Anyway, I'm still sitting in my car, thinking of an excuse to tell Ron, the manager. Then I remember that it was Ron who talked me into this in the first place. Ron, who not so long ago was one of the faceless and mediocre students who drifted through my senior English classes just before I retired. I can feel anger rise up inside me. The anger is not directed at Ron, not really, but rather at myself for sacrificing this magnificent day to no higher purposes than money and boredom.

I close my eyes, lean back in the soft cloth seat, and think of how much energy I had twenty years ago when I would dream of what I would do, all that I would accomplish and enjoy during my retirement years. What a farce that dream turned out to be.

When I open my eyes again, the small blue numbers on the digital clock read 10:08. I process the time and feel a sudden twinge of responsibility that causes me to sit bolt upright in the seat. However, just as I'm about to open the door and surrender myself to the great gods of retail, a yellow VW Beetle pulls into the spot next to me. Instinctively, I glance over and I can see that the driver is a young woman with long brown hair.

She sees me and flashes a pleasant innocent smile just before sliding out onto the pavement. As she begins to stroll toward the mall, I notice that she is wearing a white

sundress that stops just below her thighs and brown leather sandals on her shapely bare feet. Even from a distance, I can see the firm outline of her breasts pressing against the thin cotton of her dress.

I seem to forget all about time and responsibility as I shove open the car door and jump out, nearly tripping over my clumsy feet in the process. Feeling some kind of mindless primal tug, as though I am the ocean responding to the moon's gravitational pull, I quickly secure my car and practically break into a jog in order to keep pace with the young woman. This doesn't make any sense, the practical side of me says as I continue to lengthen my strides in order to get to within fifteen or twenty feet of her, all the while hoping she doesn't notice my ridiculous and grossly inappropriate behavior.

At that moment, I am reminded of the expression, "In spring, a young man's fancy turns to...turns to..." What? The expression doesn't apply to me anyway, my other internal voice replies, because I am certainly not a young man, at least not anymore. But am I an old man? When does a man stop being young and start being old? I cannot answer these questions. I only know that some dark and sinister part of me has become far too interested in this pretty young female walking ahead of me, minding her own business and offering me absolutely nothing.

Finally, the practical side of me, the ethical side, that blessed voice of reason, decides that I should be thoroughly disgusted with myself, and I begin to slow down. But then, a strong, sudden gust of wind hits her dress, and, for a split second, I can see the back of the white panties she is wearing. The image seems to be forever burned into my eyes, and my brain goes on red alert, flashing pictures of me in prison for gross sexual imposition. My wife, daughters, and grandchildren are massed outside my cell shaking their heads, telling me over and over again how they simply cannot believe what I did

and how much I have shamed them (“Hope you get life, you dirty bastard,” my oldest daughter proclaims just before turning away in disgust).

This gruesome image is enough to slow me down to a virtual crawl. So now the innocent and unsuspecting young woman is at least forty feet ahead of me as she enters the mall. With sweat dripping into my eyes and cascading down my face, I try to avoid looking at her, as if that would somehow stop, or at least slow, the frenetic transmission of conflicting pictures from one part of my brain to another. Of course, this doesn’t really work, but the attempt makes me feel a little better nonetheless, more like the enlightened man I have always aspired to be.

I am nearly self-satisfied and in control again when I see her slowly move past the Hallmark Card Shop, Bath and Beauty Works, and the Gap. Then she stops in front of the bookstore, and I can feel my normally healthy heart hammer inside my chest. Once again, I slow my pace and cast my eyes to the polished concrete floor.

She only glances at the rack of bestsellers and continues on toward Macy’s, now just another shopper. As I approach the wall of magazines inside the store, I notice Ron. But he doesn’t see me at first because his gaze is fixed intently upon the young woman as she strolls away from him, her firm body swaying casually from side to side. “Man, I wonder if she needs a job,” he mumbles in a low voice. He scratches his head and turns toward me. “Well, it’s just as well if she doesn’t,” he continues, “she’d probably be suing me for sexual harassment after the first hour...Still, it would almost be worth it.”

As I process not only his words but their secondary semantic implications, I experience a jolt of an emotion which feels a lot like jealousy or maybe even raw animal passion. I think about this as I slip closer to Ron and discreetly try to catch my breath.

Ron looks at me again and scowls. “Wayne, what are you doing here?” he asks as if he has suddenly awakened from a dream. “You’re not on the schedule for today, are you?”

I roll my eyes. Ron always forgets to check the schedule when he opens in the morning; it’s just one of his many little flaws that I have tried to ignore. But whenever I feel myself getting angry with him, I try to remember that he is only twenty-five years old and got the job as manager mostly because he has worked at this same bookstore since he was sixteen, was a key holder at eighteen, and assistant manager at twenty. He works hard, almost never complains in spite of the stress, and the store seems to run pretty well.

I take a deep breath to calm myself. “I’m pretty sure I’m on the schedule,” I answer softly. “But if you don’t need me, I’ll be more than happy to go home.”

