

## Not Too Late

Everyone loved Harold it seemed, except for perhaps his wife Eleanor. He was “uncommonly cheerful” she said, unable to come up with anything more derogatory to describe his unfailing good nature. Her revered father had warned her that she might be well cared for should she marry the young man she had met and claimed to love, but she would undoubtedly be enormously bored. Life with her father had been anything but boring. He drank alcohol, smoked Cuban cigars, ate at expensive restaurants, wore hand-tailored suits, and eventually gambled away his inheritance, leaving his more boring, but affluent family the task of making sure his wife and daughter had at least the bare necessities, the most important of which was to insure that Eleanor attend Ursuline Academy, as had all her female relatives before her, on both sides of the family since the war between the states. Yes, dear Rafe Morceau would sooner have died than be bored. Which he did eventually do, die that is, only six months before Eleanor’s graduation, leaving his wife and daughter only memories and debts.

In spite of his forewarning, Eleanor married the summer after her high school graduation, much to the relief of her relatives. Young Harold Donnelly might not be of the same class as Eleanor, but his family was quite well off, and at least they were Catholic. He deposited his young bride into a family residence on State Street, just off St. Charles Avenue, not far from where she had attended high school and only blocks from her mother’s home. She was left to set up housekeeping on her own. Her décor choices would have been more to the liking of her flamboyant father than that of her modest husband to whom she sent legions of letters full of vivid descriptions of her purchases, although he never commented.

Eleanor had convinced herself long ago that she had not married Harold because of his money, but because he was such a good dancer, because everyone loved him, and because he looked like a movie star, especially in his Army uniform. They married only days before he shipped off to Korea. His father's accountant paid off her father's debts and supplied her and her mother with generous monthly stipends until Harold could return home from defending his country. Being only eighteen, and a properly brought up New Orleans Catholic girl, Eleanor had no idea what that might entail. So, she spent endless hours making up stories and scenarios starring her handsome young hero husband. The fact that his letters contained only stories of his buddies, sans death and mutilation to spare her tender sensibilities, and not of his undying love and adoration of her didn't seem important at the time.

"Some men," Mama winked, "are better at making love than writing about it."

Eleanor was properly scandalized. She and Harold had fumbled about some in bed for the too few nights they had together before he shipped out, but she wasn't sure they were doing it right. He had even blushed, for heaven's sake! She had never even French kissed anyone. He was the man. He was supposed to know what to do, wasn't he? Boys were so, so inept sometimes, and after all, Harold, at nineteen, was still only a boy. But then she thought, even so, perhaps she was pregnant, yet another romantic notion and daydream, this one soon dashed by the regularity of her monthly period.

So, she waited, living much the same way she had before getting married, although now in her own home. Likewise, her mother lived alone, ceaselessly mourning her own husband. Truthfully, Eleanor too missed her dashing father with a greater intensity than her newly minted husband.

It is said that war changes a man, and Eleanor made up heart-wrenching melodramas wherein it was only her fierce love and devotion that kept her devastated husband from descending into the abyss of his memories of the war, until she was finally able to heal his tortured soul. She listened to the news and read both the *Times* and the *Picayune*, adopting a serious attitude, not really of her nature. She re-read Austen, and Bronte and Flaubert and even Margaret Mitchell. And she did what all war wives do, wait. But, that was nearly sixty years ago. And she was still waiting.

Today she waited in the doorway of a cramped French Quarter tourist trap staring at a sky, which even through her dark glasses was a uniform, blinding blue. In June the heat just builds in the Quarter from the moment of first light until by midday it smothers the streets like a moist and unwelcome featherbed. Harold was inside joking and giggling with the much tattooed and pierced sales clerk. She had a heart with the words “My heart belongs to Daddy” on her left bicep, and her hair, like her dress, was a shade of pink never intended by God. Finally, she packaged up whatever trinket he had purchased and helped him to the door, giving him a big hug.

“You take care, Mr. Hal,” she gushed as she moved aside so that three women clutching college composition books and talking loudly could squeeze past. The women looked like teachers disguised as tourists who had somehow escaped academia and were living it up before being caught and returned to the classroom.

Harold watched them curiously and then whispered, “Who are they, Amelia? That’s the third group we’ve seen today with composition books.” Then adding, not unkindly, “but they appear to be past school age.”

Amelia whispered conspiratorially, “They’re writers, Mr. Hal. They come down to the French Quarter a couple of times a year and write, and well, party.”

Harold raised his eyebrows, his eyes following the group inside the shop. “Writers? How exciting!” Remembering himself a moment later, he returned his attention to Amelia. “You have a nice day dear, and encourage your writers to buy something.” She gave him a quick peck on the cheek and turned back into the shop.

