

## “MAYBE, IF, AND WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN“

Beverly Ann Collins and I were both juniors at the university. I was on a basketball scholarship and her obscenely wealthy dad paid her tab. I was a second-string basketball player and she a member of the school’s famed Southern Belles, a dance group which entertained spectators during halftime at football and occasional basketball games. She was in the most socially elite sorority and I in a more lowly fraternity that believed we were supposed to get good grades in college.

We were both arts majors and had shared a few classes together. So, we were on a nod and smile speaking basis, although on occasion we caught one another sneaking glances. Could or could not mean something, but I had it in the back of my mind, and if the opportunity ever presented itself, I intended to pursue it. She was used to being pursued, of course. And to pursue a girl like her, a pursuer had to have confidence. I had that. It helped, too. if you had something in common, like good looks or money. I was iffy on the money part, but enough girls had told me I was good looking that I believed it. Hence, my confidence.

Our basketball team was decent, which isn’t saying much, given that basketball was just a sport southern colleges played in those days to give the football players a breather. The game on our schedule that night was against a hated rival, which also played in the powerful SEC. We usually trounced them in football, less so in basketball. It was a league game and reasonably well-attended. The Southern Belles had even deigned to dazzle the fans with a performance at halftime.

Our game with our rival was close. I played some the first half and scored a basket or two. The Southern Belles were sitting directly behind us. There were 48 of them, and although I glanced around a few times in the first half, I couldn’t locate Bev. They performed at halftime, which I wasn’t permitted to see. Only about half of them had enough interest in the lowly sport of basketball to return to their seats after their performance and root us ugly stepchildren on.

A Belle directly behind me cleared her throat. I knew an “ahem” seeking attention when I heard one, so I turned to acknowledge the ahemer. It was Beverly Anne.

“Can I borrow your warm-up jacket, Zach?” She asked. “It’s freezing in here.”

She was sitting directly behind me. I didn’t know if it was protocol or not to lend my warm-up jacket to someone, even a Southern Belle, but I pulled it off anyway and handed it to her. Several of my fellow second stringers noticed and smiled. The coaches generally ignored me.

“Maybe you should wear more clothes,” I suggested.

“Look who’s talking,” she laughed, alluding to my own scanty outfit.

“My jacket might be a little sweaty,” I cautioned.

“It’s not. You didn’t play that much. She pulled my jacket on and zipped it up.

“You watched?”

“You’ve got five points. You watch us perform at halftime?”

“Sorry. Coaches were chewing us out?”

“Why?”

“That’s what they get paid to do.”

“Turn around,” she warned. “One of them is glaring at you.”

I speed-whirled around. It was THE coach . He screamed my name.

I jumped to my feet. “Yes, Coach?”

“Bailey’s hurt. Go in for him.”

Bailey was the guy I subbed for. He was our point guard. He ran the offense and made all the assists, only occasionally taking a shot. Coach shoved me onto the court.

I’m not going to bore you with the details, but no second-stringer in the history of our university played a better second half of basketball than I did that night. If you guessed I was trying to impress someone, you might be right. Unfortunately, we didn’t win, but I scored ten more points, had ten assists, and stole the ball from our opponents five times.

“If you played like that all the time, Zach,” Coach begrudgingly said, “your ass wouldn’t be sitting on the bench so goddamned much. That Southern Belle must’ve really hyped you up.”

Fair enough. She had, but, when I returned to thank her, she’d departed. I looked for my warm-up jacket, but it was MIA. I asked the student manager if he’d picked it up.

He shook his head. “That Belle you were talking to left with it.”

“Coach is going to kill me.”

The manger shrugged. “We’ve got spares. I’ll get you another.”

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We had a small movie theater across the street from the college. It was called “The Second Chance Theatre” and featured films folks didn’t mind seeing again and maybe again. I noticed that “Casablanca” was playing and decided to spend a night again with Rick and Ilsa. As I was standing in the ticket line, I noticed some Southern Belles in front of me. One of them was Bev wearing my warm-up jacket. She noticed me noticing her and my jacket. She grinned mischievously and turned round several times modeling it for me. Looked a hell of a lot better on her than me. She’d rolled the sleeves up. I shook my head as if she were an incorrigible.

