

For a dark-haired girl in a pink dress

1



An Igbo friend in Nigeria told me that he once doubted that lead actresses in Indian films had sex organs. He said that he could not imagine the biological functions of lesser mortals in such exquisitely beautiful creatures...

As bizarre as that sounded, it prompted a reflection on the girls of my boyhood fantasies. Their faces were sweet and their voices soft—but like in my Nigerian friend’s imagined Bollywood goddesses—the nether parts were smooth as the plastic bodies of dolls...

By my mid-teens, naturally, the girls of fantasy had evolved human-like bodies. They moved gracefully but were delicate. They could be seductive—but never coarsely so. Long before I had any inkling of the tensions between courtly and erotic love, my imaginings reflected it. On first reading Keats’ *‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’* at sixteen, I immediately recognized the ethereal beauty:

*‘Full beautiful—a faery’s child,
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
And her eyes were wild.’*

A mysterious dark-haired lady later appeared in my dreams. After a particularly vivid encounter I wrote a lengthy narrative ‘poem’ called *‘The Barber Woman’*. In it, I described the seductive lathering and shave she provided:

*Hot breath
Close to my face
She brushed on
The ether-sleepy lather*

It was a 16-year-old’s cringy but sincere effort to render a vision of a supernatural tryst...

Meanwhile, such visitations of wild-eyed succubi in my adolescent nights had not lessened the attraction to real girls. I did not expect that the enchantments of *‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’* could ever be matched in flesh and blood. Still, I was always on the lookout for any hints of mystery or beauty that set a girl apart from those of the local cohort...

From about the age of fifteen, I refused to believe that any local girl could possibly be interesting. There were certainly village girls who were attractive in conventional ways. Yet

however curvaceous or button-cute—they left me cold. Too often they seemed simple-minded—to the extent I heard them speak at all. Their very voices (in the dreary local accent) grated my ear...

Yet there was no doubt that the feelings were mutual. I understood that the indifference (if not aversion) felt from local girls was due to more than the usual liabilities. I was certainly not alone in lacking a driver's licence or other means for a potential date. I might not even have been the shyest among my teen male cohort. But none of those disadvantages equaled that of a hook stabbing out from a stiff right sleeve. Obviously, that detail could never appear in any girl's conventional 'boy fantasies'...

That realization was not hard to accept. Much more embittering was the suspicion that village girls were somehow warned about the dangers of involvement with someone like me. Correspondingly, it seemed that someone like me ought not to even be *allowed* to consider dating. All of this was unspoken but it seemed no less binding than the restrictions of mating rituals within a tribal society...

Fortunately, much of that mid-teen angst was swept away by the tsunami of the latter 1960s counterculture—which I fervently embraced... But even before then, I believed that some girls from outside the village—untouched by the village taboo—might see me differently. I felt a few might even find me interesting. Still, the opportunities for meeting such girls were so very limited.

Mystery girls sometimes appeared in the summertime. Some came with their families to the cottages in the nearby lakes. They occasionally showed up in the village café or at the local beaches. Yet they tended to be unapproachable—at least for guys who weren't 'hunks' or who didn't fancy themselves as Casanovas. In winter months, hordes of strange girls sometimes descended on the village for high school basketball tournaments. They were definitely not my type.

The only likely opportunity for meeting a new girl was at a dance—provided one danced. I didn't. Yet almost every Saturday night found me in the corner of the dingy Oddfellows Hall watching the doorway for unfamiliar arrivals. Those dances tended to attract a rougher 'greasier' crowd. The band was composed of local lads (my buddies among them) who sometimes played off-key or while drunk. Still, the floor heaved when they played their Chuck Berry covers. For most in attendance, those Saturday night dances were the highlight of the week.

Girls from neighbouring villages often attended—but they seldom looked any more attractive than the locals. Occasionally a local girl showed up with a pretty female cousin visiting from afar. There was always a possibility of casually sitting beside such a mystery girl and exchanging a few words. That was a faint hope that sustained me though the dreariest weeks of winter.

