

Wild cat returns: “calm of mind”

I’ve got several great-aunts – my grandmother’s sisters. Mostly they are like Granny, getting old and stiff, and a bit set in their ways. They are soft, motherly creatures, mostly; people to be polite and well-behaved around. One, though, is feisty – there is no other word for it, though she wouldn’t care for the term – she isn’t soft; she isn’t motherly, though she is mostly polite and well-behaved and likes others to be. She’s tough, tolerant, mostly, and interesting, as well as being interested in everything herself. She’s been around. A lot. She’s young, despite her years.

I stayed with her when I went on open days at the Cambridge colleges I wanted to apply to, and again when I was called to interview. She was delighted when I got a place, and I hoped it would mean I would see her a bit more often – she really was interesting and special, even to a 19-year old.

It turned out she wasn’t around in Cambridge much, so it wasn’t till near the end of my second year that I saw more of her. One afternoon, I went to have tea with her, and while she was preparing it in the kitchen I picked up a list of public lectures that was lying on the table. It was marked up in pencil, but one in particular was ringed in black pen, with an accompanying exclamation mark. Intriguing, I thought in some surprise, looking at the not-that-exciting subject – Cold War: détente and cooperation. I suppose that was her era. The speaker meant nothing to me, except that it was a Russian name – my great-great grandmother was Russian, so it was mildly interesting if only for that reason. The subject meant a little more: the Cold War was over before I was born, but I had studied modern history.

She came in with a tray, talking, so it was a while before I got round to asking her about the lectures she planned to attend. I started by asking her whether there were any she thought I ought to go to.

“Well, they’re usually all quite good. Some speakers are better than others, of course, but it’s always interesting. And it’s always worth expanding your world knowledge. Just pick one and see.”

“What’s the special attraction of this one?” I pointed to the emphatically ringed one.

She looked down at the list, and didn’t speak for several moments. Then she cleared her throat and said, “I believe I know the speaker – from a long time ago.”

“Oh?”

She turned her head and, seeing my unconcealed curiosity, smiled rather wistfully, and suddenly I saw in her rapt expression what she had been fifty years ago. She’s still a very attractive woman, but she must have been a bit of a stunner when young. She was married once, but it didn’t last. Grandad once said he thought there had been some early disappointment, and it was because of that she couldn’t settle down to keep house for a man; she wanted to go on working and travelling, without encumbrances. He was clearly on the side of the neglected husband, whoever he was, but I’ve always been on her side. So, as she didn’t seem ready to reply, I said, “Who is he?”

She sighed. “Someone I met once, in very strange circumstances. Really strange. I’m not sure if I want to ...”

“Want to what ..?”

“I wrote it down – what happened. It must be around somewhere, I didn’t throw it away.” She stood up, looking a little flustered, which was unusual for her. What was this about?

“Can we look for it? Can I see it?”

“If we find it, and I let you read it, will you come to the lecture with me? I think I might need support.”

I was amazed. “What? You, Anna? Need support?” She never let anyone call her Aunt, let alone Great-Aunt. “Of course I’ll come, but I’d like to know why.”

She had written about it first in her diary, she said, and then rewritten and added to it much later. All that stuff was in boxes in the study, so it was a matter of working out which boxes contained papers from that long ago.

“You ought to give this to an archive,” I said, after poring over some large folders full of letters. “This is like historical evidence – the real McCoy.”

“I have thought of it,” she said, “but some of it is still live for me. Like now.”

I knew when she found it, by her silence and stillness.

We took it downstairs, and I watched the subtle changes of expression in her face as she read it through. Then she handed it to me. “Will you stay for supper?” she asked.

“You betcha!” I said, and took the old notebook from her and started to read.

She had written it in the first person, but like a story, not a diary entry. It was vivid, and very strange. A love story without a consummation, born out of a violent incident. Once again, I saw her as she had been half a century ago. The decades disappeared – it was very real and immediate.

I was intrigued by the thought of Anna’s past as a young woman in love with a young man, but it now occurred to me that that young man must now be an *old* man. This lecture was going to be weird and I wondered what it would be like to see the reactions of two old people who had been in love so briefly when young, and hadn’t seen each other since. Most likely it hadn’t meant much to him, and he wouldn’t even remember. Do men get sentimental over old love affairs? No wonder she thought she might need support.

