

## **A Beaker Full of the Warm South**

*That I might drink, and leave the world unseen*  
- John Keats

- *St. Patrick's Day, near Hardwick's*

"Hey, Mags, I'd really like to smell that gardenia."

The man who called out seemed to know her, but Margaret remained confused. She didn't know anybody here, not anymore; she'd lived away for more than twenty years, and she hadn't been "Mags" really since high school.

"Mags, remember the gardenias? You can't have forgotten the gardenias," the drunk continued as he exited a bar, Hardwick's. The music also spilling out confirmed that the bar was an Irish pub. She felt his fingers touch the back of her shoulder.

Margaret turned, her anger up, he'd already made a scene; she might as well finish it. "I don't have any gardenias, and you're..." she started to say "drunk," but then she saw. "Alb? Alb Martel? That can't be you, not after all these years."

Alb had been her prom date high school senior year, she had worn a gardenia, and, in the restaurant, a different drunk had stumbled into her and wanted to smell it. She and Alb had parted ways as college freshmen; the last she heard, he taught at some east coast small college. Some years back - not quite 10? - he had won some national book award for poetry; he had written her poetry.

"Mags, it's St. Patrick's Day, I'm in town to do a reading tonight. Come in to the bar, let me buy you a drink. We'll catch up on old times."

"Frankly, Alb, you don't look like you need another drink."

"So, an Irish coffee then? It's been, what, twenty-five, thirty years? Come inside."

"Maybe. But without the Irish? I really don't think you need more."

"Without the Irish then. But you'll have to explain that to the good Saint Patrick himself," he said in an acceptable Irish brogue.

She laughed. Just after four o'clock. She had nothing planned until dinner. Maggie Walbank went into an Irish bar to have coffee with a poet.

- *A few hours later at a sidewalk table at Fresh, a Cafe*

"And then, of course, there's Amanda's baby. Alb, you just can't imagine what a difference a grandchild makes."

The coffee in the bar had only opened the conversation. He'd mentioned he'd planned an early dinner, then back to his room to freshen up before the reading. He'd wondered if she'd join him at a cafe just down the street someone at the college had recommended. She'd looked at her watch, said something about going to a cousin's nearby later, and agreed.

“You know, nowadays, I most often go by ‘A.G.’ I can’t recall anyone using ‘Alb’ for, well, for as far back as I remember.” Good grief, but the years had been kind to her. Still slim, her breasts had filled out from girlhood. Her hair, arguably still blonde, was darker and shorter than he remembered, but her brown eyes really hadn’t changed. The delft blue dress she was wearing accented her legs, always her best asset, even in the comfortable flats she wore.

“Well, then,” Maggie continued, “A.G. then. I just don’t think of you as ‘A.G.’”

“No, really though,” A.G. interrupted. “I like it when you call me ‘Alb.’ Please, don’t change.” He looked at her as he sipped his wine, a fruity zinfandel that almost overpowered the fish.

She continued with her story. He continued nodding, smiling and nodding, as her life unfolded. He really hadn’t expected to see her ever again. Yet here she was. And somehow he needed to rewind her story back to that college year, that month he hadn’t heard from her. He’d continued writing her, the letters even more chatty, he realized later bordering desperate, daily, then almost daily, then, after weeks with no response, he’d stopped too. Despite the wonder of her at Christmas break that freshman year, he’d changed plans for spring break - accepting invitations, he’d followed friends to the first of many jazz celebrations, the haze of Bourbon Street with its easy ways and easier relationships adequate for muting his imagination, blurring pictures of her with some other guy enjoying the sun in some other place. His mother, still in the same church where they’d grown up together, mentioned a year later her pending engagement to a Vietnam vet, likely the same guy she’d mentioned meeting in one of her last letters, a business major still fragile from those Special Forces nightmares the movies avoided and the vets he knew could only hint about.

"So," she'd looked up, her brown eyes direct as he remembered, "I've talked so much about myself. What happened to you? You seemed to drop off the planet freshman year."

Despite the buzz of conversation and clink of forks and dishes, the bit of traffic noise expected in a sidewalk cafe, he heard her perfectly.

He'd dropped off? "Well, I haven't exactly been hiding," A.G. replied.

"Oh, I've seen the occasional review or notice in the media. What was that award a few years back?"

"The National Book Award for Poetry. Six years ago. The book was *Almondine Salad: A Recipe*. Based on poems about appetites."

