

Reunions
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On Jim's sixty-fourth birthday, he received an email notice from Anna's Facebook. He didn't recognize her last name but knew at once she was his Anna. The two had been lovers. She was sixteen, and he was seventeen when they first started dating. On Jim's eighteenth birthday they made love: the first time for both of them. She remembered the moment with a smile or a blank stare off into the Kentucky of her past—invocations easily roused up on the fourteenth of every May and from time to time in the hearing of certain songs. Each time that past came into her present, she felt the closeness the two had shared—their usness Jim had called it—and mourned its absence from her life as if she were grieving Jim's death. The two were serious, even talked about marriage, but after graduating high school, he joined the Army to avoid the draft. The recruiter told Jim he could side step the infantry and Vietnam by volunteering. The recruiter was wrong.

Jim went to boot camp and advanced infantry training while Anna finished high school. She wrote him every day and when he was home on leave prior to his deployment, they were inseparable. They made love: physical, sweaty love that left their souls satiated and vulnerable. They talked afterwards, always. Jim called it their afterplay: whimsical musings about love and life, death and mysteries, and the wonderment that compelled Jim to write. He wrote her poems, told her his stories, read her Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and Faulkner for whom the past was not a diminishing road.

"Just think, Anna. . . you know, I mean. . . look, if something happens. . . well, you'll have this. It is. No matter what happens, this moment will always be."

"Stop that," she said. "Nothing bad is going to happen to you in Vietnam. I won't allow it."

"Wow. Shielded, am I?" he had said, laughing and grabbing at her, before pulling her underneath him again. One week following Jim's deployment, Anna left for college in nearby Murray, Kentucky. She wrote Jim daily for the full year of his tour, refusing to be one of those women who send a Dear John letter to a soldier at war. It was the right thing, she thought. She had promised Jim nothing bad would happen to him while he was away. To wait until he returned safely home before she told him about Doug was the honorable thing, she said. She couldn't explain how she and Doug had become involved or what changed her ambitions, but her mother knew. So did her friends. Jim knew too. Doug was a Hollins and little else mattered in Hopkinsville, Kentucky.

Jim clicked over to Anna's Facebook page and read her profile—the names of her son and daughter and her two grandsons about whom Jim knew nothing. He didn't even know they existed nor did he know Anna had remarried . . . 22 years, nearly twice as long as her first marriage lasted. He smiled when he read about Anna's support for the Wounded Warrior Project. "Ironic," he said, "so Anna."

A series of family photographs dominated the page—snapshots of her children and grandsons, family photos at various gatherings, pictures from a recent vacation in Spain, and an oversized portrait of her and her second husband. The picture bothered Jim, but he learned that by cocking his head to the right slightly, and closing his left eye, he could lose her husband in the

background. It allowed Jim to linger over Anna's image and wander through their history unimpaired by distractions. She was still beautiful, he thought, and even though she had aged, she had aged well.

"Beakish, this second husband," Jim said aloud once he let himself look at the man. No one heard Jim's words save a bitterness made all the more evident by bourbon, "pointed nose set against a square chin," he said, "a shaved head. The chicken hawk doctor—Dr. Doolittle, and too damn young for her."

Jim took another drink and remembered he said the same kind of things about her first husband, except Doug had hair and was a year older than Anna. He laughed, accepted the grace offered by a little more whiskey, and read her email message aloud in a mocking sing-song tone, looping it through in repetitive readings, each reading accompanied in two part harmony by Old Crow.

Happy Birthday!!! We're doing fine. I'm retired now. I think of you sometimes, especially when I hear a song by the Shirelles and on your birthday. It remains a special day for me. I just wanted to say hello and wish you well. Anna.

"What happened to Dougie, Sugar?" Jim said, still speaking to someone evident only to him and his whiskey.

He visited her Facebook page several times a day for more than a week, always prompted by a few more shots of Old Crow and always careful to shove her second husband back into a blurred background. It allowed him to focus on the Anna of his memories: his Anna. One night, Jim managed to make it past drunk, and sent her his email address but not another word. She replied the next morning.

My memories of you are precious to me and will remain so until the day I die.

Jim did not respond. One week later, he received another message from Anna.

As close as we are, we could meet for lunch at the Cracker Barrel on the KY-TN state line. Catch up. Meet me for lunch next Wednesday at 11:00??? Please say yes.

Three days later, Jim was drunk enough to write her back.

I'll meet you by the rocking chairs. It seems fitting.

Jim arrived at 11:00 sharp. He noticed her sitting in one of the rockers—white boot-cut pants and a slouchy crochet sweater, stylish as always, except for her hair. He thought it was too long and pulled back too tight, giving her a Benjamin Franklin forehead. She was petting the black Border Collie that lay at her feet. She tugged at the dog's leash lightly. "Stay," she said. The dog paid no attention to Jim.

