

3432 WORDS

DOUBLING BACK

The last time I saw him was during the fall of 1989 on the second story terrace of a Capitola coffee house. At that time of year we pretty much had the place to ourselves. I hadn't seen him since June and assumed he had been avoiding the tourists. I knew his first name was Howard, but we hadn't talked much in the past, just said hello and sometimes exchanged a few words about our work and how lucky we were to live on the edge of Monterey Bay. Mostly we kept to ourselves, engrossed in our writing, he on one end of the terrace and me on the other.

But that last time things were different. He was restless, unable to sit still. Finally he gathered up his things and walked over to my table.

"Mind if I join you?" he asked.

Before I could respond, he put his things down, took a seat and rapidly told a story he seemed to think I had heard parts of before.

"The whole thing caught me at a bad time," he said. "I've been going through this terrible period and have pretty much isolated myself. I knew that wasn't good, but I just didn't care any more. That's when the dreams began. In some ways I wasn't surprised. In the back of my mind I knew the time was coming up and of course with the divorce and all, there was the issue of how the whole thing had turned out. Even before my divorce I wondered if I had made the right choice. But when I found myself in the Ahwahnee Hotel Dining Room having dinner with a younger me, I was taken aback. Then Sarah appeared in the doorway and just stood there staring, and it all made perfect sense, but I didn't know what to do about it. I knew what I was supposed to do, what the dreams were telling me to do, but that seemed impossible... Do you know what I mean?" he implored.

"I understand," I responded empathetically

He sighed and leaned back in his chair.

"Who's Sarah?" I asked.

"I met her in Yosemite," he said, "during the summer of 1959 when we were both twenty years old. I was a younger twenty than she was, but she fell in love with me anyway."

He shook his head and continued, “God knows why...I hadn’t seen her since 1960 and I was sure that even if she had remembered it she would have no interest in keeping the date I had proposed thirty years ago. But when the dreams became a regular occurrence, something out of my control I had to somehow bring closure to the whole episode. So I tried writing about it.”

He sighed again. “Looking back on it now I realize that writing the story was an escape from reality and that somehow must account for what happened.”

“What did happen?” I asked

He opens a note book and began to read ;

July 1989

Yosemite National Park in the Ahwahnee Hotel Dining Room, at a table for two. Its dusk, but still hot. Myself at age twenty sits across the table, backlit against a large window.

“How long has it been?” he asks.

“Thirty years.”

“What’s happened in all that time?”

“Marriage, family, career, divorce” I respond.

“Was I capable of all that?”

“Kind of.”

A waiter appears, lights the candle on the table and asks if I want a drink.

“A Mexican Coffee,” I say. He moves on to the next table.

“Why have you come back?” my younger self asks.

“It’s time to keep the date.”

“She won’t come. She told me that at the time.”

“Maybe she’s changed her mind. I wrote and asked her to meet me here tonight.”

“You’re still in touch with her?” he asks.

“I haven’t seen her since 1960. “

“How did you know where to write?”

“I didn’t. I wrote in care of her mother.”

“To an address thirty years old?”

“That’s all I had.”

“Boy! That’s a long shot. Did you get a reply?” he asks.

“No, but the letter wasn’t returned. Maybe she decided to come at the last minute.”

“What time did you say you would meet her?”

“Seven.”

He looks at his watch and asks, “How are you going to recognize her?”

“I’ll recognize her.”

“Didn’t you ask her to wear a red rose or something?”

“Why should I?” I reply.

“It’s been almost thirty years! Think about our high school reunions. You know how those people looked!”

“She’ll be beautiful.”

“She’s fifty years old!”

“Thank god I’m not like you any more,” I respond angrily. “Making the date was the most insensitive thing you ever did! She was in love with you! Wanted to spend her life with you! Not re-meet thirty years in the future for god’s sake!”

“Look who’s talking!” he retorts. “After the mess you’ve made of your life!”

“I’m trying to forget that!” I respond angrily

He stomps off and the waiter arrives with my drink. I take a swallow and try to calm down. Looking around, I find solace in the features of the impressive room. Its handcrafted metal chandeliers are now lit, highlighting a spectacular three-story ceiling supported by huge timbers. The tops of the many large windows are stained glass with American Indian designs.

