

Natalie

a novella by:

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It was barely three months ago at this very spot near the end of the bar that I found Natalie for the second time, and the door to my heavily armored strongbox of a life came unhinged. That night seems as familiar to me as *last* night, even though the time passage that ferried me here has already disappeared like the Harvard Bridge in a Boston fog. And curiously, as in a worrisome dream sequence, there doesn't seem to be any possible way back. Even when dawn pours in again with its familiar golden streams, vivid memories will continue to haunt me, memories of the most amazing night of my life, the night that both convinced me I was alive and severed me from reality.

I am not pining away though, wishing that I could somehow turn back the clock or the circumstances of my recent past. But neither would I willingly surrender a single memory of those dreamy, measureless days spent with Natalie, days which saw us soar high above this woe-begotten world on rekindled love, days which constitute the full measure any man can expect in return for his entire existence. Still, if it were possible to go back and simply tweak a few particulars this way or that, perhaps I could have altered the subsequent chain of events somewhat, thereby preventing all hell from breaking loose. And believe me: I have racked my brain senseless trying to identify the exact point when such pressure might have been applied—just a tiny twist, perhaps—to assure a more favorable outcome.

Misfortune and misgivings aside, however, I have reached the conclusion that tempting fate, or if you prefer, “challenging the gods,” is but a fool’s distraction, roughly like spitting into a headwind. Especially since it was fate herself that so cleverly brought Natalie and me together again on that misty night in May, or perhaps God had done it; I cannot be exactly sure. And besides, in view of the facts, who am I to be so bold? Considering what I have come to know of myself, of my weaknesses and failures, my tenuous hold on reality, my fragile ego, and my longing to believe in someone mightier than I who controls the seemingly random events of this world and can save us all from self-destruction, I of all people should know better than to overreach.

Nevertheless, there remains one reasonable question, and that is “why?” Why? Everything seemed so perfect.

Nineteen years ago...

When I first laid eyes on her, Natalie had perched herself on the carpeted window seat halfway up the stairs of the old Theta Chi house and was reading a paperback book by the amber, early morning light. Here was a curious appurtenance, I thought, but a nonetheless welcome embellishment to the normally stark fraternity house ambiance. Truth be told: upon entering the gathering room through the tiny vestibule, I was momentarily transfixed by her presence—her chestnut hair ablaze, her graceful silhouette eclipsing the rising sun. In fact, I had to forcibly arrest myself from staring up at her. To break the spell, I began pacing the floor. I had business there that morning; Scott Emerson would be coming down momentarily and we would be walking together to class. He was behind schedule as usual. Then, realizing that the girl must have noticed me as well, I became immediately self-conscious. I straightened my shoulders and reached a hand up to smooth my hair; I was aware of my gait for the first time in recent memory. Though, later, she would claim never to have seen me at all, she had me at a distinct disadvantage from the very beginning.

“Who is that girl,” I asked, once safely out the door.

“Natalie Mayfield,” Scott said. “She is *something*, isn’t she?”

“No kidding. *Who’s* something is she?”

“No one’s really. She’s just a good friend of one of the brothers, Jake Sutherland. They went to high school together. Been friends ever since.”

At that moment, I made a mental commitment to ask out the young goddess, Natalie, though I had no idea how to go about getting properly introduced, let alone how to ultimately persuade her that I was worth an evening of her life. Not that I was a complete nerd or anything like the stereotype my engineering major might otherwise suggest. Quite the contrary, actually. At just over six feet, 155 pounds with a kind face and brown eyes, women typically found me attractive. But, for some inexplicable reason, I possessed little self-confidence with the opposite sex at the age of nineteen, and for another, this particular young woman had rattled me before I could even make her acquaintance. The best I could do was hope that circumstances might somehow work out in my favor, and, as you must have guessed by now, they did.