“Casablanca” was one of my favorite movies. It had won Oscars not only for best movie and best director, but also best adapted screenplay. I bought a tub of popcorn and found a seat near the front, which most people avoided. I came to enjoy the movie and its snappy dialogue and preferred being alone in Rick’s Café Americain. But...

...But something sat down beside me. My warm-up jacket with Bev in it.

“Mind if I watch the movie with you?” She asked.

“Only if you agree not to grope me.”

That broke her up, and she laughed, showcasing her perfect teeth. Braces no doubt, which none of us peons could afford, although mine hadn’t turned out too bad despite being unbraced. She had a delectable Mediterranean look about her. Large brown eyes, heavily lashed, and long dark-brown hair. Her body? Need I say more than she danced for a living?

She slid into the seat beside me and helped herself to a handful of my popcorn.

I knew a lot about the movie, and there was nothing I enjoyed more than showing off and sharing information about something I really liked. Even though we were a good distance away from anyone else, I conveyed my comments to her in a whisper. She leaned her head in close so she could hear. I could smell a mild perfume, but mostly I smelled soap and good grooming. It was odd. From a distance she seemed aloof and untouchable, but up close as we were then, it seemed almost as if she wanted to be held or even cuddled.

I know, in my dreams.

I took her on a grand tour of the movie. She listened attentively.

“How do you know all that?”

“I’m a history major, so I delve into things that interest me.”

She teared up a bit at the end. I passed her my handkerchief.

She was surprised when I told her of rumors they had made an alternate ending to the film, where Rick and Ilsa ended up together.

“Have you seen it?”

“No, just read about it.”

“Why didn’t they use it?”

“Supposedly because World War Two was on, and it was a time for sacrifice. They couldn’t have happy endings. Bad for the war effort. Anyway, I think the film works fine just the way it is.”

Her sister Belles had departed, and it fell to me to escort her back to her sorority house, which I happily did. We made small talk, during which I learned she had an affinity for anything chocolate, especially chocolate milk.

As we said good night, I told her I liked her warm-up jacket.

“I borrowed it from a friend.”

“Borrowed?”

“Yes”

Does that mean you’re going to return it?”

“I don’t know. He hasn’t asked for it back yet.”

#####

We jocks had our own serving line in the cafeteria. The food was practically the same, although we had a little more selection, such as chocolate milk. A few days after the movie I saw her sitting with some other Belles near where we jocks ate. I scooped up a half-pint of chocolate milk. After I deposited my tray in the jock dining section, I took the chocolate milk to her.

Her table was a bevy of beauties. It was hard not to be intimidated, but I somehow was able to relegate them to regular college girl status. I leaned in and placed the chocolate milk and the glass next to her.

“Compliments of the management, ma’am.”

I bowed as if I were a waiter and returned to my table.

“Aiming kind of high, Zach,” a teammate commented.

Which was true. But, win or lose, I was enjoying every moment of it.

She and I ate at about the same time for lunch and anytime thereafter I saw her, I repeated the chocolate milk presentation. No conversation - just gave her the chocolate milk and left.

One day a sister Belle broke the silence. “Where’s our chocolate milk?”

“Sorry, ma’am. The chocolate milk is for athletes only.”

“She’s not an athlete.”

“Oh, but she is. I’ve seen her many times in a warm-up jacket. Only athletes have those.”

“You gave it to her.”

“Not mine to give. College property.”

Beverly had sat silently through all the previous chocolate milk presentations. Her attitude seemed to be it was my theatre and up to me to play it as I wished. Label her curious and amused, though.

This time, however, she entered the fray, such as it was, and assumed the air of a beautiful empress, which, given her stature on campus, was not exactly miscasting. “Please express my gratitude to the management for these gratuities,” she decreed, “and I wonder if I’m permitted to tip you for your prompt and courteous service?”