With some distaste, Eleanor added Harold’s latest tawdry trinket to the bag she carried for that purpose, as though trick-or-treating. “Mostly tricks,” she thought. She helped Harold maneuver his walker back onto the treacherous sidewalk and they continued haltingly down the narrow path as passersby made room and were invariably treated to a million dollar smile and “thank you” from Harold. Occasionally someone would recognize him—a buggy driver, a delivery person, a waiter on a smoke break. Each of them would call out “Hey there, Mr. Hal. Good to see you. Hope you’re well. You’re in my prayers.” or some such rubbish, to which he would cheerfully reply, never forgetting their first names or details of their lives.

Eleanor and he had made an agreement a number of years ago concerning their outings. Twice a year she went to the French Quarter with him and twice a year he went to a casino with her. They were still man and wife and should be seen together once in a while. Though truthfully, since they ate out regularly, these French Quarter excursions were merely unpleasant tasks for her, though he never complained about the casinos. He had never been much of a night person and he wasn’t a gambler. But he soon learned all the first names of the casino employees and listened intently to their stories while she obsessively played the tables and sometimes the slots. He never complained about the

cost although she lost more often than she won. Thus, it would be petty for her to complain about their French Quarter jaunts, though she hated the noise, the smells, the crowds of tourist and ill-behaved children, and as invariably taken in June and October, it was nearly always uncomfortably hot.

“There’s that stationery store. Let’s stop,” Harold crowed. How anyone could get excited over pens and paper, Eleanor had no idea, but it was neat and clean and air-conditioned and the owner was categorically not tattooed, so she followed Harold inside. There again were a group of women with composition books, reverently fondling expensive pens and exclaiming appreciatively over hand-made paper.

“Good day, Mrs. Donnelly. Mr. Hal, can I interest you in a journal, perhaps. I have some lovely leather-bound ones that just arrived from France.”

“France!” squealed one of the composition book owners. “Oh my God, they must be terribly expensive. Can you imagine what you might write in a journal like that?” She recovered from her enthusiasm. “Oh, I’m sorry, sir,” she said to Harold. “I didn’t mean to interrupt. But, we are writers, and this place is like HEAVEN. I want one of everything.”

“It’s almost better than sex,” interjected a plump but pretty woman in a low cut dress.

Eleanor blanched but tried not to show her disapproval. The women crowded around Harold and the shop owner, tentatively stroking the leather journals like the backs of exotic cats.

“I wonder if Hemingway wrote in a journal like this?” one asked.

“He wouldn’t have been such a misogynist if he had one of these to touch,” proclaimed the woman in the low cut dress.

“You are so judgmental, Martha,” said the first woman reprovingly. “Times change. Papa might have been very different if he were writing now.”

“And then we wouldn’t have *For Whom the Bells Toll* or *The Sun Also Rises*.”

“Or,” chimed in the third woman, “*A Movable Feast*.”

“Well, at least he had the kindness to do himself in when he couldn’t write anymore.”

“You’re just mean.”

“Yes, I am. I’m mean and I’m a writer, but unlike Hemingway I am not a misogynist.”

Harold cleared his throat. “How much are the journals?” he asked of the owner.

“Well, they start at \$100, but the large ones are quite a bit more.”

“Give me three of them, the regular sized ones.” Harold handed over his credit card as the women ahhed over his purchase. He signed the receipt and gave each of them a new journal.

“Forgive Hemingway, my dears,” he proclaimed. “He was only a man after all, and we are all, what is the word, flawed.” He waved off their thanks and protests that he “really shouldn’t” and hobbled out the door followed by Eleanor and the thanks of the store owner.

Eleanor knew more than to say anything. Harold would only point out that she could buy anything she wanted so how could she begrudge others things they clearly wanted as well. She had no rebuttal for that but it grated on her nerves whenever he gave

gifts to strangers. He would never even see these people again. She sighed, aloud this time.

“Harold, it’s lunch time. Perhaps we should stop. I’m tired, and hungry, and hot.”

“I’m so sorry, Eleanor, dear. I never seem to think about you. Of course you’re hungry. So am I. Time just flies on days like this.”

“For you, perhaps,” Eleanor thought sardonically as she followed his slow painful steps down St. Ann Street to a restaurant on Jackson Square that they frequented. It was said to be haunted which enchanted Harold but made Eleanor suspect the rumor merely a ploy to increase business.