There were also regular dances in the village high school. The bright lighting, teacher chaperones and school police tended to draw only kids under fifteen. On special occasions, though, the school dances featured out-of-town rock bands. It was a treat to hear musicians with decent equipment.

In the late fall of 1966, I attended such a school dance that featured a live band. It would not be the rock band from Fredericton, N.B., I would remember. Unforgettable from that evening would be the mysterious dark-haired girl in a pink dress.



She was accompanying her girlfriend, a dun-haired girl from the Maine hamlet just six miles away. She looked like a Latin beauty—with dark complexion and raven hair. It seemed she was bathed in a rosy glow... Amid a row of other ogling lads leaning chairs against the wall, I watched her dance...

Through most of that appearance, the mystery girl only danced with her girlfriend. Only one boy—a gangly fool—had the nerve to approach her. She danced with him once but declined the second request. She and her friend stayed only about an hour. When they abruptly left, one of the boys in the row who was from the hamlet on the Canadian side of the border piped up:

“You know her father is?”

We shook our heads.

“Old Jack G.”, he chuckled. “You can bet he’s some strict with her!”

It was thus revealed that the dark-haired girl in the pink dress was the daughter of the meanest customs officer on the American side.

More carloads of teens were turned back at the border by Jack P. than by all the other customs officers combined. Like every American border guard, he knew how to trip up the unwary with startling questions. But his techniques were uniquely intimidating. As he barked his interrogations, it was no coincidence how his angled his hip for the best view of his holstered pistol...

Once I received his special attention. After demanding the names of the two friends and I squeezed into the back seat of the car which picked us up hitchhiking, he pointed a hairy finger at me.

“I know about you,” he squinted straight into my eyes. “You’re the kid comes over here to get drunk.”

“That’s not me,” I faltered.

It was no surprise that in a hamlet of few hundred, he could have heard something about a feral Canuck boy with a hook. Still, I was unnerved.

“How old are you?” he growled.

When I told him I was fifteen, he sneered. “What? You look about twelve. Listen, if you don’t behave yourself over here, you’ll get yourself in serious trouble. Understand?”

The boy who revealed the name of old Jack’s daughter that night at the school dance might well have warned: *‘Don’t even think about it!’*



The following winter, one of my buddies began dating the American girl who had brought FG to the school dance. On Friday nights, I would often hitchhike across the border with him to visit her. She had an easy-going mother who didn’t mind us chatting in their kitchen or watching TV.

Her house was on the hill above the railroad tracks—right beside that of Jack P. My buddy’s girlfriend provided a few more intriguing details about his beautiful daughter. She was in the tenth grade and like me, going on sixteen. She apparently loved to read. While I never saw her, I could not walk past her house without feeling a little giddy...

One Friday evening in early spring, my buddy’s girlfriend had startling news about the dark-haired girl who lived next-door to her. She said that FG had been seeing me around the hamlet and “thought I was cute.”

The following week, my buddy’s girlfriend arranged for her friend to drop over. So that FG’s mother would not suspect anything, my buddy’s girlfriend told us to come along the back road. If we took the usual way past FG’s house, she warned, her mother might be watching from a window.

When we snuck in the back door at 7:00 PM—sure enough—there was FG in the living room. She was sitting alone in one of the two sofas watching TV. My buddy sat with his girlfriend in the other sofa, and I took the armchair.

Nearly four decades later, I would clearly remember details of that evening. At first, the four of us watched TV silently without FG and I acknowledging one another’s presence. The TV was tuned to the Bangor channel, the reception of which was not quite as snowy as it was on the Canadian side. We were watching a show called *‘The Wild, Wild West’*, that was an odd mix of sci-fi and western. As the plot got more twisted, FG and I exchanged glances of raised eyebrows and smiles. We seemed to be on the same wavelength.

Only in the final half hour before her 9:00 PM curfew did I pluck the courage to sit beside her on the sofa. In low voices, we talked. She talked mostly but I gladly listened. Her soft Maine accent had me spellbound...