Ron’s eyes widen a little. “No, no,” he says. “You’re probably right...I may not have looked at the schedule when I opened this morning. Besides, I could use you...I’m supposed to meet with the district manager in a couple of hours, and now I can leave you in charge. I thought Michelle was supposed to be here too, but I haven’t seen her yet.”

I smile patiently. “Michelle doesn’t come in until one.”

“Oh, that’s right,” he says. “I guess I really didn’t check the schedule this morning.”

I scan the store’s interior. “What do you want me to do before your meeting?”

“Well, there are a lot of new books that need to be shelved. And there is a new Stephen King display the publisher wants us to set up near the front,” he replies. “Maybe you can start on that while I check stock and work the register.”

I nod and move to the back of the store. As I clock in, I look at myself in the little mirror over the time clock. I’m still sweating slightly. Quickly, I take my handkerchief

from my back pocket and wipe my face. Then I comb down my thinning gray hair. As I look at myself again, dressed in my usual white polo shirt and khaki pants, I wonder if I look anything like Robert Kincaide from *The Bridges of Madison County*. I shudder at the image in the mirror and my own vanity, suddenly remembering that it was just the other day someone paid me the ultimate backhanded compliment: “Man, you really look good for your age.”

The rest of the morning flows smoothly. I finish setting up the display just as Ron leaves for his meeting. Hardly anyone has come into the store. I grimace as I think, why would anyone want to come to the mall on such a beautiful day? I know I wouldn't be here if I didn't have to be. But do I really have to be, I ask myself. Then, just as I am beginning to engage myself in a serious debate over free will versus the blind acceptance of responsibility, she—the young woman—comes into the store. I freeze in place as I watch her stop in front of the magazines and start to browse.

That dark and dangerous part of me is very tempted to approach her and ask if I can assist her in finding anything. However, intrinsically I know that she really doesn't need any assistance I could offer, so I keep my distance and try very hard not to stare at her. But as much as I try to control them, my eyes are continuously drawn to her, especially as I replay the image of what I glimpsed earlier today outside. Like maybe there will be some kind of sudden surge of air inside. Not very likely, but you never know.

I choke and stagger as these thoughts continue to assault me, one wave at a time, seeming to gather momentum each time they recycle. I tell myself that for thirty-five years I fought through the worst kind of temptation and never once even came close to giving in. I thought I had that all under control, especially now that I'm decidedly too old to do anything untoward anyway. I mean, maybe it really is true that fantasies are

harmless, but aren't they best reserved for the young? Thus, I am more than a little dismayed to discover that I, a sixty-three-year-old man who has been in love with and faithfully married to the same woman for forty years, could possibly be interested in a woman that is obviously younger than my own daughters.

This internal dialogue distracts me enough so that at first I don't notice her standing near the register. She is holding four magazines and is looking directly at me, a whimsical little smile lighting up her pretty face. Although I realize that she can't conceivably know what I'm thinking or see the conflict roiling like an angry sea inside me, I flush as I suddenly become aware that she needs me to ring up the items she has selected to purchase.

I discreetly suck in air, get control of myself, and move in behind the register. She lays the magazines down on the counter, and I casually ask her if she found everything okay. "Yes, thank you," she replies in a soft and pleasant voice that matches her appearance perfectly. Then, slowly she scans the store, looks directly at me again, and asks, "Do you have the *Kama Sutra*?"

For an instant, I am stunned by the question. I gaze at her; her expression is a mixture of pure innocence and expectation. "No, I don't believe so," I answer with a slight hitch in my voice. I flash an image of one of my daughters coming into a bookstore and asking some old clerk the same question. I don't like the image and quickly shake it from my head.

She seems to notice my discomfort and smiles nervously. "My girlfriend said I should read the *Kama Sutra* before my wedding," she says. "But she likes to play jokes on me, so I thought it might be a dirty book or something. Do you know what it is?"

My face feels like it is on fire as I try to disengage from her inquiring eyes and look down at the magazines she has laid on the counter: *Glamour*, *Vogue*, *Modern Bride*,

*Cosmopolitan*... Typical and appropriate, I think to myself. Then, for the first time, I see the ring on her left hand. It isn't much, a simple gold band with a single diamond solitaire, perhaps a third of a carat, maybe a half. I cough once and look at her face again. "Yes, well, it's sort of a...a...a manual for lovers," I finally say in a voice just above a whisper.

She rolls her eyes and lets out a cute little squeal of nervous laughter. "I knew Stacy was setting me up," she says. "I guess I really embarrassed myself, huh?"

I smile at her reassuringly. "Not at all," I say in my best teacher's voice. "The *Kama Sutra* is classic literature, definitely not a dirty book."

Gently, she lays one small hand over mine. "Thanks," she says. "I'm glad you were here instead of that other guy."