Cool air escorted them into the foyer where a smiling Maitre D’ greeted them. “Hello, hello, and welcome, Mrs. Donnelly, Mr. Hal. What a pleasure! The chef must have had word you were coming because our special today is your favorite, a simply outstanding red snapper.

“Perhaps a ghost told him,” said Eleanor dryly as the Maitre D’ held out her chair. He looked uncomfortable, not sure how to interpret her comment. He cleared his throat. “Maybe so, maybe so. So, will you have the usual from the bar?”

Eleanor nodded but Harold was silent. He wasn’t even looking at them. A table full of laughing, drinking, composition book holding writers who were sharing appetizers at the next table had captured his attention.

The Maitre D’ smiled. “Oh yes, the writers. They do get a little noisy sometimes. I can move you to another table if you like.”

“Oh no,” exclaimed Harold. “This one is fine.” Then, amiable as usual, he added with a grin, “of course if we wish, Eleanor and I can just shout over them.”

“Just let me know. An old-fashioned, sir? White wine, madam? I’ll send your server right over.” The Maitre D’ efficiently dodged platter-laden servers and was seating new customers when Martin arrived with their menus and drinks. Before he could tell them the daily specials one of the group at the next table turned to them.

“I would definitely recommend the snapper,” he called. “I had it yesterday and it is the best I’ve ever had. In fact I’m having it again today.” He turned back to his group.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Hal,” said Martin. “They’re writers.”

“No problem at all, Martin. I find them absolutely fascinating. And, I will have the snapper and a small house salad. You Eleanor?”

Eleanor slowly perused the menu as though seeing it for the first time. She’d be damned if she’d have the snapper.

“A cup of gumbo and the petite filet, please,” she finally decided.

Martin hurried off with their order and she sipped her wine. Harold had leaned back in his chair to better hear the conversation from the next table. “I wonder what they are writing?” he mumbled.

“Harold, it’s rude to listen in on others’ conversations.”

Harold grinned widely. “They seem to be having an awful lot of fun for writers. I always thought that writers were solitary and conflicted and unhappy, kind of like psychiatrists or funeral directors.”

“They don’t look like proper writers to me,” Eleanor responded.



Harold looked at her questioningly as though she had said something profound. “Well, Eleanor, I never thought about it before, what does a proper writer look like?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she replied somewhat peevishly. “Like F. Scott Fitzgerald or Tennessee Williams, I suppose, kind of dapper but sad.”

“What about Shakespeare and Poe and Joyce and Whitman and even Emily Dickinson? Aren’t they proper writers?” She thought she could see his mind working, like when he took on one of his “projects,” and it was like trying to dissuade a bulldog from his favorite bone to get him to change topics. He muttered throughout their wonderful lunch, paying Eleanor no mind and occasionally nodding at an eavesdropped comment.

She really didn’t take offense, she was used to his inattention. She just wished she wouldn’t be considered rude had she started playing poker on her smart phone.

When Eleanor and Harold’s coffees arrived, the group of writers arose and started to leave.

“Excuse me,” she heard Harold say. “I’m sorry to interrupt, please forgive me, but I understand that you are writers and I just wanted to ask what you write.” Eleanor felt like melting into her chair from embarrassment.

“No trouble at all, sir, and thank you for asking,” said a rather ruffled but smiling man with graying hair and smudged glasses. He took a large sip from his drink.

“We sir, are writers. We write about everything, anything, and sometimes nothing. We write about what has already happened, what is happening now, what might have happened, and what will happen in the future. We record the voices of our Muses.”

He paused. “And now, good sir, we are retiring to the séance room to write. Why don’t you and your lady join us?”

Harold was almost out of his chair before Eleanor found her voice. “That’s very kind of you,” she said, “but my husband isn’t a writer. And, we need to be getting back home soon.”

Harold slumped disappointedly back into his chair. He managed a smile and said, “Thank you, thank you very much, but Eleanor’s right. Have good luck with your writing,” he smiled, “and give your Muses my best.”

The rumpled man shrugged and followed his friends out of the dining room, past the bar and upstairs to the séance room.

Harold and Eleanor finished their coffee in silence. He paid the bill, over-tipping Martin and the Maitre D’. Regretfully Eleanor followed Harold out into the humid French Quarter afternoon.

“There’s a cab,” Eleanor cried.

“Don’t be in such a hurry, dear. We still have one more stop. We haven’t been to the Irish pub yet and I haven’t had one of their wonderful Guinnesses on tap yet. The perfect ending to a perfect outing. Come on, it’s only two blocks Eleanor, and James will call us a cab.”

She sighed once more and followed him as they passed beneath ornate iron balconies overflowing with flowers still dripping from a noontime watering. “One more drink,” she thought “and then I can get him home and have some peace.”