“We humble servers are paid but little, ma’am, and tips are appreciated.”

“Very well. Meet me at “The Second Chance” tomorrow night. My treat.”

“Gratitude, ma’am. Might I ask what movie is playing?”

“ ‘Shane,’ with Gary Cooper.”

“I believe that movie stars Allan Ladd. Perhaps Madam is thinking of ‘High Noon’.”

“No, I’m quite sure it’s ‘Shane’ with Gary Cooper.”

“And I’m equally sure Madam is wrong.”

“Care to place a small wager on it?” She challenged.

“A gentleman doesn’t wager money with a lady.”

“Then we’ll wager something other than money.”

“Like what?”

“A kiss if you win the bet,” she replied.

Her sister Belles all oohed and aahed. I was a little on the pleasantly shocked side.

“And if I lose?” (Totally academic question. No penalty would be too severe.)

“You bring me two chocolate milks hereafter instead of one.”

I quickly agreed.

She proffered a handshake to seal the deal.

I took her hand. It was larger than that of most girls, as befit her height, which I estimated to be five-eight or nine. Her large brown eyes signaled approval. She gripped my hand in a surprisingly strong way.

“Making headway, Zach,” the same interested teammate noted when I returned. “You took longer than usual to deliver the chocolate milk. A nibble at the bait, perhaps?”

“A nibble indeed. Perhaps even a bite.”

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I was standing in front of “The Second Chance” promptly at seven. She arrived several minutes later and read the movie posters affixed to the wall. They all affirmed that Alan Ladd was indeed the star of “Shane,” the movie we were going to watch that night.

She shook her head glumly. “I guess I just read it wrong, or worse yet, didn’t read it and assumed Gary Cooper was the star of “Shane”, as well as practically every other western. I should’ve known better than to make a bet with a movie buff like you.”

Perhaps I had taken advantage of her. No one knew movies as well as I, or at least I had yet to meet him or her. My conscience bothered me just enough to offer, even though reluctantly, to negate the bet or at least change its conditions.

“How about we forget the kiss and make it a tub of popcorn?”

She turned surprisingly quick and emphatically said no. “A bet’s a bet. I never renege.”

She paid for the tickets and then for the popcorn and Cokes. She led me to a dark, deep part of the theater, where no one ever sat and directed me to take a seat. My shoulder was literally against the wall, and I was looking at the screen at a near 45-degree angle.

We ate the popcorn and drank the Cokes. The movie was about a third over.

“I’m ready to pay off my bet, Zach,” she announced.

I expected a short kiss, maybe even a peck. I leaned into her, enthralled by the sweetness of her smell. Her lips parted, and instead of the mundane kiss I expected, the softness and depth of her lips and mouth enveloped me, almost taking my breath away. It was a long kiss, and finally we reluctantly pulled away.

“That’s got to rank as one of the great kisses of all times,” I gasped.

“We can do better,” she said, pressing close to kiss me again

And that’s how we spent the rest of the movie. I went to some far-off place and didn’t snap back to reality until I hear Brandon DeWilde yelling, “Shane, Shane, come back, Shane.”

I didn’t want to leave the theater, and if I could somehow locate the two seats we’d sat in, I’d have them bronzed. We walked back to her sorority house, holding hands and stopping every 50 yards for another kiss. When we got to the steps of her abode, she embraced me.

“Want to be boyfriend and girlfriend, Zach?”

“What about Lance Robinson and Jerry Levings and Larry ‘Touchdown’ Douglas?”

She giggled. “Jealous?”

“I don’t like competition from rich fraternity guys or star quarterbacks.”

“All items of the past. And you? What about Peggy Cummings?”

“God, Bev, that was two years ago.”

“How about Debbie what’s-her-name? I’ve seen you here with her at the movies.”

“We broke up. I got tired of her telling me James Dean was still alive.”

She climbed the steps to the front door, then turned and called down to me.

“Zach?”

“Yes?”