We talked over dinner. She described the young man, as he had been then. I was quite envious; he sounded like quite an Adonis, even allowing for the exaggeration of memory. “What happened afterwards?” I asked.

“I went back home, back to work, tried to forget.”

“Not so easy, I guess.”

“No.”

“You got married, to someone else, though.”

“I did. Much later.”

“What went wrong?” Then I gulped, “Sorry – you don’t have to answer that.”

But she didn't seem to mind. "The quick answer is that comparisons are odious," she said. "I was disappointed. It wasn't just that I ended up wanting him to be fair-haired and blue-eyed, rather than tall, dark and handsome – which he was – but I wanted him to be dangerous and exciting. Instead I found I had married someone who wanted his slippers warming by the fire, supper on the table, and babies to keep me at home."

"You sound quite bitter."

"Of course. A failed marriage is a bitter thing. *He* remarried, of course, a sweet little blonde who gave him three daughters."

"You never met anyone else?"

"Ah, that's different. I never married again, put it that way."

It's odd and not quite decent, somehow, to think of the love life of an old lady. Perhaps that was a rather delicate question for another day. Instead, I asked, "How do you think you'll feel when you meet this man again?"

"Who says I'm going to? It's just a lecture."

"I do. Because you are."

She buried her face in her hands, and gave an uncharacteristic squeak of dismay.

A public lecture in Cambridge is usually very well attended, so we aimed to arrive early in order to get good seats. Anna nearly didn't go in, and then she wanted to sit at the front, but to the side so as not to be in the speaker's immediate view.

Two men walked onto the stage and sat down at the table. The man chairing the lecture rose and bored everyone with health and safety announcements, and a list of forthcoming lectures and other housekeeping stuff before at last introducing his guest. As he maundered on, I watched the lecturer, who sat impassively waiting during this tedious spiel; he was apparently relaxed, but there was a kind of tension in him, like he was wound-up to spring. Still dangerous, then. He scanned the audience carefully and unobtrusively, his eyes finally turning our way and passing over us without recognition – I heard Anna let go her breath, in relief, or was it disappointment? He was a handsome old man and, though no longer an Adonis, didn't look the age he must be; not very tall; slightly built and neat; his hair no longer fair, but greying. When Anna moved suddenly, he glanced in our direction again for a moment, his eyes creasing a little, as if trying to focus better.

Then he was on his feet, accepting the applause of an expectant audience, and gracefully thanking the Chair for his generous introduction. Practised at this, clearly. His voice was quite deep with, to my surprise, a slight American accent overlying what sounded more like an English accent – certainly not Russian-sounding. He commented on how Cambridge had changed since his day, apparently for the better – and I realised where the underlying English accent had come from.

His lecture evoked a very different era, one very difficult to imagine now. He didn't say so, but it was evident from little things, that he had been part of a kind of James Bond set-up. Licensed to kill, and all that. An organisation dedicated to saving us all from the evil machinations of people we would now call terrorists, I guess. To me, it also sounded like part of the unforgiving polarisation of Left and Right, and the Communist versus American hegemonies of the 1950s and 60s. Not quite PC now.

He spoke for exactly 45 minutes, and agreed to take questions. There were several about his nationality and his move to the West at a difficult time in East-West relations, which he answered fairly readily. Others asked about what his work had actually involved, and how it had been managed at international level, which he seemed less willing to answer. I put my hand up, and felt Anna glance at me apprehensively. "You must have been injured in your work," I said. "How did that affect your life? Do you regret any of it?"

He looked at me almost fiercely and I felt myself blushing. "I was, it didn't, and no I don't," he said abruptly, and then added more kindly, "It was a long time ago. I remember some individual incidents, but not many, and I am still alive and, happily, quite well."

Before he turned away, I found myself asking, "Do you remember the bluebells?" and heard Anna give a tiny moan. His eyes widened, and he stared at me questioningly. Then he looked at my neighbours, one of whom was a male student, the other being Anna. His gaze softened, and he smiled. "See me afterwards and I'll try and remember," he said, and passed on to other questions.

"How could you?" whispered Anna angrily. "He won't want to see me again."

"I think he does. He remembers. Don't worry," I whispered back and squeezed her hand.

