

## A Taste of Love

The seasons flew by so quickly. Time was passing and my life was closer to the end than the beginning. I didn't know why, but I'd spent the last few years revisiting places I'd already been. Maybe it gave me pleasure to reflect on the sweet memories of those precious years so long ago.

Not that I was stuck in the land of yesteryear. Far from it, but re-visiting a place after fifty years, gave me the opportunity to see it with new eyes...perhaps more understanding eyes.

My first excursion to the past took me to the neighborhood where I was born seventy-five years ago. I was amazed to see Gus's barber shop was still around. Though Gus had died many years earlier, his name remained on the sign, a little worse for wear, as if in memoriam. Remnants of the past always seemed to linger on.

Most of the locations I visited changed with time. My father's dental office was gone, but I was happy to see the apartment building where I'd spent my first twenty years was still standing. The neighborhood was my home, and I had the same friends until my late teens because nobody ever moved away. They were as close to me as my family, and in many important ways, even closer. Walking in my footsteps from long ago, reminiscing, allowed me to envision my life as a youth again...fresh, energetic, and unplanned.

While visiting the old neighborhood, I reveled in the joys of the past, but was also saddened by the fact that the number of years ahead of me were few. I still had so much to do.

There was one particular place I longed to see again.

I left my apartment on the east side of Manhattan and drove to the Bear Mountain Inn, a hotel in the rugged mountains off the Hudson River, a few miles from West Point Military Academy. I hadn't visited the inn since my twenties when I was a law student.

Would it be the same?

Visiting places from long ago made me see them without the golden glow of the past that I knew and I had to conjure up rose-tinted lenses to re-color my memories. The truth was that life never made mistakes. No matter how I viewed a place, past or present, things are always just as they are in the now.

As I drove up the winding mountain road to Tomkins Cove, I had a feeling that today promised to be different. Scattered traces of snow still lingered and although the ground didn't seem to be quite ready for spring, I could see a few budding daffodils trying to fight their way into the sunshine.

I parked my car and entered the front doorway of the inn, guarded on each side by two wrought iron black bears. The huge rustic main room was *exactly* the way it was fifty-five years ago. A roaring fire blazed in the large fieldstone fireplace and elk heads with full sets of antlers flanked an oil painting of Rip Van Winkle.

The high ceiling and walls were made of rough hewn dark timber, and on the flagstone floor were soft sofas, overstuffed chairs, small tables and lamps. Four large chandeliers hung from the ceiling, each contained a dozen lights topped with small sand-colored shades. Pots of steaming coffee and tea were on a table nearby.

I settled into a seat on the sofa, my eyes hypnotized by the fire, and soaked up the familiar atmosphere. A few people milled about; some read newspapers, others played with their children and it wasn't long before I fell into a deep sleep.

Not knowing how much time had passed, I was awakened by the brush of soft fingertips moving back and forth across the back of my hand. An elderly woman stood before me, smiling. It was a smile I knew. She said nothing for a few moments.

“You don’t recognize me, David, do you?”

I thought I knew her but was afraid to mention her name aloud. Was I dreaming? Then I saw the way she curled her lip, tilted her head, and stared at me with raised eyebrows. All those nuances told me she was real.

“Christina?”

She nodded, took a deep breath and her smile widened.

I shook my head and rubbed my eyes.

“My God, Christina! What are you doing here? Please sit down next to me.” I patted the cushion.

“Thank you.”

“I know that perfume.”

“You should, it’s *Fleures de Rocaille*. You gave it to me at Bobo’s restaurant in Chinatown when we celebrated my twentieth birthday.”

“You still have the same bottle?” I laughed lightly.

She returned the laughter, then looked in the air, and playfully waved me off with her hand.

“You haven’t changed. No, silly. Well, actually, I do have the old bottle. I could never throw it away, but I’ve bought more.”

“I’m amazed you’re here, sitting with me after all these years. We shared so much together. What luck.”