"Well, I remember the poetry. I guess you've achieved a dream."

"No Pulitzer yet. I've been nominated."

"Congratulations. I am impressed. But any Mrs. Martel? any children?"

"Actually there've been four. And two children, both grown now. No grandchildren. No one currently."

"Go on."

"My first, Maria Gambier, and I married in grad school. We met in Iowa at the Workshop. She did win the Pulitzer." He chuckled. "Actually, I was sort of the father of her poem 'Post Partum,' something of a manifesto for contemporary feminism."

"Really. A child then?"

“A daughter. Sylvia. I don’t see her much. That marriage went pretty south pretty fast. Rivals in verse and temperament.”

“I’m sorry. But you didn’t give up?”

“No. I’d come early to believe in marriage and want it. A few years later I did try again. Marcy was a high school English teacher. We met when I was doing a poet-in-residence at the Waldorf School in Lima, Ohio.”

“And that didn’t last?”

“Oh, it struggled on for eight, nine years. She surprised me with the divorce papers on our ninth anniversary.”

“That was rude.”

“Less rude, I guess, than I was the afternoon she dropped in during my office hours and found me *in flagrante delicto* with a grad student whose work I had been encouraging. No children with Marcy. But I married the grad student. Stay-at-home mom. I just finished the child support last year for that one. I’ve a few years of college tuition left.”

“That’s only three.”

“My fourth was a performance artist. She was crazy.”

“Another wild artistic type?”

“No. Really. Certifiable. She’s currently institutionalized. I almost died in the fire.”

“Forgive me. I’m sorry. I just assumed...”

“Oh, you’re forgiven. Always.”

Having held back for a lull in the conversation, the waiter appeared to remove the remains of what had been a more than acceptable California fusion dinner, baked Ahi for him with some sort of white wine reduction, a Chinese garlic shrimp salad for her.” He looked to the wine glasses, began to top off Maggie’s as she held up her palm, a universal “No.” As the waiter drained the bottle in his glass, he asked A.G., “Another bottle?”

A.G. started to nod, but Maggie interrupted, “Don’t you have your reading in another few hours? Is more wine wise?”

Relenting, A.G. asked the black-jeaned, black-aproned, white shirted man for the check.

“I guess I do seem to be feeling it. It’s these road trips, so many restaurants in so many college towns,” he apologized.

“I don’t mean to judge,” Maggie responded. “It’s just, well, I need to be going on to my cousin’s, and more than the one glass of wine would not do me well on the drive.”

“So, you need to be going?” A.G. asked. “I mean, I’ve really enjoyed catching up and all, but I’ve had a couple questions, things I’ve wondered for a really long time.”

The waiter appeared with the check. A.G. placed his card in the folder, looked back up at Maggie.

“Questions?” Maggie wondered.

“I never figured out what happened back then.”

A cloud crossed her eyes. “What happened? I don’t know what you mean.”

“I mean, we dated in high school, wrote most every day, then...”

“Then I guess we just grew up. I mean, high school...” Her brown eyes lowered.

“Yeah. High school. Well, it has been great seeing you. I really do think of you often.”

“You can’t mean that. It’s been, what, you said twenty-five or thirty years?”

“Thirty-one years, almost two months.”

“You’ve been counting?”

“I’ve been counting. I really did care about you. I kind of went off the deep end after I didn’t hear from you and even more after I heard you were engaged.”

The waiter returned. Martel took the card and his receipt, signed the check, closed the folder as Maggie continued.

“You can’t mean that; off the deep end? To what? A university career? Poetry awards? Fame?”

He smiled, “Yeah, all that, and four marriages, a larger number of less stable relationships, and, as you can see,” he gestured at the half-full wine glass on the butter yellow tablecloth, “a lot of Irish coffee and bottles of wine.”

Speechless, she looked down.

“Listen, Maggie - you know, I didn’t even ask you, you still go by ‘Maggie’?”

She smiled at this. At last. “Not for a long time. That’s why the ‘Mags’ threw me. My husband calls me ‘Margie,’ I go mostly by ‘Margaret.’”

“Okay, then, Margaret. I mean it, it really has been good. You’ll have to come to one of my readings some time.”

“Oh, I can’t tonight. As I said, I’m in town to begin the work on my mother’s estate. I need to meet with a cousin still in the area tonight.”