People stayed chatting among themselves or to the lecturer for a while, afterwards. We waited in our seats as the audience started to drift out. At last he was left alone talking to the Chairman. Observing the empty hall, he said goodbye to his host and came down the steps from the stage and approached us.

"I'd like to answer your question, but I think I need a drink," he said. "Would you both care to join me?"

Anna was silent as they looked at each other, so it was left to me. "We'd love to, but *I*, at least, must go back to college, I've got an essay to write." I said. Tactful, me.

He smiled politely and thanked me for coming, then he looked at my companion, "You'll come, Anna, won't you. Please?" He had remembered her name. How amazing. Bluebells. Fifty years ago.

Speechlessly, she nodded, and we left the hall together. When we parted in King's Parade, I watched them walking up Bene't Street towards the Eagle. It was only a slightly stiff gait that betrayed their age, otherwise they were both upright and slim. Two old people, once lovers – but they could have been a slightly embarrassed young couple on a first date. Then I saw them stop and look at each other; I saw their hands meet. I stepped back in case they saw me standing there, with the lump in my throat.

I hoped she would tell me about their meeting, but, why should she? It was none of my business; I'd only made sure they met.

I was too busy with lectures, and preparing and delivering an essay to my tutor, for the rest of the week, so I only emailed Anna to say, 'thanks for taking me to the lecture, hope all went well', but made no other attempt to get in touch with her till about a week later. She invited me to supper.

She was her normal self when I arrived. Chatting about the news, foreign affairs – some of which had escaped me, of course – and full of thoughtful comments about them. In the end, I had to interrupt. “Anna, I’m dying to know. What happened after I left you last week? Do tell!”

“Cheeky girl,” she said, “what happened, or didn’t happen, is none of your business.”

“I know, but tell me anyway – I did get you to meet, after all. Please?”

She sighed. And smiled. And didn’t speak.

“Anna!”

“Oh, all right,” she said. “We went for a drink in the Eagle. We talked. He walked me home. We spent the next day together, and the next, and then he went back to London. He’s already back in New York. That’s all.”

“No, it isn’t, you wicked old lady. If you aren’t going to tell me now, will you at least write it down?”

“Old lady, nuts,” she said. “Wicked? Hah! Well, there’s life in the old dame yet.”

“That sounds like a quote.”

“It is. Look it up.”

Anna’s account

With my great-niece out of the way, we were able to talk. She’s a dear, but this wasn’t something for her to be part of, so it was nice of her to leave us to it. We had a beer, a pint for him, just a half for me – I can’t drink a whole pint now, not in one go – and sat in one of the quieter corners of the Eagle. Not speaking, just looking at each other, both aware of how odd this was. To meet after so long, with the same intense memory of such a fleeting love affair. What would happen to that memory now?

We had both faded and wrinkled in fifty years. His blue eyes were less intense, his lips less full, his hair no longer gleaming. There were lines on his forehead and down his cheeks, but his smile was the same, and the fierceness was still there, burning underneath. What did he see? An old lady, whose hair retained some of its colour among the grey, whose face was also lined. Was my smile the same?

Then we broke our silence and talked. I wear no ring, but he took it for granted that I must have been married and asked if I had children, and seemed slightly disturbed when I told him of my unsuccessful attempt at marriage. He had never married, successfully or otherwise. The impossibility of establishing such a relationship had outlasted his career in that work. Like me, he had had other lovers – and was glad to know that I had – but somehow our all but non-existent love affair had remained perfect in his memory: truly Platonic, not just platonic (which it wasn’t, strictly speaking).

Like all old people, we talked about our health. The injury he had sustained that time had mended, he said in response to my question, but the scar was still there. One of many, it seems. So platonic was our affair, that I never saw much of his body. Some of the injuries he had sustained over the years had left more than scars. The normal evils of growing old were super-enhanced, so, arthritis, cartilage damage, torn muscles and tendons, and more insidious internal damage made his life sometimes very uncomfortable. You wouldn’t have known any of it from his appearance. I didn’t ask about the psychological damage he must have suffered.

I asked after his partner, the charming American who had made such an impression on my landlady. His smile disappeared suddenly. "We lost touch after we both left the organisation we worked for," he said. "It was years before we met again, and then it was because we were persuaded to go back. Stupid, really, we were too old, even then." His unlikely foray into the world of high fashion had lasted about fifteen years, before he gave it up and returned to his old occupation. He stared into his glass. "We kept up the old friendship after that. A long time – more than thirty years. He died last fall," he said sadly.

