

CLASS REUNION

"...and the emperor was so happy with the way we played that he just had to reward us over and above our normal fee. He ordered the State's Treasurer to fill each musician's instrument with gold regardless of its size....and there was I was with my piccolo...

(From an old Portuguese story. Source unknown.)

"It's as if nothing really happened. I feel as if I'm still able to throw a baseball, or kick a soccer ball. Granted I probably need a bit more time to warm up, but, then, I really don't feel as if twenty-five years have passed. This place still looks the same, and a liverwurst on rye at the Wursthaus is the same it's ever been. Even the waitresses seem to be the same age now that they were then. I'm telling you, Bill, nothing has changed. Those pictures on the 25th report, for example, are only something the camera caught, but which is not there. Even those walls across the street haven't changed. I still look at them in awe, admiration, and the feeling of intimidation they were supposed to represent. Do you realize I still have nightmares about the place? And they're always the same. I'm wearing a T-shirt that doesn't quite cover my genitals, although if I pull it down from the front and the back, I manage to hide somewhat from Karin Andersen. You remember her, don't you? It seems that Karin and I are always in Widener Library studying for a test for which I didn't even have time to cram.

"So you see, I haven't aged, really.

"On the other hand, today's Globe called us middle aged and even did a feature on the number of us whose sons are graduating as we celebrate. You know, it really scares the Hell out of me to learn that some of the guys I once knew are now the fathers of Harvard alumni.

It scares me even more to know that perhaps at this moment there is someone walking down the street who not too long ago was sitting next to me in some history class and who today is responsible for someone's life on the operating table, or for a political decision that will affect how man will live thousands of miles from here.

"Do you suppose that William Fulbright, for example, ever looked like one of us?"

"Why William Fulbright?"

"No particular reason - except that I remember Professor Holcombe mentioning him as a giant in the Senate. A man from Arkansas whose ideas helped reshape the world. Not too long ago, for example, I was in Milan, where I heard an Italian comment that one of the unfortunate aspects of American politics is that its local decisions often affect world events when they shouldn't. He then went on to call attention to Fulbright's defeat in his last senate race by a man who, in the Italian's words, was nothing but a farmer.

"Can you picture Ted Kennedy, for example, as president? Or am I, or better, are we the only two people who haven't grown in the twenty-five since we left here. Surely, I don't believe that in that time I have learned enough to be president - never mind Ted, who needed five years to finish four. And John Culver? John was always a great grade getter, yet I remember how, in a course with Cherington, the one on Federalism, John was asked a question openly and his reaction was such that anyone could see that John's grades were not necessarily reflective of his knowledge. Yet two days ago I heard people around the Union mention that he could be a good substitute for both Ted and Jimmy Carter."

"I'd take John before I'd take Ted anytime," Bill Tiverton replied. "On the other hand, some lowans I know tell me John may be in trouble. They liked his record as a congressman, but feel that, as a senator, he's too liberal for the state democratic moderation. In short, if he doesn't make it in next year's re-election, his name may never be mentioned near the Union, or anywhere else. By the way, did you notice that Ted showed up with his wife? Boy, wasn't that a line of shit?"

"Well, some people feel that wives are essential. Even I once thought I had to hang on to mine, no matter how much I fooled around. Hanging on to her, I felt, was the only way to keep my job - as if it were the only job in the world. Strange how fear sometimes traps us all. I'll never forget it."

"You mean, the photographs?"

"Shit. Yes."

The two men paused briefly. They had been friends a long time, having met originally in high school. At college they had been almost inseparable, so much so that friends used to joke that if one wanted to find Bill Tiverton, all he'd need to do would be to look for Gary Babcock, or vice versa. The armed forces, however, saw that the two would eventually travel different ways. Bill was drafted..

Babcock, on the other hand, opted to continue his studies as a theology student, eventually becoming a Baptist minister. The two had often discussed how they would beat the draft after college by possibly joining the Massachusetts National Guard. At no time did either ever discuss the ministry. In fact, neither had ever shown to anyone any form, or symptom, of a religious streak. Babcock, for example, was known for his ability to drink, and for his habit of ordering two beers for himself whenever he'd sit down at Cronin's, finishing the first in

one gulp before his friends had even reached for their own. Once he had finished that ritual, he would then join the others in their drinking and discussions.

"I'll never forget that day, and the way my secretary came in my study pale as a ghost," Babcock said in a somewhat slow voice as if he were reminiscing. "He says his name is Murphy, and that he has the photographs. I wanted to know what photographs he meant, but he said he would only talk to you.' I tell you, I really couldn't think of any photographs, and didn't know what she was talking about. Hadn't ordered any for the church, nor did I know of anyone who had. It was only when she recovered her composure that she suddenly brought me down to reality. 'He says, he'll meet you tomorrow at three at the Howard Johnson counter on Memorial Drive, and that you'd better bring five thousand dollars, or he'll give the pictures to the press.'