Then I see her standing in the doorway, like in my dreams, she hesitates and then enters the room. I can't take my eyes off her. “Howard?” she asks when she

reaches my table. Dumbfounded my first words are: “The letter—you got my letter.”

We stare at each other, then with a start, I jump up and pull a chair away from the table.

“Please. Sit down.”

We both take seats.

“Now that you’re here I don’t know what to say.”

“It doesn’t seem real, does it?” she responds.

An awkward pause, then I ask, “How are you?”

She laughs and responds, “I’m fine, Howard, how are you?”

“Just like the first time we met,” I say. “I didn’t know what to say then either.”

“It is overwhelming,” she says.

Another pause and then she asks, “What’s your life been like?”

“Well... first there was you, then I got married, finished college, had a career and a divorce and here we are again.”

“You’re going to have to do better than that,” she says, “we’ve got the whole evening ahead of us. When did you marry?”

“1961.”

“You married the girl you met here?”

“That’s right...Arlene.”

Pause.

“I couldn’t remember the day we were to meet,” I say. “From your letters, I knew it was in July sometime.”

“You kept my letters? I threw yours away years ago!”

“Oh.”

“I just wanted to put the whole thing out of my mind!”

“Of course.”

Pause.

“I don’t feel that way now...it’s all water under the bridge...I’m sorry Howard, I don’t know what came over me.”

“Don’t worry about it. God knows, I wasn’t the perfect boyfriend. There is no excuse for the way I acted.”

“Was it because you were so young?”

"I’m not sure . . .probably" I respond.

The waiter reappears and we order more drinks. He leaves and I ask, “Why are we being so serious? We had some good times, didn’t we? Do you remember how we met?”

“Of course I do! I was a maid at Camp Curry.

On the coffee house terrace, Howard continued his narrative. I was sometimes puzzled about the sequence of events, but I didn’t want to interrupt and risk losing part of the story.

He continued to read.

After dinner, she and I made our way down a hotel corridor and stop in front of her room.

“I am glad you threw my old letters away,” I said.

“Why?”

“I was a selfish ass and those letters prove it.”

“I’ve never understood our relationship.”

“That’s because I was such a fool. Have you forgiven me?” I ask.

“Of course, years ago”.

“I’ve not forgiven myself . . . your good for me . . . I had forgotten that.”

"I sensed you needed me" she said.

Pause.

“It’s been a wonderful evening,” she says.

“It’s been enchanting. You’re enchanting.”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“I’m not,” I respond. “After all, I’ve had thirty years to think about it.”

I lean forward and she leans towards me. Then she pulls back, and begins to cry. “I can’t...I can’t.”

“I’m sorry. I wouldn’t make you cry again for anything.”

“It’s not your fault.” Then, wiping her eyes, “Breakfast tomorrow?”

“I’d love to have breakfast with you. What time?”

“Nine?”

“Sounds good. See you in the dining room.”

She gives me a quick kiss on the cheek, enters her room and shuts the door.

I find my room and try to sleep.

Sara prepares for bed. When she exits the bathroom she finds herself at age twenty sitting on the bed, wearing a frown.

"You again!" Sara 50 says

“Why! Why didn’t you invite him in!?” the younger woman demands.

“I couldn’t! How could I ever face Steve?”

“Whose fault is that!?” I told you not to marry him!”

"Let’s not go through that again!” the older woman exclaims.

The younger Sarah, looking furious, takes quick, short steps to the door.

“Where are you going?”

“To make up for lost time!”

She storms out of the room, walks down the hallway and knocks on my door. I stumble out of bed, open the door and face the younger Sarah. Confused, I stare in silence.

“Aren’t you going to ask me in?” she asks.

I open the door. She enters, sits on the bed, and says, “You made a mistake thirty years ago.”

“I don’t know what love is now, let alone what it was in 1959,” I respond.

“Things would have been better,” she replies. “I would have kept you happy all these years. . . Turn off the lights.”