She spoke of her family. She had one brother, a couple of years her junior. She had French Canadian roots on her father's side. She said her surname was originally French but was changed to an American spelling...

She even talked about her father. She said that in a previous posting on the Quebec border, he had had to combat a vicious smuggling gang. She also told a funny story about her father ineptly repairing a cabinet door while drinking whiskey. Later her mother teased him ("To fix it properly you'll have to get drunk again!")

Aware of his notoriety with Canuck border crossers, FG seemed keen to defend her father. It seemed astonishing that her sweetness could derive from his harshness. Yet close beside her, I clearly saw her resemblance to her father. It was as if the craggy features of a swarthy Marlboro Man were exquisitely refined in a beautiful face.

"I think she has a little crush on you," said my buddy's girlfriend after FG left.

In the walk back across the bridge, never had early spring air smelled so sweet. That night, I fell asleep with the angelic voices of Simon and Garfunkel on my record player. Within a few years, songs like '*For Emily, Wherever I May Find Her*' would be too sugary for my taste ('*What a dream I had/pressed in organdy...* '). Yet in a 15-year-old heart that night, that song evoked a tenderness never felt before...



It would be nearly a month before FG and I would meet again.

In early May 1967, there was a rare dance in the gym of her tiny school. Records were played over the PA and a few kids danced—but most attendees that evening stood around solemnly talking. An announcement had earlier been made that the community's high school would be closing down. In just a month, the tiny twelve grade class would be the last to graduate. The following September, the remaining high school students would be bussed to a school fifty miles away.

Along with a couple of buddies with whom I'd hitchhiked over to the hamlet, I stood at the back of the hall. FG was near the front, talking with her fellow students. She looked at ease, gesticulating and even tapping the shoulder one of the male grads to get his attention. I was beginning to despair when she suddenly noticed me.

She raised her hand and smiled. I nodded back, making effort to appear nonchalant. Stopping to briefly chat several times, she gradually made her way to the back of the hall.

She greeted me and stood alongside, watching the small crowd. She asked if I liked the music. Barely distinguishable through the blaring speaker was '*I'm a Believer.*' Knowing she liked the Monkees (a band I thought appealed only to teenyboppers), I made no comment. After a couple

of minutes of silence, I asked her about books and authors she liked. I mentioned that '*Animal Farm*' and the horror stories of Edgar Allan Poe were favourites of mine.

She asked if I'd read '*A Tale of Two Cities*', which was on her tenth-grade reading list. I told her I hadn't. She then proceeded to summarize the plot. She went into more detail with the ending—explaining how Sydney Carton takes the place of the husband of the woman he loves in the French prison, and bravely faces execution by guillotine. When she quoted: '*It's a far, far better thing I do,*' her eyes misted up.

That seemed like an opportunity to ask her whether she wrote poetry. Yet the din in the hall seemed to have suddenly increased. We both were wincing from the noise.

In a surge of rare pluck, I asked: "Do you want to do outside where we can hear better?"

She looked around uncertainly but nodded. She walked behind me to the entrance.

I had intended to just stand outside the hall with her. But a gaggle of boys were standing under the bright lights smoking cigarettes and spitting. I took another leap of courage.

"Let's just walk around for a while," I said.

In the dark, I hoped to speak more freely—perhaps even work up the nerve to hold her hand. But we were barely beyond the light of the school hall when a pick-up truck pulled up from behind.

She twisted round, aghast. It was her father.

"Get *in* here!" old Jack snarled. Without a sound, she ran back and climbed in the cab.

A few of the boys standing outside the hall had witnessed the scene. I had no doubt that within minutes, chuckles would be echoing through the hall:

'Didja hear Jack G. caught his daughter walking with that one-armed bandit boy? He'll have that kid's balls!'

No boy whose testicles were so narrowly spared could have been so intensely embarrassed. I half ran through the dark back to the border bridge. As for FG—she was apparently even more embarrassed than me about the incident. A tiny bud was thoroughly crushed.