* * *

Within a few short weeks from that auspicious morning of my sophomore year, Natalie Mayfield had turned my life totally upside-down. Unfortunately, I had no way of knowing that this relationship was destined to end before I could get to graduation, and that she would leave me and Boston on her quest for “the meaning of life” without ever giving me back my heart. Not being clairvoyant, I simply let Cupid take his shot at me and just as swiftly as the arrow penetrated, I became hopelessly captivated by her. Now, looking at the bright side of those twenty-eight months, she became the source of the most enduring memories of my college years, to the degree that I cannot now remember a single significant thing about school in which Natalie did not figure prominently. Amazingly still, after all this time, those moments we spent together continue to shine like jewels out of the dark recesses of my mind. Like the time we drove up to Mt. Washington on a whim and hiked to the summit, freezing most of the way, neither of us willing to admit we would rather turn back. And the countless Friday afternoons we picnicked by the river, people-watching and studying nature like painters would, enjoying the ever-changing colors on display—the steel-grays of the Charles, the sky and its moody blues, the tapestry of earth tones brightening in spring and softening with the exodus of summer. To this day, I cannot think of B.U., or of our fair city on the Charles, or most especially about the kaleidoscope of nature’s beauty without being reminded of Natalie and our storybook love.

This past spring...

I had driven into Boston on a lark. My mind was in a muddle and I had nothing better to do. Worried about the buy-out and the uncomfortable corner my company had painted me into, I thought a change of scenery might help set me straight. I had in mind to stop at the Blond Dingo for a beer. It was our regular hangout when we were at B.U., especially on weekends and primarily for dancing, which, near as I could tell, was Natalie’s favorite pastime back then. Sure, you could get a good draught of Guinness there, like a hundred other places in town, but in addition to being right off-campus, the “Dingo” had the liveliest dance floor around.

I had no secret hopes of finding a dance partner that night; I had long since outgrown my limited hardwood skills. But, neither did I suspect the place could have changed so drastically over the years.

The overly long Friday at the office finally behind me, I completed the crawl through intermittent patches of fog along the in-bound 20 from Waltham. I parked my Acura about twenty paces past the tavern. Evening was descending out of the gray, a premature dusk for a mid-spring night in Boston. It also seemed unusually quiet for a Friday, but then I realized that exams were probably over and students would have already flown off in every direction in anticipation of summer pursuits.

A faint stench accosted me on the sidewalk, vaguely reminiscent of all bars everywhere—an unholy blend of tobacco, ammonia and beer. I nonetheless entered the Dingo, pulling back the heavy wooden door by its sticky, oil-stained handle—another bad omen, or so it seemed. Once inside, I recognized the same battered tables and chairs that had been in use two decades ago, and the paint on the walls, long since discolored to a dingy yellow-brown, distinctly familiar as well. The bar itself, a remarkable beauty in mahogany from the turn of the last century, had not been altered, but it looked tired somehow, not at all gleaming and tidy as I remembered it. Then again, things may have appeared as they did because I was viewing them through a thick haze of cigarette smoke. Yet, considering these disconcerting visual stimuli, and others, equally powerful though unseen, and with nothing other than a snapshot appraisal, the decision to stay or leave had to be made. Fortunately, after another swift surveillance of the room revealed the absence of biker types and not a single odd-ball creature with multi-colored, spiked hair, facial piercings or tattoos, I did not feel persuaded to find dinner elsewhere. I say fortunately because, had I left without a drink, fate itself would truly have been compromised.

I picked my way across the room, past tables sparsely populated with what could only be hard-drinking locals. I found an empty two-seater around the end of the bar near the old dance floor, which had apparently fallen from grace. Several tables were set up on the dimpled hardwood, another three perched prominently on the old stage. These were all occupied, a sure indication that no band would be tuning up there any time soon.

The menu was not long, but neither did it bear any resemblance to the one I recalled. Peppered with items one could not have conceived when I was here last, there were selections like portabella mushroom sandwiches with French-fried yams, and teriyaki chicken with oriental vegetables. Perhaps the owners had hired a professional chef with hopes that food could draw in a crowd while also generating more demand for beer and booze. Then, in attempting to legitimize the Dingo as a restaurant, they must also have felt it necessary to fill every square foot of floor space with tables. This might explain the lack of entertainment on a Friday, in addition to the fact that good bands were difficult to find these days and even harder to keep. But, regardless of how well-prepared the food might prove to be, I could not help feeling a deep remorse over my realization that the source of a thousand college memories for me had been reduced to this—another unremarkable tavern in a town already crowded with the same. What were they reaching for here? Perhaps just a living.