Howard looks up from his reading and looking carefully at me he said “I keep telling myself that maybe it was just a dream. Maybe it all was all a dream . . . No it was real! I know I saw her again!”

He stares out to sea for a minute or two then continues to read.

"In the morning I arrived at the dining room early. I'm seated and a few minutes later my younger self appears as a waiter."

“What can I do for you this fine day” he asks.

“Just leave me alone, will you?”

“You’re not saying the right things, asking the right questions.”

Is there some kind of talking formula for people who haven’t seen each other for twenty-nine years?” I ask. “I’ve already apologized for the way you treated her!”

“ Why did we do what we did?” he responds.

“She doesn’t know! That our question.”

“Not mine! I’ve done my part. I got you here. It's *your* question,” he says over his shoulder as he leaves the table.

I’m sitting next to a window overlooking a meadow. In the distance is a forest of oak and pine in bright morning light, silhouetted against the sheer grey walls surrounding the valley. I hear a waterfall in the distance. Then the soft clatter of dishes brings my attention back to the room. Sarah is sitting across the table.

“You’re awfully quiet,” I say.

“I didn’t want to disturb you. It's good to see you at peace . . . isn’t it a beautiful morning?”

“I can’t think of a place I’d rather be and how good it is to be with you again.”

“Still good after all these years?”

“Still good after all these years” I repeat.

Back on the Capitola terrace, Howard and I had moved to the shade of the coffee house wall to escape the ocean glare of a late afternoon October sun. Now more at ease, he reads me more of what he's written.

“At breakfast, both of us avoided saying anything about our reunion ending. It was as if we had wordlessly agreed to let the matter resolve itself when the time came. Neither one of us had thought beyond last night's dinner and had no plans for the day. We decided on a tram tour of the valley. We could get off and on as we pleased and visit parts of the park that neither one of us had seen in years. Our first stop was the Mirror Lake Trail head. The short walk gave us an opportunity to relive one of the things we had done in 1959. When we boarded another tram, I saw a sign featuring a half day bus tour and dinner in the park's high country. What a great trip that turned out to be. We stopped at Tenaya Lake and hiked its perimeter in perfect weather. The water was an unbelievable shade of blue, and for an afternoon I forgot my problems. Dinner that evening was at Tuolumne Meadows lodge.”

Howard stopped reading his story and said, “I've never enjoyed a dinner more. Meals at the lodge are served family-style and it was nice to be with people again after my self-imposed exile. To my surprise, I found that our table mates actually seemed to enjoy my company.”

“How did you spend your day?” a woman sitting next to Sarah asks.

“We hiked around Tenaya Lake.”

“Isn't that a beautiful place? You sure picked a good day for it.”

“Our timing wasn't as good,” her husband said as he finished his second glass of wine. “We tried the same hike last summer and got caught in a terrific thunderstorm and dodged lightning bolts all the way back to the car.”

Smiling, Sarah says, “We had a similar experience camping here thirty years ago.”

“Thirty years! Surely you jest,” our wine-drinking acquaintance says.

“I have a witness,” pointing to me.

Looking in my direction, he says, “I can believe *he* was here thirty years ago, but you’re too young!”

“Forgive him—it’s the altitude. *And the wine may have something to do with it,*” says the woman, wagging a finger in her husband’s direction.

“It’s true,” I respond. “We were both here, but to say we camped might be a bit of an exaggeration. Let’s just say we ate a cold dinner using borrowed utensils, slept in a leaking, partially deployed tent and left at dawn.”

After dinner, Sarah and I sit side by side on the bus trip back to Yosemite Valley. “Our camping trip wasn’t that bad,” she says.

“Wasn’t it?” I ask.

She smiles and takes my hand and we silently watch a moonlit landscape of trees and granite pass by the windows of the bus.

After a while, she says, “I know it’s late but I’d like to stop at Camp Curry .for old time’s sake”

“Sounds good” I respond.

She puts her head on my shoulder and falls asleep.

On the Capitola terrace, Howard and I watched a distant line of thunderstorms backlit by a setting sun. Laughing ironically, he encompassed the dramatic scene with a sweep of his left hand and said, “In the past I would have taken all this for granted. Can you imagine such a thing?” He took a napkin from the table top and wiped his eyes. “Forgive me” he said. I’ve been under a strain for a long time . . . and now there’s this.”