I can't remember how soon thereafter I dared cross the border again. It couldn't have been long. I spent the best part of the following summer on the American side... Still, I was always anxious

in passing the U.S. customs' office. A few times I took the greater risk of illegally crossing the dam or the railroad bridge just to avoid facing Jack G...

I heard that his daughter spent most of that summer of 1967 isolated at her family's camp on a remote point of Spednic Lake. The closest I came to her cottage was in a boatload of buddies headed up the lake to drink beer at the camp of a sleazy American... I looked closely as we roared past the point, hoping for a glance of her standing on the rocky shore. But I was never to see her again.

By then I'd heard she had "a little crush" on one of my long-haired buddies. That was no wonder after our humiliation outside the school hall. I also bitterly accepted that until my sheared hair (enforced by my raging father) grew back, a girl would find me anything but 'cute'....

At the end of that summer, FG and her family moved away from the Maine hamlet. The rumour was that her father transferred to avoid school busing. In late September I heard from my buddy's girlfriend that she was living in a town on the New York-Ontario border. She said she has got a letter from FG and would be writing back. She would pass on my greetings...

Late that fall, I received a letter postmarked Ogdensburg, New York. Neatly written on the envelope were FG's name and return address. I was thrilled but embarrassed. My father had picked up the mail and my mother had handed it over with an odd grin. Perhaps she was relieved at the hint of heterosexuality...

I did not keep FG's letter, but vaguely remember the contents. She said she was still settling into her new school but missed some of her old friends back in Maine. She wrote of a school visit to Ottawa. Seeing the Canadian flag, she wrote, made her feel a little nostalgic. Apart from that melancholy turn, she asked about music I was listening to. She listed several of her Top-40 favourites. The only song I recall from her list was a very minor hit called '*Spooky*.' Such pop fare was not to my taste, but I could not hear it thereafter without thinking of her (*'Love is kinda crazy with a spooky little girl like you'*)...

I started composing a return letter. I wanted to tell her that her presence had brought some colour to a dreary place—that the greyness seemed to have deepened in her absence. But after a few attempts, I gave up. I could not write something that her parents might read first or probably not even hand over to her at all...

Worse, my father had teased me about her letter. "*Don't mope over a bit of fluff*," he had said with a drunken snicker. "*Plenty of that around!*"

So, I did not rely. In the following weeks, I buried myself in private readings and in the camaraderie of a few close friends. Through the gloom of winter, there were no more mystery girls to inspire fantasy... Yet well before the spring of 1968, pining for FG had faded...

In a tiny but ever-enduring memory, though, the dark-haired girl in the pink dress danced on...



Fast-forward thirty-eight years:

In early 2005, four years after marriage breakup, I was stoically settled into routines of shift work and single fatherhood. With joint custody, I was fortunate to have the company of at least one of my kids on most nights. Too often on those weekend nights when all three were absent—like so many in the universe of the uncomfortably alone—I took refuge on-line. I avoided on-line poker, unconventional porn or chat-groups but did not always dodge the rabbit holes. In those wasted hours, my best opportunity for creative work may well have been pissed away...

Among my many distractions was digging around for clues about the current lives of former friends and acquaintances. In those first years of the new millennium, Facebook and even Google were still in infancy. Searching for names and addresses often required digging in odd places: along with 411 directories, I even searched court proceedings and obituaries. There were often dead ends... Yet the aim was seldom for potentially getting back in touch with anyone. Most often, I dug out of idle curiosity. By standards of more honourable times, I was just being nosy.

But there were a few lucky hits. Most thrilling in January 2005 was coming up with the email address of a 54-year-old woman in Anchorage, Alaska...

Her name appeared in an alumni list of a tiny Maine high school. Her surname looked like a hyphenation of her unmarried and married names. Still, her marital status was listed as ‘divorced’. I had no doubt that the FGR on the alumni page was the same FG who at fifteen had been the dark-haired girl in the pink dress.