The pub was not one of Eleanor’s favorite places; it was, what was the word, a kind of dive. She felt that it had never been properly cleaned and always surreptitiously

wiped the rim of her glass before drinking. “It’s only twice a year,” she reminded herself.

Three people with composition books exited the bar as she and Harold entered. He watched them wistfully as they chattered their way down the street.

But James wasn’t there. Instead, there was a young redheaded woman behind the bar, dressed all in black with glossy black fingernails and a black Art Deco tattoo on her arm. “You must be Mr. Hal,” she said unexpectedly. “Uncle James told me you might come in. He had a funeral to go to, and you know how we Irish are about funerals,” she laughed.

“And you must be Mrs. Donnelly. Uncle James said you always have a white wine.”

The young woman started the slow process of drawing a Guinness and wiped down a wine glass before pouring a drink for Eleanor. “My name is Colleen, what else? Uncle James is my great uncle, my grandmother’s brother. We have Irish on both sides. Are you Irish, Mrs. Donnelly?”

“No, French,” Eleanor replied icily.

“Oo la la,” laughed Colleen. “No wonder Mr. Hal married you.”

Eleanor slipped into her own thoughts as Harold and Colleen chattered on about the inane things the Irish always discuss when finding a kindred spirit.

Harold had not been gone even a year when they learned he had been wounded and would be arriving at the Veteran’s Hospital in New Orleans as soon as he was well enough to travel. Eleanor had no idea what to expect but certainly not what happened. Soon however, he was in a wheel chair, joking with the doctors and learning all about the

nurses' families. He was in pain, the doctor said. He would never be able to walk. He was lucky to be alive. Eleanor must be so proud of him. That was not what a young romantic girl wanted to hear. She cried to her mother.

“You can't divorce a purple heart,” was all Mama had to say, though she said it sorrowfully. “Women always have to make the best of bad situations.”

So, the 50's slipped by and Harold hired a male nurse to help him learn to walk again. He had a heated pool installed. He might be crippled, but goddam it, he was going to walk. His family treated Eleanor and Harold like royalty. Her mother treated Harold like a god, always looking sideways at Eleanor as if daring her daughter to dishonor this wonderful man who had given so much for his country, not to mention to them. Sometime during his recuperation Eleanor moved into her own bedroom. His crippled body filled her with disgust and it was hard for her to sleep with him beside her. Likewise, after a couple of failed attempts at sexual intercourse, that intimacy too faded from reality. She assumed that men could somehow “satisfy” their own cravings. Hers seemed to have disappeared with her dreams.

The 60's arrived, proclaiming sexual freedom. “For whom?” Eleanor asked herself bitterly. It was then that she joined the altar society at church and a book club, and volunteered at the church thrift shop. Harold began to attend all the veterans' events, including dances where, when she would finally agree to go with him, he would encourage her to dance with the men who could do what he could not. He even encouraged her to go out on her own with friends. Soon, however, their daily contact went the way of their sexual intimacy, and except for dinners out, church on Sunday, and family gatherings they might not even have known one another.

The 70's ushered in women's lib. "For whom?" Eleanor had a brief affair with a friend's cousin visiting from New York. They had fun she supposed, but she didn't miss him when he went home. If Harold suspected anything, he didn't say and remained smiling and cheerful regardless of what time she got home. His nurse assistant moved into the guesthouse so "Mrs. Donnelly doesn't have to worry about helping Mr. Hal." She could have robbed Harold blind and run away with the milkman and Harold would only have shrugged and smiled affably, forgiving her without even being asked.

Sometime after the Vietnam War, Harold started entertaining his "projects," though if he knew that's what she called them, he made no acknowledgment. Suddenly, though it could not have been suddenly, it had to have been gradual, there were veterans at the house nearly every day. In addition to the few Korean War veterans and a couple of World War II veterans who had regularly visited over the years, younger Vietnam veterans who seemingly had no place to go found Harold. He listened to their stories, gave them coffee and food until four and beer until dark. They had screenings of *Apocalypse Now*, *The Deer Hunter*, and later *Band of Brothers* and *Full Metal Jacket*. Harold maintained a library of books and DVD's including everything from *Heart of Darkness* to *The Things They Carried*, and all the John Wayne movies and episodes of *MASH*.

"Harold is running a home for wounded warriors," Eleanor complained to friends. Sometimes one would even stay over for a few days. Harold's days were spent in his converted garage or around the pool, surrounded by men. They never were loud or discourteous. They never made a mess, which in any case Eleanor would not have had to clean. They watched television, played cards, talked or just stared into the distance.