"Even then, I couldn't quite associate what she was driving at until she informed me that Murphy had indicated that the pictures had been shot through the window of the Holiday Inn, room 324, and that his telephoto lenses had done a more-than-adequate identification job.

"'Were we ever in 324?' she asked me."

"Were you?" Bill Tiverton asked as he lifted his glass.

"How the Hell should I know? We had been all over that damned motel for at least two years. My preoccupation at the time was how the Hell I could lay my hands on the five grand. Hadn't it been for that anxiety, I assure you that even you would have never heard the story."

"But I did come through, didn't I? Besides, I owed you one."

Tiverton replied with an almost sarcastic smile.

"So the next day, there I am at Howard Johnson's, with your money neatly counted in an envelope inside my vest pocket. I'm having a coffee when this guy approaches me and introduces himself. He tells me I'm a lucky guy for getting away so cheaply, and that he had to use all his skills as a cop to get the pictures. He then handed me a large envelope. 'Don't bother to open it here,' he says. 'Both the film and the prints are in there.' I then handed him the money. He didn't bother to count it, either, and left almost as mysteriously as he had come in. As for me, I felt somewhat relieved. I reached for the bill on the counter and paid it. I also left as rapidly as I could.

"I saw no sign of him out on the parking lot. This time, however, I walked towards my car almost as carefully as if I were stealing it and did not wish to be seen. I opened the door and got in. Once inside, and making certain that no one saw me, I opened the envelope and reached

for the prints. God, I couldn't believe it. It was, no doubt, the room at the Holiday Inn. The camera was so accurate that it even caught the open bible near the telephone on the night table. Too accurate, in fact. No matter what prints I looked at, I could see clearly see my naked wife. And the guy screwing her didn't look a bit like me, either."

The two men laughed.

"God, I was mad." Backcock said as the laughter subsided. "So mad that I wanted to go home and denounce her with that sense that only the sinless bestow on sinners. Then I realized I owed you five grand and that I had blown it on somebody named Murphy at a Howard Johnson's. I could have killed the son of a bitch."

"Well, I charged you no interest."

The two laughed once again.

"You know, even our break-up was no big deal, I just sat down with her a couple of evenings later and told her I knew we had had it with one another. For some reason that passage in the Lord's prayer, 'forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us' seemed to have a lot more meaning than the vows we'd taken when we were married. The passage, I felt, was something with a sense of permanence, something that had come down through time. Our marriage, however, was something undertaken by someone else, two kids about to discover the world and to be engulfed in its midst..."

"Perhaps the cameras, therefore, weren't too wrong after all, and those pictures in the Class Report are real. Yes, I was also amazed at how different we all looked from the boys whose faces lived twenty-five years ago. Unlike you, though, I didn't care one way or the other. Did you notice, for example, that all the pictures we took back in '54 had us dressed in our best suits, as if we had wanted the world to see us at our most important? On the other hand, did you see how some of the guys looked in the Report?"

Importance, it seems, is something evolutionary, somewhat like that biblical seed that the man threw all over the lot. Some turned ok, others just went kaput. Period. Take Kennedy, for example. Do you remember Ed McCormick's famous question: 'Had your name been Edward Moore, would you have dared to be running for the Senate at this time?' Nobody bothered to ask McCormick, though, had his uncle not been a power in Massachusetts politics, whether, he, too, would have been a candidate for the Senate at the time. Oh, sure, we changed, as the photos say we did. What we don't seem to understand, though, is that within us there is something as permanent as those walls across the street.

"You know, on the day we arrived, my wife, Joan, suddenly blurted out as the taxi dropped us off on Quincy Street, 'Bill, Bill,' she says.

'There's John Updike!' She recognized him from his picture in the Record. Suddenly I was also filled with awe and wonder. John Updike, right there in front of my eyes.

John Updike, Member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, who had often showered with several of us at Lowell. Two days ago, I happened to shower with John once again. Suddenly it dawned on me I wasn't impressed. We've all done what we've had to do, it seems, and if that waitress who served us a few minutes ago looks like any of those who served us twenty-five years ago it's because, in fact, a part of her happens to be the same as that of the others. Some parts of us just don't change. If you looked at the waitress' tits twenty-five years ago because they looked nice and firm in their bras, you will look at today's waitresses' tits for the same reason. Period."