He was disappointed, but tried not to let on. “I didn’t mean tonight. Some other time. I get this way now and then.” As they began to rise from the table, he said, “Let me at least walk you to your car. You’re parked...?”

“Just down the street. But your reading? You wanted to get back to your hotel to freshen up?”

He pushed open the metal gate opening the eatery to the sidewalk allowing her to slip through. “I’m just up the street, and I’ve got time.”

To his relief she agreed.

- *On Main St., toward the Traffic Circle, the west side*

“I’ve never been much for antiques,” Alb volunteered as they stopped to look at a rocking chair in one of the windows. “But that is a nice chair.” He’d seem to have worked to slow the return to her car.

“We never really had a nice one. A rocking chair, I mean.” She looked into the window at the oak chair, upholstered seat and center back, burly tiger oak arms, the oak high and curved across the top of the back. “I would have loved something like this to rock my children in.” She wondered what life would have been like with this man, his reflection next to hers showing him tall enough, his hair silver gray, shaggy but thinning at the top. His dark corduroy jacket with khakis, a light denim shirt open collared, very professorial if a bit paunchy. But even standing parallel, she could smell the alcohol on his breath when he spoke. She shuddered at the thought, the romance of love with a poet easily driven under by the prospect of any relationship ruled by drink. His life was interesting though.

“I wonder,” he began.

“I need to be...” she spoke at the same time.

He stopped, apparently mid-thought.

Margaret knew she should be going, and she’d spent enough time with A.G., as he seemed to style himself. “You were saying?” she asked.

“No, you first. Mine’s not important.”

“I need to be going. Belinda’s expecting me for dessert and coffee,” she blustered. “It’s not far, but I’m not sure just where I’m going. I haven’t lived around here for a long time. Modesto does sprawl, but it’s a lot smaller.”

“I was about to ask you if it would be possible to see you again. I’m supposed to be here a few more days, a workshop for fledgling writers.”

She looked down, then back up at him. “Alb, A.G., I mean, I’ve enjoyed running into you, catching up. but, no, I don’t think so. You know my dad, my real dad, drank. That was part of the reason he and my mom split up, and that hurt me. I’ve got a good life with Mark and my kids. Not quite the empty nest but getting there. And there’s just not room for you. I think I’d better not. These next few days, I’m pretty booked, lawyers and the like.”

“I really enjoyed your conversation, and, I just thought...”

“You thought we could just pick up...” Something seemed to flare inside her. Suddenly, she said precisely, carefully, what she had been thinking back at the restaurant. “You wanted to know what happened back in college? I thought I had loved you, you me. Then you went off to the wilds of Iowa. You abandoned me. The letters were enough for a while, and after Christmas, I thought, well, I don’t know what I thought. But then I met Mark, and he was nice, considerate. He spent time with me. Even then, I thought you and me, well, I figured I’d see you at Easter. I figured you’d make it right then. I didn’t write because I was confused. I didn’t know where I stood, what you wanted. And then you didn’t come home Easter. And summer I never even saw you in church.”

“I avoided church. I’ve avoided church ever since.”

“Precisely. And I don’t enjoy drunks. The boy that I thought I loved wasn’t a drunk.” She felt herself glaring at him, his attempt at holding his smile losing its success.

“Well, you can’t blame me for trying.”

As they reached her rental Ford, he took her hand, squeezed it, and turned. She thought she had caught a note of sadness in the breaking of his voice.

She clicked the button, unlocked the car, and got inside.

- *At the bar in Hardwick’s moments later*

“Back again? I thought you’d headed to dinner and back to the college,” Paul the bartender said.

The pub band had gone acoustic, a lilting but quiet reel for the dinner hour. The polished oaken bar, the solid bar stool were both comforting.

“Dinner indeed. An old acquaintance.” A.G. laughed. “But that’s Bobby Burns, and it’s St. Patrick’s Day.

The main thing is to write  
for the joy of it. Cultivate a work lust  
that imagines its haven like your hands at night  
dreaming the sun in the sunspot of a breast.

Now that’s poetry, Seamus Heaney himself. Heard him read it at a festival in Dublin. How about another Irish Car Bomb? I should have time for a couple more before,” he shifted to his Irish brogue, “before I head out for to please the gents and ladies.”

“Jamison’s in a drop with Guinness, right up,” Paul said. “But you need to go easy. You are on foot, right?”