While I was still adjusting to the surroundings a waitress approached. Half-smiling down at me, she asked, “What can I get you to drink?”

My eyes followed her lips, gently upturned and somehow familiar. Then I caught her eyes. I was incredulous. Could this actually be *her*, or was my mind deceiving me once again, hoping to find her as it has for over a decade, measuring stature, comparing hair color, figures, facial features and body language to none other than Natalie, as if by some freakish chance our paths might cross—but reduced to disappointment again and again. It was always someone else.

“A pint of Guinness, if you’ve got it on tap.”

“Sure thing.”

I watched her more carefully as she turned on one heel and walked around to the waitress station at the bar. There was some additional width to the hips but the saunter seemed recognizable, a kind of shuffle that forced her to sway from the waist up, ever-so-slightly, side-to-side. My heartbeat quickened. I had to know, even at the risk of embarrassing myself. Yet surprisingly, even at age thirty-seven, breaking the ice with a woman still did not come easily for me. I comforted myself with the thought that little harm could come from my asking. At worst, she might chastise me for hitting on her, something a dozen other guys must do each night in a place like this.

I watched her tip her head to check her order pad before slipping it back into her apron. She picked up a tray, placed a couple of mixed drinks on it and made for another table across the room. With my pulse still accelerating, I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. This was ridiculous; I was experiencing the emotions of a young spaniel. Then she appeared again next to me. “Hi, again. By the way, my name is Natalie. You ready to order?”

* * *

She recommended the Dingoburger and fries, a carryover from the old menu. Not surprising, coming from her. I had another two beers while waiting for her shift to end at nine-thirty. Barely a second later, she bounced out of the kitchen carrying her jacket. Shooting me a familiar look she said: “Let’s get out of here. I’ve had enough of this place for one night.”

Once outside, we walked instinctively but silently across the street toward campus and the river. My mind was whirring. There was so much I wanted to ask her, and tell her—nearly everything I had done and thought during the years we had been apart, things she surely must want to know—but I could not find the words to begin. Fear penetrated me with the chilly evening mist, that after finding her again at long last, we would no longer have a single thing in common. Then again, what else could be reasonably expected after a decade-and-a-half?

We stepped onto the curb by the bookstore mall and I reached over to take her hand. Her grip was warm, soft, comforting.

“I thought you were married,” she said, pulling up my hand. “I don’t see a ring.”

“Divorced. Nearly ten years now.”

“That’s too bad.”

“Not really. It was for the best. We grew apart.”

“You mean like us.”

“That’s not the way I remember it.” I said.

“It was my fault, I know.”

“I don’t blame you.”

“I do...blame me, that is.”

“Well it’s ancient history. What I’m really curious about is how you ended up back here in Boston, working at the Dingo?”

“That’s a long story.”

“I’ve got plenty of time.”

A spate of rain had fallen earlier from a tropical low that drifted up the coast on warm southwest winds. When the storm cleared in the late afternoon, cool air settled in and fog began to ascend from the ground and the river alike. Down by the riverbank, the grass was still wet so we found a bench to sit on. We remained anchored there for hours, talking while watching the fog ebb and flow on light breezes. It was not at all as I feared. We easily discovered ourselves again, almost as though we had never been apart. And there, amid the hundreds of other thoughts bursting forth from the recesses of my mind, I remember thinking how this night would have made a perfect Halloween—just like All Hallow’s Eve is supposed to look. Only, it was spring, and Natalie and I were anything but “*dead*.” Nor were we pretending to be anyone but ourselves. Evidently, that part of our relationship had not changed; there was no masquerade.

A foghorn sounded out in the Back Bay. With one arm around her shoulder, I drew Natalie closer. “Not a day has gone by that I haven’t thought of you, Nat. Now, here we are, together again; it hardly seems real.”

She rested her head against me. “I know what you mean.”

* * *

Earlier that morning, I was convinced I had to do something, maybe even resign from the firm. Regrettably, I had already allowed myself to get too deeply embroiled in a scheme that, in my opinion, could only end badly. With characteristic naivete, for two weeks I had been carried along on the current from upstream like the loyal company man I was—innocent only at first, though that hardly seemed relevant in retrospect. Now the water was getting rough and I wanted out, especially when I recognized how duplicitous I had been. Had I possessed any real backbone, I would have resigned three weeks ago, just after the merger was announced.

