

The Visit to the House of Eternal Return

“What’s the matter?” Carolyn asks me.

I look up. I hold her eyes for only a second before I turn away.

“I’m anxious,” I answer.

“About what?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” I say. But I do know. It’s Santa Fe. “This tea is good,” I say, to change the subject.

“Well, then, if you’re not going to bed, why don’t you turn the TV back on?” Carolyn moves over to her computer.

I don’t turn the TV on. Instead, I brood about the woman in Santa Fe. I haven’t seen her in 15 years. I moved to China and she moved to Santa Fe. I knew her when she lived in Riverside and I in Long Beach, where I am now. It’s uncanny how our lives ran parallel, however, hers and mine. We both had emotionally absent parents. We were born in the same year. I’m older by four months. My eyes find the painting of me by Alex Alferov which is on the wall opposite. Carolyn and I had posed for him right before our friend and mutual acquaintance David had died of AIDS in 1992. The painting’s strong strings of color looked dripped on reminiscent of Jackson Pollock albeit with Leroy Neiman’s colors and human forms. The portrait depicted a strong face, determined eyes, unsmiling lips, framed by long flowing dark hair—me at another time, another life.

I take a sip of my coffee, my second in as many days in Santa Fe, and watch her. She is very thin with gray wispy hair cut short in no particular style. I glance over at the Holly Hocks

and trumpet flowers of purple and yellow and see a different flower, the red heart shaped flamingo lily with its yellow phallic stamen. I wonder if the lilies in my apartment will survive my three week absence. I bring myself back to the present and take in the lovely coziness of this cafe's patio where we are sitting. Even at 67 her beauty shines through her unremarkable physical appearance. She is describing a sexual encounter she had with a trans woman. She wonders, she says, if the woman knew why she had stopped the sex. I am confused by this remark.

“What do you mean?” I ask. “Did you stop in midstream?” This seemed quite unusual. But, after all, I'd been pushed off the bed during sex once. I couldn't imagine this beautiful woman doing something as cruel as shoving someone off the bed.

“I gave her her first orgasm since her transition,” she says vehemently as if I'd accused her of negligent bed behavior. She looks down at her plate. “But she came just like a man. Not like a woman.”

Is this a song reference, I wonder. She had told me that after high school she'd runaway to join a rock band. That made me think of the Bob Dylan song, “Just like a woman.” I conjure up the song lyrics in my mind, “You make love just like a woman.” And “You fake just like a woman.” Perhaps the words “she came just like a man” were intended to stab deep into the heart of her sex partner. It sounded cruel. This does nothing to clear up my confusion about her remark—stopping the sex. I decide I don't want to know any more.

I remembered staring at the painting of myself in the living room of Carolyn's apartment before I'd left for Santa Fe where I am now. I wasn't thinking about myself. I was thinking about *her*. It's taken me years to find her. I only knew her for maybe a month. We'd met online

in 2001. I saw her maybe five or six times or less. She had bought a house when I'd met her. I had helped her paint a room or something. Now, 15 years later, I'm meeting her again and she has just bought another house that she is moving into at the time of my visit. Why is this so like the past? I'm older, well, we're both in our sixties now. We look different. Why had it taken me years to track her down? I never wrote down her last name. That made it harder to find her. Somewhere I had the address of that Riverside house. I had several phone numbers for her. Yet I couldn't pick up the phone and call her. Uh uh, that was out of the question for me.

When she sold that house in Riverside, I found her name on a Real Estate internet site. I found her on Facebook. I contacted her. We emailed back and forth for a few weeks. Me in China and she in New Mexico. She told me she no longer lived in Southern California. She's now in New Mexico. She says she is looking for a house to buy in Santa Fe. We discuss meeting. I desperately want to see her again. She says she occasionally goes to Southern California. Then I tell her of my plans to return briefly to Los Angeles—renew my passport which was out of pages, fill a prescription. Just stuff. I tell her I could come see her. A little side trip.

Before I made the trip to Santa Fe I tried not to show my friends in Los Angeles how crazy seeing this woman again was making me. I didn't talk about it. I was afraid. I knew I expected too much out of this renewed acquaintance. I knew I wanted to rekindle a romance. But in my mind then and now, I know that won't happen. Those things happen in movies but not in real life. Oh, you read about two people meeting again after years of separation, falling in love, but those fairy tale romances are few.