"I'm sorry," I said after a short silence. "He was nice, good fun." Then I thought back, "He was kind, too. At least ... He meant well – he thought he was protecting us from each other."

He looked at me with a kind of anguish, and I went on, gabbling a little, "We called him Mr Suave, do you remember?"

He laughed then, "I remember. He was suave, maddeningly so, but much more than that."

"Your brother." I said.

"My brother."

He was staying in his old college, King's, just around the corner, but he insisted on seeing me home. We walked all the way to Ferry Path, through the streets and across Jesus Green. It was a good thing we were arm in arm, because we were laughingly exhausted when we got there. It used not to feel so far. I made him some tea and found some biscuits (cookies, he called them), and we sat together on the sofa getting our breath back.

He put his arm round me and I turned to meet his eyes. My great-niece would no doubt be revolted, but we kissed each other. The passion was gone, as was desire for consummation – well, that's not quite true, but neither of us had been celibate: we *had* been there with other lovers – instead there was affection and fond memory. It was a loving, tender, chaste, kiss.

We called a taxi to take him back to college, and he promised to spend the next day with me. We kissed each other goodbye, held close in each other's arms. What do the young know about love?

The old are not normally deemed to have lascivious thoughts, I daresay, and of course the achievement of anything sexual, while far from impossible for even very old couples, is not as simple, and rarely as spontaneous as it is when you're young. So I'm fairly sure we both had the thoughts; just that they were regretful ones. I lay awake for some time wondering about what might have been, but also remembering what Mr Suave had said about it. He had been right, of course. It would have been disastrous. But not for *lack* of love...

We met next morning by the footbridge on Jesus Green. That sweet smile made my heart beat just a little faster, but we didn't touch each other; instead we sat together on the seat looking at the river, and talking.

From what I have observed among my friends, old couples fall into two categories. Some have outgrown each other or only stay together out of habit and the need for companionship. But there are those who remain interested in each other, as well as outside each other, and don't look inward and grouse about what they can't do, or how bad the modern world is.

It hadn't been possible for us to form a lasting relationship as a couple, so everything was new and very interesting. Sharing our half-century of experiences didn't spoil the memory of a perfect moment in our youth, as I had half feared it might. He wasn't mine, I wasn't his –

and we never would be. This was simply a sequel that would enhance the end of our lives with the joy of *knowing*. Until this moment, we hadn't realised how much we needed to know what had happened next, how much it had meant.

So, it doesn't really matter what we did that day, or the next. We wandered about slowly, relieved that we were enjoying each other's company – how awful if we hadn't! We had lunch together; I went as his guest to dinner in college that night. I thought of asking him to stay with me (sleep with me?) for his last night, but it wouldn't have been sensible, and I think he would have refused. Some things are better left unknown. The next day we took a train to Ely and wandered along the quiet banks of the river, arm in arm, comfortable. Happy. Then we went back and he caught his train to London for his return flight to New York. We kissed each other goodbye – on the cheek, but holding each other close.

We'll talk by phone, send emails – just occasionally. And one day, quite soon perhaps, we'll both die. I'm so glad we met before that.

She emailed her account rather than inviting me round to tea to read it – dear Anna, embarrassed at last.

I read it that night and put it down quite moved. At first, I thought: what a waste; fifty years with no contact, no means of making contact; no consummation, ever. Then I wondered if the memory of a perfect, brief love affair was actually better than a physical, maybe messy one that might have ended in tears. We've all seen or done that. Would a fifty-year marriage have worked between them? To be honest, neither of them was marriage material. Anna had thought him a wild cat once. He might look fairly tame now, but I doubted if it was more than an appearance of being so, because there was still an aura of danger about him – he must have been terrifying once – and she was independent, sassy, and quite fierce herself. What fights there might have been! It might have worked – who can tell?

I emailed back, "You're not dead yet. Why don't you go to New York?"

Her reply came by return, "Under discussion."