Anna stood; the two smiled and shook hands as acquaintances do. Jim held on to her hand awhile, rubbing her fingers with a gentle touch. "Those eyes . . . beguiling green, they haunt me still," he said.

"Oh, you," she said, laughing and smiling as Penelope must have when—after two decades of separation—she first saw through Odysseus' disguise. "How long?" she said.

"Forty-four years. I got back from Nam in '67, but we last saw each other one night in July '68. Remember?"

Anna ignored his answer and subsequent question. It was her way. When something happened or was said—something that made her uncomfortable—she willed it away by refusing to acknowledge it.

Jim pointed to the dog. “You can’t take that thing in the restaurant.”

“She’s not a thing. She’s a Tippy,” Anna said. She bent down and lifted the dog’s white tipped tail. “See,” Anna said as she stood up with the leash in her hand, facing Jim. “I packed a picnic lunch. Nolin Lake State Park is only a few miles from here. Much nicer, much quieter. And Tippy can play while we visit. I’ll drive. It’s the white Lexus,” she said, pointing to the car.

Anna didn’t wait for Jim to answer but walked toward the car with Tippy at her heel—two proper females, as if straight out of *Southern Living*, with one bewildered male in tow. Once in the car, she chatted incessantly as she had done when they were teens. He enjoyed it even then as she jumped from one subject to another, pausing briefly for a breath. He delighted in the nonsensical rhythm of it, found it poetic as she buzzed about from word to word until she discovered something she wanted to talk about.

“And you published three books. Imagine that,” she said. She took quick glances at Jim while she drove.

“Want one? I have plenty.”

“I bought and read all three, thank you,” Anna said.

Jim felt her stare. She was looking for the permanency that lay beneath the superficial changes of time. His hair was white now but full. He had remained thin but with the slight paunch that comes with age. Still handsome she thought, bearing the same little boy charm she so frequently visited in her memories.

“Confess now, am I Laura?” Anna said.

“Let’s see, Laura ditched her fiancé while he was in Vietnam but had a one-night stand with him the month before she married the other dude. Do you mean that Laura?”

“We were never engaged, Jim. And why tell the story of Laura going to his apartment?” she said. She pulled into the State Park.

“It’s so naughty. See any picnic tables or benches? No one knew about that night until you put it into that story.”

“I think only eight people bought the book. I’m sure Dougie wasn’t one of them. That’s probably fewer people than you told.”

“I told Ginna.”

“And?”

“That’s not fair and not true,” Anna said, “I loved you. We were just kids, all caught up in hormones. What’s the saying? First love, tragic love? That explains it. Don’t you think? Besides, the future wasn’t going to work out for us. We had different expectations of life. You know that.”

“How’d the future work out for you and Dougie?” Jim said.

Anna didn’t respond, withdrawing into her world where ugliness and confrontation did not exist. She disregarded Jim long enough to spread the table cloth over the picnic table, accepting his disdain as the scab of a wound she inflicted. As she placed the covered dishes and paper plates around, she searched through the pleasantries of their past as if they had happened the day before. In her mind, the two were taking on the look of a couple who had been married for forty years, and she would stop occasionally to watch her storybook husband play with their dog, seeing vivid images of what it would have been like if she had married Jim instead of Doug. The thought drew her into a hazy reality that existed somewhere other than the obvious present: a recalled world she visited often when she needed the comfort of her memories—walking near the woods at the back of Jim’s family’s farm, hand in hand, laughing, lying in bed,

talking on the phone, falling asleep together only to be awakened by Jim's voice.

She looked up from the picnic table and shifted from the seductive past back to a moment present to both of them.

"Come here," she said, "and tell me why you are acting so pissy. Can't two old friends enjoy each other's company?"

"Are you that unhappy, Anna?" Jim said.

He reached down and took hold of her hand. She snapped it back.

"Who said I'm unhappy?"

"You did, Laura."

"Funny. I'm not Laura."

"You told me you were unhappy," Jim said, "with your emails. Why would a woman contact her ex-lover forty-four years after they split up if she were happy?"

"Maybe she's dying and wants to see him again or something. I don't know. It doesn't mean she's not happy."

"You have a terminal illness other than life?"

"No."

"I didn't think so," Jim said. "Know how I'd write Laura's story today? For starters, after eleven or twelve years of marriage, her first husband dumps her for a paralegal ten, no eight years younger. Laura gets the house, the kids, a hefty settlement, and a lover. I would imagine Laura would have six or seven lovers before she meets her Dr. Doolittle at the country club and rustles him up to the altar before she's forty. The age difference is less obvious before forty, right? How much age difference is there between Laura and Dr. Doolittle: five, six, seven years?"