I've heard many stories of women who look for their biological mothers, fathers or brothers or sisters. I've seen such reunions on TV, the running into each others arms at that first

meeting. The days after that initial meeting are never shown. What kind of relationship ensued later on? Did they continue to be close? Or did they drift apart? Women who seek their biological parent are searching for someone whom they've never met. These seekers usually have no memory, no past experience of that person. They only have a dream. Just a flicker of hope for what might have been but wasn't.

I remind myself that I only have a flicker of hope as well. I say to myself, how falling in love would complicate my life now. I'm happy in China. I'm working now in China. And I have just renewed my apartment lease for another six months. What would happen if I became involved with someone who lived in the US? New Mexico is the last place I would want to live. Yet, I long to hold her again. It's painful this longing. What will happen when we meet again I had asked myself. I didn't know. I don't know.

I have a memory. A memory of a relationship that wasn't developed. A scene in my mind that never played out fully. We were in the empty room, looking at the walls to be painted, prepped with spackel prior to the painting. She made a grab for me. Startled I dodged her. She laughed. I smiled. There were other people in the house. She reached for me again and I moved away again. I wanted to fall into her arms but there were others just a wall away.

That playfulness spoke of the beginning of love, or so I thought, that was just out of reach. I had ended my affair with her when I felt myself losing control, falling too deeply in love and fearing that I didn't hold a place in her list of priorities. I heard ambivalent words from her. "Do you have anything planned this weekend?" she had asked me. I had smiled and said no. She knew I was leaving my weekends free because I wanted to be with her. "Well, I have some-

one coming over to empty my garage. My ex in fact. So, I'll be busy." I suspected my beautiful feelings for her weren't reciprocated.. I had been in my fifties. I wasn't young. Life had left its bruises on me. I was scared then of being rejected, just as I am scared now.

Yet, after a few years, I found myself looking for her. I'd changed internet providers, lost my emails on one account, wiped out others on another account. So many advertisements, so much spam. Amid all that I lost her emails. I never wrote down her real name. Why should I? Everything was a keyboard stroke that opened your email. I had tons of emails from her. I never anticipated losing my emails.. I only had her handle, her email nickname. What's in a name anyway. We all used internet names these days. She was my mythical internet playmate. Where was this mythical creature? Her last name started with an S. I knew that much. After leaving her house one night, I'd passed her mailbox, seeing the S in the seconds it took to pass by. Without a real name I didn't stand a chance of finding her on the internet. I didn't remember her email provider either. Was it Earthlink? or AOL? or Gmail? Even without appropriate facts, needed information, I started to search. When had I started my internet search for her? Five years ago, eight, ten?

Did I really expect to find her? What temporal landscape had I trespassed onto? Because if I found this woman of my past, then I would want to see her sometime hence. How often does someone step into the collision of a past and future experience—the past, what had happened and the future, what was going to happen, both coming together in the present moment? How can the past become the future and then become the present? It's so nonsensical. Who is she now? Who am I now? It's been over a decade. She and I are in our sixties. Our late sixties. We aren't young teenagers in love. We never were that. Two women who met in their mature years and

meeting again in old age. We are both elderly now. Love, however, is always young. Will we be in love again? Did she ever love me? I don't know. Was I caught in a one sided romance back then?

When I'd first placed an ad in the personals, even before online dating came into being, there was a term, "emotional baggage." Many ads specified the need to find a lover without emotional baggage. When you intend to meet a stranger when you both are in your fifties, you don't qualify your description by saying, "without emotional baggage." You both know that is impossible. By the time someone reaches her fifties, she will inevitably have emotional baggage. She'd have to have lived most of her life in a coma not to have some emotional baggage. Now I wonder if my emotional baggage will get in the way of my reunion with her.

Will we click this time? Will we be for each other what we might have been to each other? She is single. I am single. I have no one close to my heart and I am dreadfully lonely. I wonder if she is? Can I walk into her life? These were the questions that plagued my mind before arriving in Santa Fe and even during my first few days here. Over and over I ask myself these questions as I walk through the airport. I can only wait for time to reveal the answer.

When we meet outside the airport, she is in the car and I standing outside, I knew or was soon to know that I wasn't walking into her life. She had that door closed. For my part I wasn't sure I felt what I had once felt back then. And did it matter?