One lonely Friday night, I composed an email message to her. My reintroduction to the woman I shall henceforth call ‘Fiona’, was as follows:

‘My apologies if I am wrong in assuming that I am addressing the same FG I briefly knew in Maine, in the spring of 1967. I accidentally [untrue] came across your name in clicking on one of those pop-up ads one usually ignores. A few clicks took me to the high school alumni list of a long closed-down school of a tiny town on the Maine-Canadian border...’

‘...You may not recognise my name. If I may jog your memory: I was a kid from the Canadian village across the border. We met only a few times. Once was at the house of your next-door neighbour and another time in your high school meeting hall. We talked about music and books.’

Obviously not wanting to jog a memory of her father dragging her off, I gave no further details of that last encounter. I did go on to introduce my ‘54-year-old persona’ in a couple of

paragraphs. I summarized history and present circumstances while trying to avoid the impression of a come-on. I mentioned a few names of locals she might remember. I did emphasize that my information was old, having visited the hamlet only a couple of times during rare visits back to New Brunswick over the previous four decades. In closing, I reemphasized that my out-of-the-blue greeting was benign in intent: *'Consider this a friendly greeting without ulterior motive. My apology if it is an intrusion.'*

For nearly a minute, the cursor hovered. Then with a deep breath, I clicked 'send'.



Just two days later, a response appeared in my inbox:

'Wow! What a nice surprise! I am presently in New Mexico with my mom, just back from visiting my brother in El Paso—and will be going back to Alaska in a week.'

She then sketched out her own background. It was interesting: she had a degree in French and Psychology and was a professional musician. She mostly played saxophone in bar bands. She had a side-line job as a horse-drawn carriage driver. She said she'd lived in Alaska for thirty-five years but was getting "tired of the cold." She made no mention of children, nor did she hint of a current partner. In concluding she wrote: *'Thank you so much for writing, as I think it is very important to keep in touch with those in one's life.'*

Had her reply been merely cordial, I would still have been touched. But she seemed to be signaling her openness to a further exchange: *'Once I get back home to Alaska,'* she wrote, *'if you want I will send you some photos that are interesting (horse, music, Anchorage scenery)...*

There was even a hint of interest in a potential meet up: *'I have wanted to visit Vancouver a lot lately... I heard that it was a beautiful city but I need more air miles to do it.'*

I was thrilled but did not want to seem over-eager in replying. I waited a week.

In the second email, I answered her questions about my present job and earlier work in Africa. Although tempted, I did not ask whether her brother in El Paso worked in Homeland Security as did her (presumed late) father. I did not want to appear snoopy. I was not so guarded in admitting my delight in being in touch:

'I can hardly believe that I'm communicating here with the adult incarnation of the teenage girl whom I first saw at a high school dance a million years ago. Do excuse the nostalgic sentimentality: but you looked as exquisite as a ballerina twirling on a music box....'

I attached photos: one of myself taken by my daughter, TE, on a walk by the Coquitlam River and another of both TE and my 13-year-old son on the same walk. I wanted to emphasize my commitments...

Her second reply also came just two days later. She said she was interested in teaching and wanted to hear more about my work. In response to the teaching in Africa I'd referred to, she asked about animals of the savanna:

'Sounds like your job is really cool—there is nothing like seeing new places and meeting new people! I would love to hear more about your travels.... I watch African web cams a lot—especially of the Serengeti. Animals are so cool!'

Admittedly, I winced at that first 'so cool'. Subsequent emails would be peppered with modifiers like 'crazy' and exclamations like 'yikes!' It initially seemed like fossilized hippie argot. Still, I reminded myself that a horn player in a female rock band was hardly a typical 54-year-old. I also conceded that like most email users, she was writing in a conversational style... Perhaps to her, my email style seemed tight-assed and teacherly... In any case, my red-pen reflex was soon overshadowed by curiosity in hearing more about her unconventional world...



For the next few months, I wrote her an email nearly every Friday evening. She usually responded on Sunday afternoons. The exchanges began to feel a little like dating. Still, the 'dates' were as innocent as the two 15-year-olds on the sofa thirty-eight years before—talking animatedly without touching...