“Did you really think I didn’t know Allan Ladd was the star of Shane?”

She laughed and went inside.

It’s still the same old story, a fight for love and glory. Right, Rick?

####

Bev and I stayed together through graduation. We'd had sex by then, and there was no question but that we were compatible there. During our two years together I can't recall a single spirited disagreement between us, other than perhaps a film-buff debate like the one we had one night on the John Wayne character, Ethan, in "The Searchers." I maintained Ethan was in love with his sister-in-law, Martha, but that she was not in love with him. If so, why had she married his brother? Bev said otherwise. Martha loved Ethan deeply. The only evidence she could offer, though, was Martha affectionately stroking Ethan's cavalry coat when she was putting it away for him.

"Stroking a coat is a sign of love?" I challenged.

"Most assuredly," she insisted. "I stroke your warm-up jacket nearly every night before I go to bed and think of how much I love you."

Touché, Bev, I thought, as I fought back a tear.

She met my family, and they loved her.

I met her family, and, although they were ostensibly nice to me, they sent subliminal messages I might not be the right fit for their daughter. It was the little things. A raised eyebrow when I ordered Chicken Parm instead of French Salamis of Duck at the country club. An exchange of smiles when I passed on the cabernet sauvignon and said a Budweiser with a frosted mug was fine for me. They were unquestioning Presbyterians, while "The Big Bang Theory" and "The Origin of the Species" compelled me to scoff at nearly everything about God and religion.

I'll never forget one of the first conversation I had with her dad.

"You play golf, Zachary?"

"I like to go to the driving range." Which was true. I liked to hit balls.

"Where do you play?" This was the first in a series of questions designed by the wealthy to ascertain if I were one of them. Next question is what my dad did for a living, followed by where I summered and did I know the so and sos. My answers would then be absorbed by that section of my interlocuter's brain charged with affixing my place in the social hierarchy.

"I don't."

"Don't? Didn't you say you liked to hit balls at the driving range?"



“I do, Mr. Collins. My friends and I go out to the range, grab some beers, and hit balls.”

I didn't bother to say I could hit a golf ball over 200 yards straight as an arrow and could probably be a decent golfer if I could learn to enjoy walking through the woods in tourist shorts. Just not my kind of game. Too slow and boring. He looked at me oddly after that.

First impressions are often the only impression.

Bev had two older brothers, and they were worse than their father, all because they were lucky sperm beneficiaries. They had both gone to our university and had been in the most prestigious of the rich-boy fraternities. When they inquired as to my fraternity, one of them, James Prescott Collins, III, actually laughed. “Oh, the Nerd fraternity.”

After we graduated we put off the subject of marriage until we could put it off no longer. I had been offered a scholarship, which, if I hit the books and finessed it just right, could lead to a PHD, which was exactly what I wanted to do with my life.

Bev kicked a few things around about possibly doing some grad work herself, but I knew down deep she had no desire for a career, and, in an old-fashioned way, had gone to college to find a man suitable to marry. Instead, she had the misfortune to meet a proletariat with whom she fell in love. She knew I was eager to marry, and I'm certain she wanted to marry me. If she did, she would have two choices. Get a job and help support me as I wended my way through grad school in pursuit of my doctoral aspirations and forego having children until I could afford to pay my own way OR we could hit her dad up for financial help. She told me she had discussed it with him, and he said if she did indeed love me and that was her desire, he would acquiesce to funding the process. He had discussed it with her mother, however, and their recommendation was that we forego marriage until I had completed my schooling.

A clever opening chess move. They knew that years of seeing each other only occasionally would eventually wear down our relationship and our marriage would never occur. They also sensed the stubborn pride in me which would never permit me to accept their financial aid. They realized, too, as I had made no serious effort to disguise it, that I had no desire to move up to bourgeois and beyond.

One night in particular doomed me. I had taken a rare weekend off and was at dinner with Bev and her brothers and her parents at their very large home in New Orleans. The brothers and her father were rattling on about their golf game that afternoon. I wasn't contributing much to the conversation, although I did endeavor to nod and smile approvingly when I detected an applause line. My silence did not go unnoted.