"Stop it, Jim. That's mean," she said, "and stop calling me Laura and him Dr. Doolittle. He does quite a lot, thank you. I'm sure you'd like him if you knew him."

"Nah, I don't like him and wouldn't . . . ever."

"You're only trying to hurt me."

She leaned in, took her fist, and beat Jim on his collar bone until she laid her head on his shoulder and wrapped her arms around his back, rocking left to right.

"This is impossible, exhausting, a mistake."

"So now Laura wants to know if her old lover still wants her because her husband no longer does," Jim said as he returned Anna's embrace. "Laura thinks her old lover'll help her find her way back to Dr. Doolittle, but Doolittle won't change, Laura, or Anna, or whatever your name is. And you won't change either. How'm I doing so far?"

"And you. I suppose you changed."

"Nam changed me. Watching you walk out of my apartment that night and knowing it was because Dougie was a Hollins and because I wasn't—that changed me, but beyond that, not really. We don't change. We can fix up a few things; mend a few missed place bricks here and there, but not much else. How long's the dry spell been for Laura anyway?"

"Two years."

"And she's initiated nothing?"

"No."

"She will. Soon. She'll reach for her old lover some night while she's lying next to Dr. Doolittle, and Doolittle will service her. He'll be afraid not to."

"Why? Why's he afraid?"

"Laura's been fiddling around down there. He gets an erection—an automatic response.

Now what's he supposed to do? Tell her he does not want her?"

"Stop it."

"The mechanics'll need release, and release'll be enough for Dr. Doolittle or any other man as far as that goes, even her old lover. You know—a grudge fuck."

"Stop it. And don't talk like that to me."

Jim pulled Anna's arms away from him and stepped back to put some distance between them.

"But one night," he said, "Laura will reach for Dr. Doolittle out of desire. It'd be unfair, she'll say, unless she balances everything out. Equal time in the sack makes it less shameful, she'll say. That'll be her excuse. She wants the doc, and to arouse her desires she returns to her lover. She'll tell her lover she's always with him and makes the doc think she's always with him. She'll use them, call it love, and think she deserves it."

Anna turned her back to Jim.

"That's a horrible thing to say," she said.

She walked away from Jim, standing alone, angry, separated from the man and the dog and her make believe world. After a pause, she swung back around and stared at Jim.

"That just pisses me off," she said, "I kept up with you. I knew when you got married and when you had your children and grandchildren. Ginna told me. She just wouldn't tell me where you lived."

"Why?"

"She was always afraid I'd go see you, especially after my divorce from Doug. She thought I'd go to you and screw up your marriage. And then this Facebook thing came along. My grandson taught me how to use it, showed me how to look people up. That's how I found you. But Ginna told me almost everything else about your life before then. She didn't tell me about your books—afraid I'd find you that way, I guess. I even knew when your. . . ." Anna froze.

"Go on, say it."

Anna turned her head away from Jim.

Jim stepped away from her, staring off into the woods behind them, his hands in his pockets. "Go on, Anna, you can say it. Say it."

"When your wife died. Oh, Jim, I was so sad for you." Jim turned to face Anna, despair drawn over his face. "I wanted to go to you," Anna said, "but Ginna refused to tell me where you lived. I just wanted to let you cry while I held you, to comfort you, to give you what you used to give me—reassurance and love."

Jim walked toward Anna but stopped short and stared down at the ground.

"I came home and found her lying on the couch," Jim said. He raised his head and looked Anna in the eyes. Anna stepped forward, wrapped her arms around him, and pulled him to her.

"The pills and wine were on the coffee table," he said, "and that damn DVD playing as if caught in some endless loop."

He embraced Anna, accepting the comfort she offered him.

"She became obsessed with the movie," he said. "Watched it constantly. I did everything to break her obsession. I even threw the player against the wall. Broke it in pieces. A fit of despair, I suppose. It didn't matter. She bought another one. Became increasingly depressed. The docs and meds didn't help."

Jim laid his head on Anna's shoulder but turned his face away from her. "Must have come a time when she preferred whatever reality it offered her, and she went there," he said.

"That's why you took leave and retired?" Anna said.

Jim pulled his head back to look at Anna, still holding her.

“You knew about that?”

“Ginna told me.”

“They called it a medical leave.”

“Why?”

“I stayed drunk. I sat in the chair, stared at that damn movie and drank.”

“Depressed?”

“That’s what they called it. I kept watching it, trying to understand it, and how it pulled her away from me.”

“Did you?”

“I understood enough to leave it alone. I gave it to her. It was hers, not mine. My last gift to her, I guess you’d say. Maybe my one genuine act of love, to let loose.”

“What was it . . . the movie?”

“*Marjorie Morningstar*.”