“I’m just as surprised, and when I saw you sleeping, my heart raced. I knew it was you. There was no doubt about it. At first, I couldn’t catch my breath. Questions flashed through my mind. Will he remember me? Is he alone? Why is he here? Should I wake him or wait?”

“Well I’m glad you woke me. Do you come here often?”

“No, never, not since you and I were last here.”

“Neither have I. My God, how could that be?” I touched her hand.

She tilted her head upward and shrugged. “It must be kismet.”

“Of course, it has to be.”

When I was with Christina fifty-five years ago, her eyes were filled with tears. We sat in a quiet corner that night, steps from where we were now. She wore a white blouse that day, one she had monogrammed with what she believed would be her married initials, CNR, Christina Noelle Rothman. But it was not to be.

“Do you have time to talk?” I asked. “I mean, are you here alone...”

“Yes, I’m alone.” She put her warm hand on mine. “I have time.”

I couldn’t take my eyes off her. She was beaming. Her face, even with the few lines across her brow, was wholesome and innocent, still reflecting her inner beauty. I wasn’t the only one who loved her. All of my friends did too, and they were happy for us. We never argued. Being together was always enough.

We laughed a lot, and when I said something that bordered on a possible quarrel, she would look at me with a questioning face, wave her hand down at me, and good-naturedly blow me off. That was it. She had her ways, all of them lovely. But now, I couldn’t help but think about the huge gap in time that was already behind us.

“How many years have gone by?” I asked.

“Too many, our lifetimes.”

“Not all,” I said.

“No, not all. We did share two wonderful years together. Part of them bittersweet, but it was our first taste of love.” Christina sighed. “and it was a gift I’ve always cherished.”

I looked down and nodded. “Those years were the sweetest for me. I never found them again with anyone. I don’t know where to begin. We have so much to talk about.”

Her hand pressed tighter on mine. “We have all the time in the world. There’s no more racing to class. No dashing about. She held back a moment. “Tell me, are you married, children?”

“My wife, Julia died two years ago. I have one daughter, Noelle, and three grandchildren, a boy and two girls. What about you?”

“One son, Michael, and two grandchildren, Jena and Christopher.”

“Very nice, and how is your husband?”

“Henry? He was a good man, but I lost him a year ago.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” I moved closer to her.

We chatted for hours. I didn’t take her hand although I wanted to. Being with Christina was a dream come true, especially here, of all places.

Years ago, we came to Bear Mountain to watch the ski jumping and went skiing later that night at the Silvermine ski area. It was nothing more than a long hill with a rope tow to get us to the top. We skied under the stars and spent the night in the mountains at the inn. It was a slice of heaven and a place to express our love.

I had lost track of Christina over the years. I married Julia but Christina was always in my heart. I wanted to know more about her and her marriage.

“I told you, Henry was a good man and a wonderful father, but we were different, too different to have a deep emotional connection. It was nothing like what *we* had and he didn’t have our sense of humor.” She smiled. “You and I laughed at the same things.

“I wanted Henry to know me and accept me for who I was. He was never able to do that.” She paused. “We missed out on what could have been a fun marriage. Maybe I ran to the first man available after we broke up, thinking it would be the same as it was for us but soon realized it could never be and nothing ever could.”

“I think I get the picture. Sometimes when I sit across from Julia while she’s reading, I would stare at her thinking ‘you have no idea who I am.’ Then I thought of you and what we had.”

“Well, you know, David, that’s not fair. Comparisons never are and yet, when it comes to us, I find myself doing the same thing. We can’t change the past.”

“You’re right.” I whispered.

“Besides, you know things *could* have worked out for us. Tell me more about your Julia.”

“There’s not much to say. Our marriage wasn’t about love. Each day was another opportunity for us to be polite to each other, and we got to be comfortable that way. After awhile even that was gone. We drifted further apart until we retreated into our own separate lives. We still kissed each other hello and goodbye. I don’t understand why. There was nothing left. Maybe we did it out of habit.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that and I’m glad we’re together now. I have so many remembrances of us here in the Bear Mountain Inn, and haven’t been here since we said our goodbyes.” Her

voice was almost a whisper. She paused, touched the moist corner of her eye and forced a weak smile. “Let’s talk about some of the things we did together. You first!” she said with renewed enthusiasm.