At that time, Tim Brown, the company lawyer, told me to keep my mouth shut if the Italians should ask about the Leap Frog project “pilot” in their due diligence process. Naturally, he failed to let on that all official company documentation and e-mail references to the test had already been destroyed amid attempts to make the fiasco disappear from view. No one should be the wiser, except for the anointed few, and we had all been previously

sworn to secrecy regarding the project to keep any news of the ill-fated test from leaking out to competitors. What Tim must also have known at the time, but wisely refrained from acknowledging, was that there were still a lot of computer and personal files containing notes on project Leap Frog, everything from the germ of the idea to the failed pilot last month. Asking us to surrender those notes at the same time would have made the cover-up a little too obvious, and they did not want to be obvious. So, as it was, in agreeing to maintain the already stipulated policy of sworn secrecy on the project, I could only suspect that the merger was at risk should the facts about the pilot become known outside of R&D and executive management circles. It appeared as though Dan Davies, President and CEO, was deliberately trying to hide the truth about Leap Frog, despite the due diligence process that accompanied the merger, but it was pointless to ask Brown what he thought. He wasn't the type to spill his guts on any topic, least of all one involving collusion and corruption.

Now, three weeks later and no longer personally blameless, I could see the craftiness of the plan quite clearly in retrospect. And, even if I had not exactly figured out what was happening on the day of Tim Brown's gag order, I knew it for certain twenty-four hours later when my boss Terrance McNabb, the company's senior executive VP, asked me to pack up all my notes on Leap Frog and send them to his office. "...every last thing you've got, Connie. Are you clear?"

I was clear all right. Some kind of cover-up was in the making and I was being asked to play along, like a rube, or worse: the designated and complicit fall guy. Yet, I went along anyway, like a pig in a kayak.

* * *

I awoke to the familiar ringing of my cellular phone. Clumsily, I climbed out of the strange bed where Natalie lay undisturbed, pulled on my boxers and took three steps with clammy feet on the cold, sticky hardwood to retrieve the phone from my jacket pocket.

"Hello," I said, answering rather quietly, trying not to wake Nat.

"Conrad, it's Sandra. Do you know what time it is?"

"To be honest, no. You woke me up."

"Well, it's eight-forty and you were supposed to be here ten minutes ago to pick up the girls. You knew I had plans and a hair appointment."

“Sorry, Sandy, I’ve had a rough week and a late night. I’ll get there as soon as I can. Half-hour tops, unless there’s traffic.”

“All right, but hurry,” she said. “I don’t want to be late to my appointment. You know, there was a time when you were a lot more considerate.”

“Yeah. And you used to be a tad more pleasant in the morning.”

“You leave me no choice.”

“Sandy, you’ve always had a choice but let’s not get into all that now. I’m hanging up or you’ll be late for sure. Bye.”

“Good-bye.”

“Who called?” Natalie said, groggily, lifting herself to a seated position and holding the sheet up to cover her nakedness.

“Just Sandy, my former princess bride. I’ve got to pick up the girls this morning and, thanks to our late night escapades, I totally forgot.”

“My fault, huh?”

“Only if you have a guilty conscience. Come on, let’s get dressed and you can go with me out to Brookline to pick them up. You’re going to want to meet them eventually, no better time than the present. Afterward, we can go over to my condo and fix some brunch.”

“I don’t know, Con. It’s so soon. I don’t think I’m ready to meet your ex-wife just yet. And, besides, I need some time to look my best.”

“No problem, you can wait in the car. Even I won’t get invited in. Besides, you’re gorgeous. I’m sure you’ll look better than the girls will. Neither of them are Saturday morning people.”

“Okay, but at least let me shower first.”

“Only if I can accompany you.”

“No monkey business, Connie.”

“Nope, no time for monkey business. We’ll get to that later.”