"What you're trying to say, then, is that the Ted Kennedy who wants to be president is not the Ted Kennedy we once knew physically at one time, but someone with the same biological values, who also happens to have changed over time. Right?"

"It doesn't matter. Are you, for example, still the same person who wanted to travel - and who has done so - but who didn't care to do it courtesy of the armed forces? Hell, no. You are now safely out of the way, thanks to those same twenty-five years that you say brought no changes to your life. Would you, for example, now pay five grand if someone told you he had revealing pictures of you taken at the Holiday Inn?"

"Only if I suspected her husband had a gun and knew how to use it. Besides, I'm no longer married, nor a minister. My company doesn't fire anyone for his, or her, off-premises morals, as long as we make a legal profit and get our jobs done."

"Well, I would, if it happened to me - and not for the same reason I lied about us twenty-five years ago. At the time I just wanted to hide my tracks. Now I only want to get old with Joan - or at least, if someday we end our marriage, have some excuse far and more serious than my occasional fooling around."

"What d'you mean, you lied about us twenty-five years ago?"

Bill Tiverton took another sip from his beer.

"Well, you remember that trip to Quebec City we took the Fall after we graduated?"

"Yeah," Babcock replied. "Last time we ever did anything of the sort. Made me swear no one would ever get me on a long trip anywhere unless all roads looked like the Merritt Parkway."

"It was rough. And, oh, how that damned '50 Chevy of yours could burn the gas. In any case, you remember how, after we passed Lake George, all gas stations seemed to have closed for the night? We kept on joking that we'd be spending the night in the car somewhere along Route 9, when suddenly we came up to that big estate on the right."

"Boy, what a big place that was. We drove in, remember?"

"Yes, and just as we were about to leave the car by the carriage house in the back, the house lights suddenly came on and that creepy-looking French Canadian came out asking what we wanted. Remember him?"

"How could I forget?" Babcock asked. "I was the one who told him what we wanted. Just a place to stay until morning. He didn't say anything, but retreated into the house. For a moment I thought he'd be calling the New York State Police to get us run off, when he came out with the woman who obviously must have owned the place. She invited us in telling us that there hadn't been anyone in the guest house for years. Furthermore, we'd sleep better after a bath."

"Talk about hospitality. Boy, and the dinner that night... Sure as hell beat the one we'd had the night before, when we were still in Cambridge. Well, would you believe that while we ate, the woman, who must have been at least sixty, kept making a play for me?"

Babcock looked at his friend without answering.

"Yeah. We sat across the table, she and I. Suddenly she was hitting my feet with hers. Gently, ever so gently. I could have moved mine, but seeing the look in her eye and that naughty smile of hers when she knew she had caught my attention, I decided to lead her on. She was at least ten years older than my mother, but, then, what the Hell? No harm could come of it, I thought, until later that night when we were already in bed - we had been given separate rooms, remember - and there was a knock on my door. I opened it, and would you believe it? There she was facing me, holding two glasses and an unopened bottle of champagne. Didn't even ask to come in."

Bill Tiverton paused to sip his beer.

"She sat down and handed me the bottle. 'Open it,' she said placing the glasses on the coffee table at the foot of the bed. I did, making sure that the bottle pop would not awaken anyone. I poured the champagne, wondering patiently about what would be coming next. 'To us,' she said lifting her glass. I followed her. We drank slowly. Drank and talked. After two or three glasses, I started feeling I had known her all my life. I reached for her hand and before I knew what was happening we

were making love. We made love several times that night."

Gary Babcock looked at his friend and said nothing.

"Yeah," Tiverton continued. "She told me in the morning that I looked like her boy friend who had died in France during World War I. She even showed me his picture, although by what I saw, I couldn't see the resemblance. It was only then that she asked me for my full name. By then I didn't want to get involved, or have her come after me looking for a picture for some future escapade with someone else. And so I told her I was you.

"Now you know what I meant when I said I owed you one."

Gary Babcock laughed uncontrollably. "You mean, you gave her my name instead of yours?"

"Yeah. As I said, I owe you one, and I've owed it for these many years. Somehow, Gary, it's strange. I've never felt guilty whenever I had an extra marital affair. In many instances I even felt I needed it just to break away from the routine of the same woman. Yet all these years I've felt guilty for having betrayed you."

"Oh, Hell. Think nothing of it. I'm not angry. In fact, I'm rather thankful."

"For my giving your name instead of mine to a woman I'd made love to?"

"No. She died about three months ago and left me everything she had."

"Those who are meant to hang will not drown."

(Russian proverb)

Manuel L. Ponte

St. Louis, Missouri.

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