Harold took to smoking a pipe. “Gotta die of something, Eleanor,” he had said, though he never smoked in the house. She worried about exactly what he might be smoking, but could find no way to broach the subject.

One of the men was always available to take Harold to the doctor or wherever else he wanted to go. They volunteered to take her shopping but she hired a live-in housekeeper and cook who took over those duties. The men cleaned the pool and helped the gardener. They washed the cars. They were invariably polite to her though never saying more than “Hello, Mrs. Donnelly,” “Nice day, Mrs. Donnelly,” or “Do you need help with that, Mrs. Donnelly?” Though she seldom invaded their territory, talk stopped awkwardly when she did. And, though a few female veterans showed up on occasion, they seldom came more than once or twice. It was male territory and membership in the cabal, though not spelled out, was apparently restricted.

She had her hair and nails done and went shopping with friends. She regularly went to the spa and took up yoga. She read and went to lectures and concerts. She settled her mother’s affairs and sold her house when she passed. She supervised renovations on their home, purchased new cars, and completed a course in Italian. Harold encouraged her and praised her accomplishments, but she could tell he wasn’t really interested in them. Harold spent time with his “projects.”

Then gaming was legalized and her Morceau blood awakened. She was Rafe’s daughter after all, and found that she was finally happy, spending any time she could gambling. She preferred table games to slots because she had an insatiable need to win, to beat someone else. Poker was better than solitaire any day of the week. And now, she

could gamble and play all kinds of competitive games on her computer or phone without anyone guessing what she was doing, not that anyone might have cared.

Today, in the bar, she finished her wine. Time to ask Corinna, or whatever her name was to call them a cab, get Harold home and to bed, and relax in peace.

“Harold,” she said softly, “we should be getting home. It’s almost time for your medications.”

“Damn the medications. I’m going to have another Guinness.”

“Ok, one more.” She could have bitten her tongue off, but if she gave in now he would have to give in to her after the drink and go home. That was strategy. She accepted another glass of wine. She had started to slip back into her reveries when she heard Harold ask, “So, Colleen, what do you do besides tend bar?”

“I’m a writer,” Colleen said.

What a line, thought Eleanor, who had had her fill of writers for one day.

“I’ve always wanted to be a writer,” Harold replied. Turning to Eleanor he asked, “Don’t you remember the stories I wrote to you when I was in Korea about the guys and their lives and the Koreans and all?”

“Well, you are,” interrupted Colleen. “You are a writer, you know. Anyone can be, all you have to do is say it.”

“I don’t know if it is all that easy. Don’t you have to know grammar and punctuation and typing and all that? Don’t you have to have big stories to tell that people want to read? Don’t you have to have something new and important to say?”

Colleen shook her head. “Not really.” She reached under the bar, then pulled out and presented Harold with a black and white college composition book and a cheap

ballpoint pen. “For being my favorite customer today, you get the grand prize,” she proclaimed.

“What, why thank you.” Harold blushed, examining his gifts as though they were about to come alive. “What do I do now?”

“Write,” she said. “Just write. But first you must say it—just say I am a writer, go ahead, it gets easier.”

Looking a little sheepish, Harold said, “I am a writer.” Then a little louder, “I am a writer.” He opened up the composition book and printed in big letters on the first page “I AM A WRITER. “

Eleanor was incredulous. His proclamation rendered her speechless.

He turned the page and started to write.

After what seemed like a long time, without looking up, he said, “I’ll have another Guinness, Colleen, writing is thirsty work.”

“Another wine, ma’am?” asked Colleen.

“No, thank you, miss, and he doesn’t need another drink either.”

“No one needs another drink,” said Harold, “but it helps.” At the back of his mind the stories had started to line up, jostling one another for position. There was a story, long forgotten, about his grandfather, the stories of the boys and of the girls in Korea, the stories of all the people he knew in the French Quarter, the stories of the vets from Nam and Iraq, hundreds, thousands of stories just waiting to get out of his memory and unto paper. He was barely aware of anything else, and hardly heard Eleanor.

“We need to get back home. It’s getting late,” Eleanor was really starting to get irritated.



“I’ll call a cab, ma’am.” Colleen punched numbers in her cell phone and started to draw another Guinness.

“Harold, have you lost your mind?” Eleanor asked.

He looked up at her with that unfailingly cheerful face that she had once loved. Now, like hers, it was pale and wrinkled. His eyes still shone though, as they had sixty years ago.

“No, my dear,” he said kindly, “I believe I have just found it. You go on home. I’ll have Colleen call one of the guys when I’m ready.”