“Why don’t y’all hush about golf?” Bev’s mother requested, “Y’all are boring poor Zach to death.” Somehow I got the impression she wasn’t doing it to be a gracious hostess, but more to draw attention to the fact I simply didn’t fit in.

“Impossible to bore a history major, Momma,” James The Third declared.

“On the contrary,” I countered, endeavoring to cloak my boredom, “there are a number of subjects that bore me, but golf’s not one of them. It has a very interesting history, and, being a student of history, I know quite a bit about it.”

“Like what?” Scoffed The Third.

I paused, pretending to flip through my mental rolodex searching out interesting tidbits. “Like what do you call it when you shoot one under on a par five hole?” I eventually inquired.

“That’s it?”

The younger brother even knew that one. “That’s easy, Professor. A birdie.”

Professor was the nickname they’d accorded me.

“Okay, what do you call a two under on a par five hole?”

The Third looked at me like I was the hopeless nerd he believed me to be.

“An eagle, Professor. That all you got?”

“No.”

“Well, dazzle us.”

“What do you call it when you shoot three under on a par five hole?”

I was taking a chance. I would certainly look like a nerd if any of them knew the answer, but my working theory was they would have had to read a book or two somewhere along the fairway to know the correct answer to that particular golf trivia. I need not have worried. The blank look of the Collins men told me they hadn’t a clue as to the answer.

The Third did make a logical guess. “A double eagle?”

“Wrong,” I happily announced.

“There’s no such thing. No one’s ever done something like that,” his father insisted, paternal instinct to protect the product of his loins kicking in.

“Oh, but there is, sir. And it’s been done a number of times.”

“Well, what’s it called then?”

“An albatross.”

“Bullshit!” The Third exclaimed.

I placed one of my few \$20 bills on the table.

“Care to place a small wager on it?” I challenged.

I got two really stormy looks from the brothers and a cloudy one from their father.

The Third was not going to let some nerdy, wannabe professor bluff him. He matched my \$20. “You’re on, Professor. Now, how you going to prove it?”

Mrs. Collins solved it. “Call Phil. He’ll know.”

Phil was their club pro.

Mr. Collins agreed. “I’ll call him right now.”

He headed for his study, which was nearby enough that we could hear him conversing, although we couldn’t discern everything being said. I was sitting closest to where he was, and I distinctly hear him say, “Well, I’ll be damned. Well, thank you, Phil.”

He paused for a minute after coming back into the dining room.

“Well, don’t keep us in suspense, James. What did Phil say?”

“Phil was out, dear. Theresa said she’d have him call back tomorrow.”

My most vivid recollection of the remainder of that night was Mr. Collins having trouble looking me in the eye. We left the money on the table. I was heading back to school the next morning. We had breakfast, and no mention of the bet or its outcome was made. Bev was driving me to the train station, and, after I expressed my gratitude and said goodbye to her family, she handed me the two \$20’s the Third and I had wagered.

“Looks like three under on a par five hole really is an albatross,” she laughed. “Dad didn’t want to embarrass my big-mouthed brother in front of everybody, so he asked me to pass your winnings on to you. How on earth did you know that, Zach?”

“You know how I am with trivia, Sweetheart. I just remember inconsequential things.”

Maybe I was a nerd.

Nerd or not, I asked Beverly Ann Collins to marry me. She said yes and insisted she had no problem with working while I went to school. She was also insistent that we not wait, that we marry immediately. She told her parents of her decision. They convinced her they were happy for her but wanted to have a big wedding. Give them some time to make it the event they wanted and we deserved. They suggested maybe nine months hence, when I would receive my master's degree. How could we deny them that pleasure?

Check.

Bev came to see me often, even though it was a 200-mile trip round trip. Staying with me in my Spartan apartment gave her some idea of what the next four years might be like. And, as if the surroundings themselves weren't dire enough, there was the fact I had little free time. I had to study like Hell to obtain the grants and scholarships I needed to eventually become a professor. We rarely had time for even a movie.