In our exploration for some commonality in our very different lives, we circled and touched upon a range of topics. We quickly discovered that our greatest shared interest was in music...

I asked questions about her musicianship and she described her gigs. At that time, she was playing with a band called Lulu and the Aquanets. From a little searching, I gathered that Lulu was something of an institution in the Alaskan bar scene. Fiona said she rotated between sax, keyboards and drums in that all-female foursome. In one email she wrote:

'I love to play Hendrix on my horn, reggae on the keyboard and anything I know on the drums... Last Sunday, I got to sing and play Van Morrison's 'Moondance' on the drums at the same time...'

She said that her band played a range of jazz, reggae and classic rock. They also did originals, a few of which she had herself composed. At the same performance at which she played 'Moondance' and 'Purple Haze,' her band covered tunes by Led Zeppelin and Sam Cooke. Her band's most numerous covers, she wrote, were of a California band (previously unknown to me) called Concrete Blonde.

The mix of genres was curious. It was hard to visualize drunken audiences in Fairbanks or on Kodiak Island (gigs Fiona mentioned) responding kindly to the eclectic repertoire of an all-female band. Yet I got the impression that Fiona was not one to brook rudeness from big hairy Alaskans.

In one email, she wrote of fixing the engine of a broken-down clunker in sub-zero weather while a couple of local guys stood by— flummoxed by her mechanical chops. Unlike the posturing of Sarah Palin (unknown to a wider world in 2005), Fiona’s Alaskan toughness seemed authentic.

In our ongoing discussion about musical genres, I sent her a burned CD of African music featuring Zimbabwe artists, Thomas Mapfumo and Oliver Mtukudzi. She said she loved it. In return, she sent me a CD of recording of her band playing a few of her own compositions. I wrote back that her tunes were “infectiously bouncy” and that her sax was “phenomenal”. I hoped that she did not take that as patronizing.

In response to Fiona’s sharing an artifact of her creativity, I sent one of my old poems called: ‘*Fossilized Wallflower*’. It was plainly about her. I worried that she might find it creepy but after a short delay, her reply was reassuring:

‘*Yes, send me more stuff- I love to read it...Yes, the past is always good for insights and also for working things out- sometimes it is years later, that one figures something out!*’



We also exchanged several photos. I sent her a few from my African sojourns in the 1980s as well as recent ones taken on hiking trails. She sent me photos of her band. Some showed her singing and playing keyboards. She seemed to resemble her father even more than she did in her girlhood— but her mature Gallic comeliness was striking...

In one photo, she was dressed in tie-dye and costume jewelry with her black hair trailing under a broad-brimmed hat. The style seemed strikingly similar to that of the female lead singer of the punk/goth band, Concrete Blonde. When Fiona said her group covered numerous songs of that band, I looked up some information on them. It was interesting that their lead singer/songwriter, Johnette Napolitano, was known for her care of rescued horses.

Fiona shared several photos of herself with horses. In a promo photo for her carriage company, she is garbed for her carriage driving gig. In top hat and black cape, she holds the bridles of a pair of black Percherons in dark steamy air. In the accompanying text, she noted:

‘*Attached is a still photo taken a few years ago- it is of me with my 2 very wonderful pals- Fred and Prince (RIP)-- I really miss them- and treasure this photo.*’

In another email, she noted the fourth anniversary of Fred’s passing:

'He was like a giant Marmaduke—2300 lbs. of sheer happiness! Fred was one of my best friends and taught me more about life than anyone. His biggest lesson was: 'love life and be true to oneself, always!''

References to her “gentle giant” friends over our correspondence, suggested that her affection for those draft horses perhaps even surpassed that felt for non-equine beings....