She carefully stepped out of the bed exposing her still-athletic body to me in the daylight; there was more maturity in her shape but no less allure. Her legs rose up from shapely feet and ankles to hips and a backside that had rounded beautifully over time. There was only the slightest protrusion above her waist, an attractive womanly abdomen. Full breasts were set

high upon her chest, and then there was her face—the face of an Irish goddess, with a graceful chin, a slender nose, bright blue eyes and natural color in her cheeks. Tussled from the pillow, her long brown hair, abounding with red highlights, caught sunlight from the bedroom window, reminding me of the very first time I saw her.

“You better get your shower first,” I said. “Otherwise we’ll never get out of here before noon.”

“What’s the matter Connie, no willpower?”

“None whatsoever.”

“All right then; I’ll be quick.”

She turned and I watched her make her way into the hall toward the only bathroom in her apartment. I thought about something she had mentioned last night in the heat of passion, that she had not made love since we were together last, over fifteen years ago. No other man had as much as seen her naked, she said. But, last night she had become suddenly aware of how she had missed me, otherwise she could not do such a thing—have sex outside of marriage, that is. And in doing so, she was overriding both her better judgment and her inner moral authority. She claimed she needed me more than peace of mind. But, having forced herself to put thoughts of our relationship out of her mind years ago, she nonetheless acknowledged that her love for me remained strong.

I could only smile and shake my head.

* * *

The Back Bay air was electric with the sounds of songbirds. We stepped outside and immediately remarked about hearing a cardinal’s call, then we each put our index fingers to the tips of our noses, a gesture we had always used for simultaneous utterances in the past. She won and *I* had to kiss *her*, huge punishment that was. Refreshingly, it seemed that the years since we were together last had simply dissolved away. We were immediately back in stride with one another.

We got into my car and headed toward Brookline with the windows open. What a morning to enjoy together—fragrances, sights, sounds—an absolute sensory feast. Definitely a morning I would want in any highlight film about my life. And, unlike the day before, my troubles at work were far from the center of my consciousness.

I held Nat's hand but drove hastily. Unfortunately, there was not time to fully appreciate the beauty of the trees or flowers. I can remember thinking, however, that I wanted to park the car and, with Natalie on my arm, stroll through Sandra's leafy Brookline neighborhood—the neighborhood I once called my own—enjoying the fruit of my alimony and child support payments at such a spectacular time of year.

Upon my arrival, Sandra was only semi-cordial. She practically shoved Amy and Michelle out the door at me, claiming that hair appointments wait for no one. Seeing Natalie in the car she asked, “Who's that, Connie? Don't tell me you've got a girlfriend.”

“Oh, that's Natalie. You'll have to meet her sometime.”

“THE Natalie—from college?”

“The very one.”

Only a day or so earlier I had read in a magazine some advice to men on how to deal with women. *Always keep them guessing*, it said, among other things. Judging by the look on Sandy's face as I turned to go, this was sound counsel.

* * *

Not surprisingly, Natalie and the girls hit it off immediately, thanks to their mutual love for sports. Back at B.U., Natalie had been on the volleyball team and had minored in physical education. She easily fell into conversations with the girls about the current goings on with the Bruins, the Celtics and Red Sox. Amy was particularly thrilled to have a listening ear besides mine for her long dissertations on middle school softball. Michelle, being an Aquarius, and therefore a fish at heart, chattered about her diving classes and what she was going to do once she got her deep-water certification in June. Natalie told her about her favorite spot for diving: the offshore Atlantic near her folks' place in Miami's South Beach with its clear, warm water and colorful fish. Michelle said she hoped to have the chance to dive there someday. Soaking this all up like warm sunshine, I was having a great day, except for being sore from pinching myself. It hardly seemed real.

Nat and I cooked brunch at my condo in Waltham, scrambled eggs and pancakes, and then, immediately after cleaning up, we drove off to Fenway for an afternoon ballgame and got tickets for the cheap seats. A leisurely dinner on Newberry Street capped the evening in the city. Nearer to home, we rented a movie for the girls before settling in for the night.

Later, finally alone with Natalie while the girls watched their movie in the front room, I asked about her years as a church office receptionist in small-town Vermont. She agreed to fill me in, but only if, afterward, I would explain to her why I was troubled over the project at work. I had merely hinted at my predicament last evening before dropping the subject in favor of more pleasant conversation.