The view from the other side

A visiting professorship would mean catching up on a good deal of research. I spent long hours in libraries, picking up on what it had been like at the time of the Cold War. They wanted that. I wasn't going to talk about my role, though. Not safe, even now. Perhaps especially not now. But it would be good to spend time in London again; it's almost as vibrant as New York; cosmopolitan; and the food has improved out of all recognition – God, I remember how bad it was when I was first there nearly sixty years ago. Not as bad as Russia after the War, but pretty terrible.

There won't be many old friends, of course. They are dying off. It's a lonely business, getting old.

It seemed to go well. Maybe because of current events, the Cold War is on people's minds again. There were a lot of academics from elsewhere sitting in on my lectures, which is probably why I was invited to speak in Cambridge, my old alma mater. My physics doctorate

has of course become completely redundant. Modern physics has gone way beyond anything I've kept up with, so I stick to what I know, which is international affairs.

Cambridge has changed, in some ways. Some good things, some less good. Was it less self-absorbed, I wondered. Difficult to tell in a brief visit. I was invited to stay a couple of nights in a guestroom in King's, which was generous of them as it included breakfast and dinner – and food in college had also markedly improved, in the last sixty odd years.

On the night of the lecture, I walked to the hall early and stood in a corner, watching the audience drift in. Quite a mixture of ages, and types. I noticed a girl – young woman I should say – with an arm round an older woman's shoulders, being protective and apparently persuading her to go in. I couldn't imagine what had made her reluctant, if she had got this far. She did go in, and I saw them take seats in the front row, so presumably she didn't want to make a quick getaway.

Cambridge has its share of people who like the sound of their own voice. The man chairing the meeting droned on long enough for me to take further stock of the audience. They seemed OK, nothing untoward. I let my eyes rove casually over the two women in the front row to see if they were settled. They were both watching me rather fixedly, which seemed strange, but this was Cambridge – people *are* strange.

I had timed my talk to the minute, and allowed a quarter of an hour or so for questions. And questions there were. Some were easy enough to answer. I tried to avoid direct answers to others which got a little too close to the bone. And then the younger of the two women put her hand up. I snapped out an answer to her first question, which seemed to be foolishly sentimental, then took pity on her confusion and added a friendlier response. But then, as I was about to turn away, she said, "Do you remember the bluebells?"

Did I remember the bluebells? One of the few sharp memories of that period of my life – and to be challenged about it here... I looked again at her and then at her companion who was sitting bolt upright and whispering furiously to her. She would be about the right age; good grief.

Somehow, I managed to turn it off with something mildly humorous, and hoped they would still be there at the end.

The hall was empty, and still the chairman was blathering on, so I excused myself and stepped down to where they were still sitting. It was her. Same eyes, same smile. There have been many women over the years; some of them married later, some are now dead; but there were one or two who were special. I always had a particular feeling for this one – God knows why; we were in love once, but never lovers. Maybe I felt that way because we never had the chance. Maybe it was because she knew and liked my partner. Maybe it was just the bluebells. But to find her again, living, breathing, and fierce; oh my.

The girl – her great-niece, apparently – very tactfully declined my invitation to join us for a drink. I knew she was watching us as we walked up towards the Eagle. I saw her step back and blow her nose. The sentimentality of youth, I guess, but quite touching.

We tried to catch up all the years we'd missed. Anna said she'd had a failed marriage, which bothered me a little. Was I being arrogant in assuming it had something to do with me? Probably. But it hadn't cramped her style later, thankfully. She was a beautiful woman, even now. Some people just have it, and she was one of those. She remembered my now-dead partner with fondness. I loved her for that.

We walked back to her house together – I didn't want her to go home alone, and we had unfinished business which couldn't be done in a public place. I wanted to kiss her again. If

we'd been twenty years younger, maybe I'd have ... but the past is over. It can't be recaptured. The kiss was sweet, but it was one of loving friendship, not passion. To hold her in my arms, to feel hers round me, was enough to assuage the sadness of never being more to each other; it was enough to make the world come right at last. It. Such a brief moment in our lives – how odd that so little had meant so much. Nunc dimittis.

The two days we spent together went by very quickly. We found we still had interests in common; we liked each other, and there was affection. There was even a spark when we held each other close. So, it wasn't easy to leave, but we won't lose touch. I asked her to come to New York. I think she will.

Note: "Calm of mind all passion spent" – Milton's *Samson Agonistes*