In an uncertain response to a lengthy description of Fred’s antics, I described once looking into the eyes of a gorilla at the Seattle Zoo. I wrote that the sensed self-awareness of the gorilla seemed greater than any other non-human animals—including horses. I had second thoughts about having made an observation that might have seemed belittling to Fred, but she replied:

‘Yes! I’ve always been interested in non-human primates. After my bachelor’s degree I almost went to the Georgia Primate Center to continue my education- but somehow got distracted with the saxophone!’

While I was glad to continue exchanging views about music and animals, in a couple of emails I tried to tease out something of her politics. It would have been a major let-down to discover she was a Republican. Of course, that would have been highly unlikely for someone of her background. Still, I was curious about any political issues (apart from animal welfare) that moved her. Once I wrote:

‘I’ve heard that Alaska is votes heavily Republican. Why is that? Surely, Alaskans don’t think like conservative Alabamans— or do they? Anyway, probably that doesn’t much concern the life of a musician...’

She did not respond to that comment. I took that only as evidence that she probably followed politics no more than I followed team sports. That current affairs would not be a shared interest was only a small disappointment...



Before contacting Fiona, I had known she was divorced. Although I had told her in my first email about having shared custody of three kids, she never made reference to her personal relationships, past or present. That issue was avoided until about six months later. Her first reference to her ex-husband came up in a roundabout way.

Around June, she messaged that she had sprained her knee: *‘Yikes- what a drag to not be able to walk much, or normally- it gives one an incredible empathy for those who cannot walk at all...’*

I wondered how much treatment she could afford—but urged her to see a doctor. A few years before Obamacare, it seemed unlikely that an irregularly employed musician in Alaska would have had health insurance. There were three weeks of silence before her next email. Then she wrote:

'I finally went to the doctor, in fact my ex-husbands' wife took me- other than having to hobble around- we had a blast— I really feel like they are my family. My ex-husband is such a wonderful person and his wife is like my sister and their 9-month-old baby was so-o-o fun to hang out with!'

It was a relief to hear she had received proper care. Yet the circumstances were strange. Could the ex-husband who seemingly left her for a younger woman really have been so “wonderful?” Did she really consider his wife “a sister”? It was hard to determine whether “we had a blast” was written in naiveté or in irony...

It also occurred that she could have been inviting my observation. Perhaps she was curious to know how that relationship appeared to an outsider. Rather than admitting that her ex-husband appeared to be an asshole, I offered no comment.

Soon afterwards, she sought my advice on another matter. She told me that she had an offer from the local school board to work as a French tutor. She was debating over whether to take it:

'Yikes- a real job- I do not know how I would ever get up at 7 am- I have been on night hours for 30 years but am so tired of living on the edge... I am so-o-o tempted... '

She seemed convinced that financial stability or artistic freedom was an either/or choice:

'...if I get this job, I will be locked into the school calendar- yikes- not used to being locked into anything— I have been living on the edge, with a lot of freedom and no \$— but the opposite is scary... '

I strongly recommended that she take the job. I suggested that it could still be possible to teach during the week and do musical gigs on weekends. When she mentioned it was a union job with benefits— I told her that health insurance ‘at our age’ is worth more than a small sacrifice of personal freedom. However drearily practical, that was honest advice for a 54-year-old ‘living on the edge’.

In her follow up email, she said he was leaning towards taking the job, but was chary of the regimentation: *'I still have the fear- I will not be able to wake up on time... But I would be making about 3 times the income I am making now'*! In the same email for the first time— she directly expressed a desire for meeting up: *'Yikes- I could fly to Vancouver for the weekend! Am I just trying to talk myself into it?'*

A couple of weeks later, she mentioned— almost with resignation— that she had accepted the job. She would be starting in September. In the meantime, she said that she was preparing to attend a friend’s wedding in Portland. Perhaps a little too eagerly, I asked if she could arrange a day or two stop-over in Vancouver or even in Seattle. She replied: *'Sorry, I can't do a stopover this time since someone else is paying for it.'*