"I can order it for you, if you want," I offer, feeling the warmth of her fingers as they linger on the back of my hand. "We should probably get it in a few days."

She blushes. "God, I would be too embarrassed to pick it up."

"Well, if you have a computer, you can order it yourself through Amazon or Barnes and Noble," I tell her, thinking for a moment about how lucky her fiancé is and wondering if he knows it.

She seems to ponder that for an instant. "No," she says. "I better not...I don't think my father would understand if he saw me with a book like that, especially just before the wedding. I'm sure he thinks I'm still a virgin." Then she blushes again, very deeply this time, and pulls her fingers back to cover her face. "I guess I shouldn't have said that...I'm sorry."

I try to smile again. "That's all right," I say. "I understand. I have two married daughters of my own. It took me a long time to accept the fact that my little girls had



grown up. Your father will come to accept it too, especially after the first grandchild arrives.”

Her face brightens and I can actually see the sunshine in her eyes. “Thanks,” she says sweetly. “Thanks for understanding.”

I pick up the first magazine on the counter. “Will this be all for you today?” I ask as I run the scanner over the bar code.

She nods and hands me her MasterCard. I look at the name on the card: Monica Silverman. A nice name, I think as I swipe the card and put the magazines in a plastic bag. She signs the receipt, puts her credit card back into her little leather wallet, picks up her package, and turns toward the store entrance. She gives me another broad smile just before merging with the other pedestrian traffic. I follow her with my eyes until she disappears into the food court.

A minute later, Ron ambles into the store, his head directed toward the food court. “Was she just in here? Did I miss her? Did she want a job?” He is practically babbling.

I regard him with mock disgust. “Who are you talking about?”

“Who? Are you kidding?” he says. “The girl we saw this morning. Was she just here?”

“There was a young woman in here a few minutes ago. She bought some magazines and left,” I answer, trying hard to sound bored and detached.

Ron licks his lips. “Man, what poor timing,” he says. “Wasn’t she incredible?”

“I really didn’t notice,” I lie.

Ron looks at me with a silly smile on his face. “You better get your glasses adjusted, old man.”

For a long time, neither of us speaks or moves, as varying and disconnected thoughts engulf us like a fog. Then, all of a sudden, as though waking up from a bad

dream, I practically leap out from behind the counter and steer Ron toward the back of the store. “Hey, what are you doing?” He is confused but not resisting.

In the semi-privacy of the back room, I glare at him for a minute, thinking that he might actually be the antichrist. “Ron, I have to quit,” I exclaim. My voice drips with escalating excitement. I can actually feel the fog lifting.

“Wayne, what are you talking about?” he says. The full impact of my pronouncement has not really hit him yet. Or me either, for that matter.

“I have to quit,” I repeat, this time with controlled conviction.

“What...why?” He is processing the words now, but it is obvious they make little or no sense to him.

Why indeed. “Because...because,” I begin. I’m not sure I understand this either, but the vision, such as it is, is now crystal clear, a borderline religious experience, the proverbial once-in-a-lifetime epiphany. “All of a sudden I realize it’s a beautiful day and I have a wife at home to enjoy it with...and for me there might not be that many beautiful days left.”

Ron scowls with uncertainty and disbelief. It is very clear he has absolutely no idea what I’m talking about. But, then, how could he at his age, when having more time to enjoy what’s left of your life is the least of your worries? “Man, it’s not enough I’ve got to put up with stupid high school kids who don’t want to come to work. Now I’ve got to deal with your...your eccentricities.” He is becoming understandably angry.

For a moment, I feel almost sorry for him. This isn’t his fault; he is simply a young, overworked and underpaid bookstore manager who has only scanned the bestsellers on his shelves, never making an effort to read the poetry or the philosophy, the entire universe of profound ideas that he has never had the time or the intellect to appreciate. But then I come to my senses. “This is not an eccentricity,” I say with

absolute conviction. “It is...a resolution. Or call it a revelation. This is just something I have to do for myself. When you get to be my age, maybe you will understand.”

“The way things are going, I probably won’t make it to your age,” he says quickly and wistfully.

I think about that for an instant, realizing that he may very well be right about not making it to my age. “I’m sorry, Ron, but I quit, as of this moment.” This is making more sense to me now. “You can dock me for quitting without proper notice if you have to. But there is nothing more to discuss.” I take off my plastic nametag, with ‘Wayne’ embossed on the front, and hand it to him. “I don’t think I’ll miss this,” I say as I turn toward the store entrance.

There may come a time when I do miss this a little, I realize. Perhaps some cold snowy day in January when I’m stuck in the house with only talk shows and old sit coms on television. But not today; not in the foreseeable future. Poor Ron watches me walk away and scratches his head in total bewilderment.

A few minutes later, I emerge into the bright sunshine and smile. For the first time in a long time, I let the echoes of spring surround and inspire me, and I feel totally free. In the distance, I can see that the VW Beetle is still sitting next to my Toyota, patiently waiting for its owner to return.