“There’s so much, Christina.”

“Tell me.” She said with a huge smile.

I shook my head and took a deep breath. “Do you remember the time I read an article in Harper’s Magazine on how to win at blackjack?”

“Yes, then you took out other books on that so-called art and we spent all summer playing cards in the park before you went to Vegas.”

“Then I called you.”

“Yes, at three in the morning! I could still hear you, ‘Christina, Christina, I’m at The Flamingo. We won, it works...everything we did works. I’m going to hit a few other hotels. It was so easy. I sat at the end of the table, counting cards, and used every trick I learned. We’re rich!’”

“And we were.” I said.

Christina shook her head. “I wouldn’t go that far, but it bought us a trip to France and Italy where we learned about wine.”

“That was a gift by itself. Remember when we drove through the French countryside and stopped for lunch? I can still taste that crusty baguette, topped with soft, creamy Roquefort, and a bottle of good red. What could be better?”

“One vision stayed in *my* mind. It was a quiet moment. You were asleep on my lap on a hillside in Tuscany overlooking Florence. Your face was so peaceful. When you awoke, we

sipped our Chianti and tasted the sweet flavor of the grapes from each other's lips. Everything was perfect."

"The wine helped, too." I smiled.

"Yes, it always makes great moments better," she beamed, squeezing my hand.

"We must have been pioneers. None of the other couples we knew lived together or went on long trips, or at least they didn't admit it if they did. But that's the way it was back then. Society was strict about morality."

"Those were better times, simpler, but with more social restraints."

"That's true. But we're being too philosophical. What about the weekend in Greenwich Village?"

"Loved it. The Washington Square Hotel was a wonderful place. It was like a slice of Europe. I'm happy to say we missed breakfast every morning." She giggled.

"We hit all the jazz spots like Café Wha, listened to Bob Dylan, and went to see *The Fantastiks* at the Cherry Lane Theater. That was fun. And the people we met in the Village were like us."

"I remember when we left the Cherry Lane. It was a warm summer night, but the drizzle kept us cool. When the rain stopped, we walked along the shiny streets to Washington Square Park. The benches were wet, so we couldn't sit, but you gave me the sweetest kiss ever in front of the Fifth Avenue Arch. We were one. Do you remember when we first made love David?"

Christina smiled wickedly.

"Do I? Oh my God it was on my dad's dental chair."

“How could I forget that night, David? It wasn’t the most romantic place for my first time, but it was beautiful for us to be so close. We lost ourselves in our passion and after all the sweet kisses that followed we knew we belonged to each other.”

“Those moments made me feel we were one. Leaving my father’s office, you took my arm and leaned into me as we walked, your head pressing against my shoulder. My heart was pounding. I wasn’t sure what to say when you asked if it was my first time.”

“I know, but when you nodded, it put a smile on my face.”

Christina scanned the room. The wood in the fireplace burned to embers. Where did the hours go? We spent the entire day talking.” She paused and brushed away a tear. “I still can’t forget that night.” Her smile disappeared. “You mean when we said our goodbyes here.” She pointed to a table in the corner, “I was devastated. I still don’t know why we had to break up.”

I took a deep breath. “It was the mistake of my lifetime, and I’ve always kept you in my heart.”

“Why? How could it have happened? We had such love. Our lives were already written out.” She shrugged. “We knew it was forever.”

I glanced away for a moment. “When we were here that night I told you I was scared. You tried to reassure me and asked me to trust you, saying I had nothing to be afraid of, but visions of disaster raced through my mind. I don’t know why. You had a domineering mother, a strict Catholic. You told me she would consider you dead if you married outside the faith. My family would have been no different. They were orthodox Jews, and it was expected that I would never marry anyone of a different religion. There were times I was overwhelmed with guilt.”