We lay on the bed facing each other, our heads propped with pillows. Her story went something like this:

“I was there fifteen years in the same job. Pastor Roy was a pretty good guy to work for or I wouldn’t have stayed so long. And, from my point of view, in addition to earning a wage, I was doing something for the church. The pay was lousy, though. When I left, I was only making twenty-eight thousand and working over 50 hours a week. My being on salary was a better deal for them than it was for me, I’m afraid.”

“Is that why you left and came back to Boston?”

“No, not really. Oh, it was part of the reason, sure. But I’d been unhappy for quite a while. After being there so long, I knew everything that was going on, not only in the office but in the church and congregation, too. It was like Melrose Place; you wouldn’t believe it. There were so many divorces and affairs and kids on alcohol and drugs. Rumors flew around like flies at a summer picnic. And, I can’t tell you how many times I got propositioned by guys from the congregation. It was disgusting. The energy for the gossip that went through that place each week could light up Fenway Park. Eventually, I just couldn’t take it any more, if you know what I mean. Don’t get me wrong; there were still genuinely good people there but the ones I’m talking about prided themselves in being called Christians while using every excuse imaginable to justify their behavior, as if that could make everything all right. I finally came to the conclusion that if that was what the church was all about...well they could count me out.”

Hearing all this left me momentarily speechless. I was disturbed at the way she had been treated, but, had things been different, she might never have returned, and we would not have found each other again. I stroked her hair and told her how bad I felt for her, and that everything was going to change. Things would be different. I would see to it. Of course, I was no saint, as she was about to find out when I recounted the recent series of events at

MassDevices. But at least I wasn't a hypocrite. And I would never let her down. What she had experienced in Vermont seemed classically tragic, at least from what my limited knowledge of it. She had been starry-eyed and enthusiastic over religion and her search for the meaning of life when she left Boston after graduation sixteen years ago. Then, after pouring all her energy and life into the realization of her dream, it had become a nightmare.

Then again, so had mine.

"So, how'd you end up waiting tables at the Dingo?" I asked her, trying to lighten the mood somewhat.

"Well, let's face it, Connie. Fifteen years as a church receptionist didn't exactly qualify me for a big league Boston job. I was just walking by one day and saw a sign on the window advertising for a waitress."

"Lucky for me, huh?"

"Yeah, me too, except, I'm afraid it might not last."

"Oh, I'm not letting you go twice.

"I'm talking about the job, Connie. The owners have been losing money and they've said more than once they want to sell the place and get out of the restaurant business altogether."

I kept my thoughts to myself at that moment, but I became immediately curious about the tavern being for sale. With its location, the Dingo had tremendous potential. If only someone had the right format, perhaps its glory days could be revived. Unquestionably, this was a flight of fancy for me; I had no experience running a small business, least of all a restaurant. And restoring a place so run down would doubtless be a monumental task. Plus, there would be no guarantee that my efforts would yield any more fruit than did those of the current ownership. Still, for some strange reason I was tantalized by the idea.

After allowing me one kiss, Natalie made me hold up my end of the bargain. So I began the story of the Leap Frog project, from the beginning. About how an idea I got while out walking one day had been taken from concept to pilot in less than a year, and then became the principal hope for the company's future, and a large part of the intellectual property that sparked the buy-out by the Italian firm, Teledyne S.P.A.

"What does Leap Frog do?" she asked.

“Well, first of all, Leap Frog is just a code name, so given because, with this project, MassDevices would be able to jump over its competition. And the product itself does nothing, not yet anyway. We haven’t been able to make it work, which is, in fact, the real problem. We tested our prototype a few weeks ago and it was a miserable failure. Then, after all the recriminations were passed out and we took a deeper look at the reasons for the failure, we realized that some of the component design specifications had been wrong from the beginning. Plus, the component tests had been done hastily to make the pilot test date, so, essentially, we now have no choice but to go back to the drawing board on some of the computer code and the unit-to-unit communications. Some of this stuff is out of my area of expertise, so don’t ask me to explain it in any more detail than that.”