“Natalie Wood falls for Gene Kelly?”

“Yeah,” Jim said as the two slipped away from each other’s embrace, drawn by their need for solitude, separated by their individual sorrow, which was the same.

“You want to eat now?” Anna said.

“Sure.”

“I brought iced tea,” Anna said. She played her wifely role while she busied herself attending to Jim, serving him his food. The two sat across from each other as if at separate tables. She searched her mind for something uncomplicated to talk about, trying to fill the void.

“Are you writing? You know, working on anything,” she said.

“A novel.”

“Well? Tell me.”

“I just did.”

“You mean?”

“Yeah. . . . In my imagination, she was a freshman in college and fell for one of her drama professors. She majored in theatre, you know. He was married, of course. First love, tragic love, as you say. She goes through life, reliving her memories with him from time to time. One day she gets word he died. She was already depressed. Dreadful news finds fertile ground. She gets caught up in the movie. The depression and illusion spiral out of control. And. . . .”

“Geeze, Jim. . . .”

“I don’t know if that’s her story, Anna. You take a character, put her in conflict, and make shit up, although it’s been cathartic. But I’m drinking too much, way too much. I can’t drink this much and write. But sometimes it’s the only way to take my mind where it doesn’t want to go. And sometimes I wallow there.”

“Can we talk about something else?”

“Sure, you pick.”

“Tell me—what about Laura’s lover? Would her lover still want her?”

“Cute. It’s tough to say. She’d meet him, but she’d bring her dog as a chaperone. Hard to impulsively check into a motel with a dog tagging along. The dog might tell, bark it out. It’s a shame too. There’s a Comfort Inn one exit down.”

“Jimmy Hightower,” Anna said, “that’s not the reason I’m here.”

“What then? Window shopping?”

“Stop that. Not going to happen. Understand?”

She leaned over to Jim and took his hand, pulled him up out of his seat, wrapped her arm around his waist, nudged him forward as the two walked toward a bench, confessed how frequently they thought of each other, and laughed. They sat with her facing him and stretched out over his lap, her head resting on his shoulder. Occasionally, they embraced. She cried when Jim told her what it felt like the night she told him about Doug and the pain of watching her leave his apartment that night—how defeated he felt. The two shared as much as they could—enough to haunt their appetites.

“I’m sorry. It’s time, my Jimmy boy,” Anna said.

She gathered up her picnic basket and her dog, and they drove back to the Cracker Barrel. She parked her car next to Jim’s pickup. They stood outside, meandered around, and talked in meaningless terms—every hinting at a future with stolen looks and suggestive jokes but never spoke the words.

“I hate to leave,” she said. “So good to see you again. Thanks for this, Jim.”

Anna held her arms open as if to hug an old friend goodbye. She pulled him to her; her hands slipped up to cup his face. She kissed him in desperation: a passion she had shared with no man—her tongue pressing, hunting for any hint of their youth, searching for every dash of ecstasy she could draw out of their past.

“Damn, I felt that,” Jim said. No one had kissed him with such distress. He didn’t think it was possible for her to want another man with a greater sense of urgency, with nothing but sheer emotional starvation driving her.

“I’m so ashamed,” she said, “but I couldn’t resist seeing you and that last kiss. Bye, my love. You know this can never happen, Jim. Please, don’t contact me. I could never do anything with this,” she said.

She took her words and placed them and her Collie in the passenger’s seat. Wiping tears from her cheeks, she buckled up and pulled her car up some small portion before lowering the window. She leaned out of it.

“One more,” she said.

The two kissed again but without passion: the longings of their youth replaced by the resignation to their separate worlds.

“Tell Laura it will be tonight,” Jim said.

He watched as she pulled back on I-65 South heading toward Nashville before he drove north to Bowling Green, Kentucky.

Ten days later, Jim received an email message from Anna.

Cracker Barrel, 11:00, Wednesday?

Again, Jim was careful to arrive at 11:00. She was already there and stood as soon as she saw him pulling into the parking space. She walked to meet him.

“I like the hair,” he said, “shorter makes you look younger, sexier.”

“Thanks.”

She leaned over, took his hand, kissed him on the cheek, and patted at her hair.

“You really like it?” she said.

“Yeah, sure, of course. . . . Where’s the dog?”

“At home.”

She gugged at Jim’s hand and turned to walk across the parking lot, pulling at him while

she glanced back at him with an expectant smile.

“Remember? . . . the Lexus.”

“One condition.”

“What?”

“I drive.”

She stopped, rattled the car keys in her hand, looked off to her left pensively, and hesitated for an uncomfortable time before giving Jim the keys. Jim grinned and passed the keys back to her. The car pulled out of the parking lot with Anna driving, chattering incessantly while Jim listened—both lost in a memory made right.