I guessed that it was the ex-husband who was paying for her ticket. I wondered what Fiona might have told him about me. Perhaps he was suspicious of her correspondence with someone she had had “a little crush on” at the age of fifteen... Even with the sunken hope of a meet up that

summer, Fiona dangled the possibility of one later on: '*...Maybe next time I go to New Mexico to visit my mom I'll look into the stopover... I will keep you posted!*'

I can't remember my emotional state at the time I received that email—but I was moved to reply in a manner more unguarded than ever before:

'Have you ever been attracted to Buddhism? I subscribe to no religion, but the idea that the immutable 'I', is an illusion seems like common sense to me. That idea with roots in Buddhism (as I roughly understand it) seems to be borne out by what is being discovered in current brain-research. While almost certainly there is no unchanging non-physical 'self'—what does persist in our ever-changing mind/bodies are continuities of desire, clustered in memory... It is incredible just how vivid certain memories of a distant past can still be...'

Do you ever remember a Friday evening, back in 1967 when we met in your next-door neighbour's living room? I remember it took me more than an hour to work up the nerve to sit beside you... I remember in that last few minutes before your curfew we were just getting warmed up. I could hardly believe that talking with a girl could feel so natural...

Incredible to think that since then, every cell in our bodies has been replaced at least six times... Maybe all that really connects us to these same (but very different) bodies is the thread of continuity in our most vivid memories...

I'd like to think that our meeting up another time is still in the cards. In the meantime, enjoy your trip to Portland...'

She did not directly respond to that overwrought message. Instead, in her next email she gushed about her trip: '*Portland was great!! The wedding and the band was s-o-o fun and it was good to see everyone again...*'

That was a pinching reminder of just how far apart our worlds really were. Who at fifty-four would be inclined to take on a new relationship requiring a geographic and social separation from their life-world? How could anyone so doing possibly be happy?

Still, I was pleased to hear in the same email, she has taken the job with the school board. Later that fall she gave me her impressions of her first couple of months:

'I really like my job, except for the lifestyle changes do not allow me to go out and jam every night!!! the insurance, and better pay, is pretty cool though.'

Thereafter, our email exchange declined to about once a month. Our topics shifted from music and animal awareness to more mundane topics. She asked about my daughter's plans for university and I asked about her visit to Denali park. There was no more mention of a possible meetup... Meanwhile, it seemed telling that she had never invited me to visit her. Perhaps she was just too well known in Anchorage to risk being seen with an unusual-looking stranger. Such a trip would have been beyond my budget, anyway.

By that time, it was not just physical distance that seemed unbridgeable between us. There was no imaginable scenario between us which could include my kids or her horses. A dating site

would never have matched us. Yet it was touching to see the closing, ‘*love, F.*’, in her final emails.... It took nearly a year to gain that level of trust from her. Still, I had to take that closing as declaration of ‘*philia*’— endearment felt for an old friend— rather than an expression of ‘*eros*’...

In the meantime, I began trying my luck with Yahoo personals. By early spring 2006, I was exchanging messages with a wonderful woman who not only shared common interests but even seemed to write in a style similar to mine. Two years later, she and I, along with my two younger kids, would be living together.

Soon after my partner-to-be and I had met, I sent Fiona an email telling her that I had a special new female friend. She did not reply.



Over our gradual reacquaintance, I became fond of the 54-year-old Fiona. I admired her talent and enjoyed her humour. Perhaps she even got to like a few things about the 54-year-old me. Yet it was almost certainly best that there was no ‘stopover’ visit with her.

Admittedly, there was a hope that such a visit might result in our sleeping together— even for one night. Yet the self-deception in that fantasy was undeniable. Did I really desire the middle-aged Fiona or was the obsession with a dark-haired girl in a pink dress? In the latter case, the lusting of aging flesh after a phantom of memory could only be unseemly. By not meeting up, our friendly reacquaintance was spared an awkward ending...

A decade and a half later, I sincerely hope Fiona enjoyed her tutoring while continuing to jam. I hope she has health care and a comfortable retirement. If she got out of the Alaskan cold— as she’d deserved to— may she be somewhere close to horses...

2010, 2023