In fact I may have felt as though I needed to know if I had done the right thing all those years ago when I had walked away. By the end of my visit, I know that, yes, all those years ago, I had done the right thing. There was no love lost or at least not for her. For me? Well, I always felt as though I had lost at love. Perhaps I fit the flawed love attachment disorder, limerence. I

tend to build up such a fictional fantasy in my mind that reality remains elusive, slightly off register. Perhaps this is related to what I fear is my dissociation, my long standing mental problem no therapist had ever cured me of.

I'm sitting across from her in a quaint Mexican cafe, with a blackboard menu above the order counter. I ordered the eggs with fried bananas. I had squealed with delight with I spotted fried bananas, my favorite. No point in reading the rest of the menu.

We are talking about relationships or sex or something like that—nothing directly involving the past we'd shared. This type of conversation, so familiar to me, can be dangerous, full of hidden traps, readings between the lines, verbal blanks that need filling to reveal what is not said. I'd told her about my Queer Theory seminar in Hangzhou and how I'd answered a question about how many lovers I'd had. I could see by her reaction that even though these Chinese were aghast at my number, this woman found 30 a rather modest number of lovers compared to her own. I expected a small smile of satisfaction, like she'd bested me, but she didn't smile. She had quickly added that, of course, I'd been looking for a relationship. And she had not been? I wondered.

Another time we are in her car driving around. Apparently, I'm not the only one from her past who looked her up. She mentions a few. She tells me that she'd recently met a straight woman from her high school days. "Can you imagine," she looks over at me, "the woman wanted to resume the making out we'd done in high school." She uses the term "making out." I assume that meant more than kissing if the adult woman was now coming on to her. But there is a line that separates the Then from the Now she intimates. *It doesn't work that way*, she had informed the woman.

I hear what she means but doesn't say. She doesn't want me to get any ideas about reliving the past. I understand. My fantasy has crashed into reality. Of course, I knew it would.

The car eases into the garage at her new house. I tell her that I'd be happy to help her unpack. After we traipse into her dining room, I immediately start unwrapping a box of dishes and glasses. I glance down at the bubble wrap neatly rolled up from an empty box. My box, however, was packed using newspaper instead of bubble wrap. I'm holding the newspaper wrapped object and I can feel through the newspaper that it is a glass. And it is broken at the stem. I gently feel for the tape and know that the glass is broken at the cup end as well. The glasses and plates wrapped in bubble wrap survived but not these.

Before I have a chance to break the news to her, she is rattling on to me about sex again. She confesses to me that she was in love only once. But many women who loved her thought that she loved them as well. "Just because I threw money at them they thought that meant I was in love with them, too." She shakes her head and I let her words whip across the room to hit me. My cheeks burn as if I'd been slapped in the face. All those women who loved her thought that she loved them back. She, however, will only attest to being in love once. Her words reverberate in my head. She says the woman's name, a well-known therapist, sexologist and author of several books on lesbian sex. She continues to talk about the woman but I am not listening.

I am holding the partially unwrapped broken glass. I hear her implied words, "I never loved you." Unlike her other lovers, however, I had suspected as much at the time and had left.

I can barely speak now but manage to say in a small voice, "Oh, dear, this one didn't make it. It's broken at the stem."

She looks up and our eyes meet. I feel as though she doesn't even see me. At that moment I know. I'd been a stand-in during that time for her. It wasn't my lost love limerence at play here. But hers. I hurt but knew I'd get over it. She, however, hurt too. But not for me.

She'd been in love once. I'd heard the same story about the same woman 15 years ago. She has been reliving the trauma of that lost lover with every lover after the one who left her. I knew now that not only had she not been in love with me, but that she only slept with women whom she didn't desire. It was a way to stay faithful to that other woman. Passive aggressive par excellence. She defined limerence, the constant reliving of a trauma. She became the other, the love object that continually returns to love's game of rejection.

When the car approaches the nearly deserted departure entrance at the Albuquerque airport, I want to fling open the passenger side door and bolt. I consciously slow my movements because I feel such a need to quickly free myself from her presence in the car. I want to break out into a run to distance myself from her. But I hold back. She mumbles some social niceties about enjoying my visit. I grab my suitcase in the back and return the unfelt pleasantries, thanking her for being such a swell host. As I walk through the airport interiors, I feel like I am in a museum. The Native American and Hispanic cultural motifs are played up to the hilt. I hate it. Yet I feel wonderful at being alone. Why had I ever disliked being single. The freedom to come and go at my own will fills me with a soothing calmness, a spiritual tranquility. I am my own person and I am lucky to be that.

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