“And yet, you never talked about religion. I mean, I was aware of our differences, but I never thought it would keep us apart. I didn’t think anything could. Maybe we kept some of the beliefs that really mattered out of our relationship on purpose. Things are so different today, aren’t they?”

“They’re better now. I knew I made a big mistake. It hurt our lives, and I continued to live in the world of what might have been. I’m so ashamed.”

Christina put up her hand.

“Don’t be. You were just being who you were at the time, and it was all so long ago. I never got over it and never will, but I’m happy to be with you now. This moment is ours. We have been given an unexpected gift. You were strongly committed to not getting married when we last met here, and I was hurt beyond my worst dreams. Afterwards, I sat in a chair for a month staring at a wall, and my unhappiness deepened when my mother told me ‘It was all for the best.’ She paused, “I have something else to tell you.”

“Go ahead.”

“When I married Henry, I was already four months pregnant.”

My jaw dropped. I was stunned. “Oh my God!”

“At the time I didn’t know what to do. I thought of calling you to let you know, but remembered how definite you were about breaking up. I didn’t want you to feel pressured to marry me. I already knew Henry as a friend for a couple of years. If you remember, we were out with him and a girl he knew from high school. We went to the Museum of Modern Art and later had dinner at Orsini’s.”

My mind swirled. I said nothing.

“In some ways, Henry was understanding. I told him I was pregnant with your baby, and he was aware of how I felt about you, but he still wanted to marry me. After we were married, he encouraged me to tell you about the baby, but I could never bring myself to do that. You were very clear that night when we were here..”

I put my head in my hands and cried. “Christina, I gave up the most beautiful woman I ever knew. We had so much. And for what? Some stupid, shallow value that no longer has any meaning?”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

“And the baby?”

“Well, he’s not quite a baby any longer, although I still remember him that way. He teaches constitutional law at Columbia and has three children, two boys and a girl. So, you see, you and I are part of them, too.”

I felt tears running along my cheeks. How stupid I had been. “Do you have any pictures?”

“Doesn’t every grandmother? Christina held her phone in front of me. “Michael has a beard, but if you look above it, you can see your nose.”

I looked at his picture. He *was* a combination of both of us. “I can see my nose, poor kid, but I also see your sparkling blue eyes.”

I went through the pictures of the grandchildren. I could see something of us in all of them. I held Christina’s hands close to my chest and kissed them. She was still so beautiful.

“So, you never had other children?” I asked.

“No, Henry wasn’t able to, but I told you he was a good man and a good father to Michael. They even went skiing at Silvermine one Sunday.”

“Christina, I don’t know what to say. I’m so sorry for all the years we lost together.”

“And I’m so happy for us to have today.”

“Thank you for saying that. Do you think I could ever meet Michael? Does he know about me?”

“Of course you’ll meet him. He has to learn more about his beginnings. He knows Henry adopted him and that you’re his birth father. I told him some things about you, but I had to be fair to Henry and not say too much. Michael understood. He’s like us.”

We shared our phone numbers, email addresses, and promised to see each when we could.

We took each other’s hand, walked out the door and hugged.

“Thank you for telling me about Michael,” I whispered. “I can’t wait to meet him. You’re right, he does have to know more about his beginnings.”

Christina looked up at me grinning, “He has a good sense of humor, David, but we’ll still have to leave out the part about the dental chair.”

We laughed and said goodnight, promising to meet again...

and again

I awakened and rubbed my eyes, still sprawled on the same sofa. The embers in the fireplace were gone, replaced by well-seasoned wood. Crackling sounds filled the room as sparks flew up the chimney.

It was all a dream... just a dream... a wishful remembrance. I heaved a deep breath, devastated. It seemed so real. I wished I would have slept longer.

I sighed, and my nose twitched. Strange that the smell of her perfume lingered from the dream. I was snatched from my reverie by a shadow, cast across the flagstone floor. Looking up, my breath stuck in my throat, my eyes flaring.

Christina stood there, five feet away, smiling as beautifully as ever.

It *was* Kismet.