You marry someone, you marry their family. It wouldn't work. I'd ruin two lives.

So, it was I more than she who broke it off. My pride and insecurity and my inability to cope with a life in the country club fast lane had become a wall between us. I spent Christmas with her and her family, and they had only to look into my eyes to know they had beaten back the usurper. Bev had seen it, too, and, although she cried at my decision, I had only to look into her eyes to know she, too, had accepted the inevitable.

There was no wedding to call off. The family had never announced it.

Checkmate.

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The break-up was motivational to me. I plunged myself into my studies to subdue my grief and obtained far better academic success than I imagined possible. My doctoral thesis entitled "The Economics of Slavery" was so well received I turned it into a book which was published and actually made "The New York Times" best-seller list for 30 minutes or so. It received good reviews by critics and sold surprisingly well. It netted me nearly \$100,000 over the years, which I used to buy a house in the nest of professorial homes surrounding the university. I eventually achieved a professorship and even went on to become Dean of the College of History, thanks to my book and other publications. Publish or perish but publish well and prosper.

I married Grace, a lovely woman, a fellow academic, and we raised three children in the house I'd bought. I never heard much about Beverly Anne Collins, other than she was now the

wife of Gordon Xavier Rittenhouse, one of the richest men in New Orleans. They also had three children.

Twenty-five years had elapsed since Bev and I parted. I'd told my wife that I'd once asked Mrs. Rittenhouse to be my wife. My wife flattered me by saying she was very glad I had not married Bev, but, being a natural-born woman, did press me for a few details.

"Think Tolstoy." I said.

"Anna Karenina?"

"Yes, but with characters less steeped in romanticism."

Grace was a professor of literature and spoke fluent Tolstoy. She got it.

We were close enough to New Orleans that we could pick up its TV stations on our satellite dish. One Sunday morning Grace summoned me to the TV set. "Your former fiancée is on TV."

That got my attention. I hastened to the living room. "What's the occasion?"

"She's giving a tour of her home. It's being declared a cultural landmark."

I took a seat and wrestled with the flood of memories that just the thought of seeing her again evoked. Suddenly there she was. She was still slim but looked taller. The camera zoomed in on her, and those gorgeous brown eyes I'd loved so much glowed at me. Her hair was tinged with gray, and there was a wrinkle here and there that age had gently bestowed on her, but she was still the lovely Southern Belle she'd always been.

"My God!" My wife almost shouted. "You never told me she was so beautiful."

"I told you she'd been a Southern Belle."

"They're cute and flirty. This woman's gorgeous."

The tour of Bev's house, which was really more of a mansion, reminded me of Jackie Kennedy's famous White House tours. Bev took the woman hosting the TV show from room to room, putting on reading glasses occasionally to read aloud the title of a painting or the sentiment written on a celebrity photograph. There were many of the latter, even one of Prince Charles and Gordon Xavier Rittenhouse standing together. The TV hostess noted a cabinet filled with DVD's and commented on it.

"Oh, yes, Olivia. I'm quite the movie fan," Bev admitted.

"Is your husband a movie fan, too?"

“Golf is his passion.”

“I understand you have a beautiful garden, Beverly Anne. May we see it?”

“Of course. Let me get a jacket, though. It’s a little chilly out.”

Bev took out a jacket from a nearby closet. She stroked it affectionately before putting it on. The camera zoomed in on her once again. She was wearing the basketball warm-up jacket she had stolen from me years before. It had weathered the years almost as well as she.

“My favorite jacket, Olivia, I wore it in college.”

“Must bring back a lot of memories.”

Bev smiled into the camera. I’ll always believe she somehow knew I was watching, and the smile was meant especially for me. The jacket seemed to be hugging her, and she folded her arms in such a manner as to make it appear she were hugging it back.

“Very much so, Olivia. Cherished memories.”

Touche, Bev, I thought, as I fought back a tear.

Maybe, if, and what might’ve been.

THE END.