Watching my face closely, he handed me an unopened letter. Across the front were stamped the words ADDRESSEE UNKNOWN – RETURN TO SENDER.

“This was waiting for me when I got back from Yosemite.”

He paused as I puzzled over the letter, then in a loud voice he demands, “Don't you see what happened? I sent a letter to an address thirty years old to someone who may not even be alive! I ask her to meet me at a particular time and place but she doesn't get the letter!!! How did she know when and where to meet me!?”

I hesitated, trying to make sense of what he is saying.

“I know she was there!” he insisted impatiently. “I spent two days with her!”

Before I could reply, he stood up, gathered his things and angrily left. I never saw him again.

I didn't spend much time on the terrace that winter. It was one of those occasional El Niño years when it starts raining in November and doesn't let up until late spring. From the interior of the coffee house, I watched storm after powerful storm drive surf over the local sea wall. Flooding occurred all along the California coast and the snow was so deep in the Sierra Nevada Mountains that some areas were inaccessible the following summer.

April 25th, 1990

“Did you hear about Howard?” the coffee house counter person asked. “It's in the morning paper.” His car had been discovered in the parking lot of a closed campground located near Camp Curry in late March. No one knew how long it had been there. A particularly intense series of storm in February and March had buried the area in drifts up to twelve feet deep. Heavy spring rains had caused widespread flooding and exposed his car. Search parties had struggled to find him for several days before giving up. Six weeks later, crews reopening Camp Curry found what was left of his body, partially buried in a layer of gravel and tree debris, near the outdoor theater.

I was writing on the terrace a few weeks later, when another coffee house regular approached and introduced me to a woman who identified her self as Howard's ex-landlady. After he had disappeared, she had donated most of what she

found in his room to Goodwill, but had kept his notebooks. Would I like to have them? There seemed to be no one else to give them to and he had once said that I was the only person who ever showed any interest in his work.

He had called his story 'THE DATE'. I found it in his most recent notebook.

"Camp Curry." The driver's announcement wakes both of us. As we leave the bus, Sarah takes my hand and leads me down a dark dirt path to the camp's outdoor theater. It's after 2:00 a.m. and completely quiet when we seat ourselves in the front row. A spotlight comes on and reveals a tent cabin on stage with an open side facing us. In its interior we see Sarah at age 20, dressed as a maid, making a bed. My younger self appears out of the darkness and enters one end of the cabin through an open door.

Howard 20

"Hi, I'm Howard."

Sarah 20

"OH! I didn't know you were there."

Howard 20

"I didn't mean to scare you. I just wondered how you got your job. I'd love to work in Yosemite."

Sarah 20

"I'm happy to meet you, Howard. I'm Sarah. There's a personnel office in the village. Kids are always quitting or getting fired. If you're persistent you'll get something sooner or later."

Howard 20

"I work nights in a cannery at home, sometimes twelve hour shifts. I hate it...I just finished Modesto J.C. Where do you go to school?"

Sarah 20

"Harvey Mudd in Pomona"

Howard 20

"What's your major?"

Sarah 20

"Math... Are you here for long?"

Their conversation continues, but we hear no sound.

Off stage, Sarah turns to me and says, "Look how young we were! How lucky we were to meet in Yosemite when we were young!"

On stage the younger couple continues their silent conversation. Beside me, Sarah, her face serene and eyes never leaving the stage, takes my hand and holds it in her lap.

After a few minutes, my younger self leaves the tent cabin and exits the stage. Sarah 20 stares after him.

It's too much for me and I blurt out "What a fool I was! Can't we start over!?"

Sarah 50 sighs deeply, releases my hand and stands. She ascends steps to stage level, looks down and our eyes meet for the last time.

Sarah 50

"It's too late for us Howard. I live in a nursing home. It's Alzheimer's. I wouldn't know you now."

She walks off the stage and I sit alone in the darkness. On stage, young Sarah stands motionless. I climb the steps, enter the cabin and touch her face. . .

END