“Okay, Connie, but you still didn’t tell me what it does.”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry. It’s actually called Peat, P-E-A-T, which stands for Personal Electronic Attaché. And, when we get it right, PEAT will do several things. For instance: home security monitoring and alarming through infrared, heat and sonic sensors and telecommunications—both land line and wireless. It will also be programmable to control home lighting, heating and air conditioning systems with sensor-driven overrides to protect a home in the owner’s absence. It can pay bills and buy groceries over the Internet. It will keep household product and grocery inventories and generate buy orders, and most important—and this the real competitive edge for us—it can be set up to manage one or more stock portfolios over the Internet according to preset limits, and without any direct human intervention.”

“Sounds complicated.”

“It is. Very cutting edge. And that’s why we’re not going to have it on the market by October, although my boss, Terrance McNabb keeps insisting that we just put our heads down and get it out the door. He has even committed to specific manufacturing dates with our suppliers. It’s a suicide mission. Not to mention what will happen to the merger if the facts come out. Either way we’re screwed. Our only salvation is to somehow get the project back on schedule and that is just not likely to happen. Being a vice-president, I’ve found out, counts for nothing. That title just puts me first in line when they are looking for a target to shoot at.”

“What can I do to help you, Connie?”

“Not much anyone can do really...but, on second thought, you could make love to me.”

“No, I can't, not with the girls in the house. They'll hear us.”

“We can be quiet.”

“Connie, neither you nor I are capable of making love quietly.”

“There is always a first time.”

“Maybe so, but we'll have to practice when no one else is around.”

Regrettably, I had to see things her way. And to my further dismay, she insisted that I take her home later that evening, claiming that it would be a terrible example to the girls if she stayed the night. She was right, of course, but so was I, concerning her feelings for me at least. When I offered to pick her up after work on Sunday at nine, she agreed without a moment's hesitation.

Suddenly, twenty-four hours seemed like an eternity to me.

* * *

After about a week of sleeping over at her place, I sub-consciously began to adjust to the sounds of the city all over again—the wails and bursts of police and emergency sirens shattering the night, the banging and clanging of dumpsters emptying before dawn and the almost constant drone of traffic on the Mass Pike. Since the noise had been bothering me from day one, I soon suggested to Natalie that we stay at my place, out in Waltham. But she did not want to cart her clothes and toiletries back and forth night after night, and she wasn't ready to give up her apartment to move in with me just yet either. So I deferred; I figured I could put up with the city's machinations to have her company and to be able to fall asleep holding her in my arms. Soon enough, the noises seemed to evaporate back into the night, or at least I became less conscious of them as the days rolled on.

Our frequent lovemaking grew stronger over that first week, and in the weeks to come; we seemed to be performing from some unwritten script for lovers—we were driven, bold, insatiable. It was as if we were trying to reach a summit of sorts, far off in the distance and customarily approached with extraordinary patience over great spans of time. Surely, had we not split up all those years ago, this pinnacle of love between us would have long since been surpassed. But, having missed those years and the corresponding opportunity to grow

together through them, we both appeared to be striving with unstated determination toward unreasonable heights.

Lately, the strangest memories about those weeks have been looping through my mind. Well, they are not strange, exactly, but certainly notable, or I suppose you could say “remarkable” recollections. For instance, for weeks we would wake early and immediately begin the conversation we were carrying on the night before. And our moods seemed to lighten after making love for the first time each night. Troubles seemed to vanish in the atmosphere of culmination and fulfillment. I’ve often thought back on those nights and realized it was as if we could not concentrate on anything until we satisfied one another physically. Then, before falling asleep, we would simply lie wrapped up in each others’ arms and make plans for how we wanted to live our lives together.

This was how we first came up with the idea of the Café. It was on a rainy night, as I recall, and we had nearly exhausted ourselves physically. In the afterglow, Nat had said something about wishing she’d had the opportunity to express herself more in college, in artistic terms anyway. She had always dreamed of a life as a stage performer but had never taken the necessary steps to put her skills to the test and hone her craft. If she had, perhaps she would have gotten over her initial stage fright and attempted to launch a career in dance or the theater. For as much as I could remember, neither of us concentrated on much back then beyond studying and hanging out. There wasn’t time, not if you wanted to pull good grades anyway. Nonetheless, I agreed completely with her that she could have successfully made a go of it in the performing arts; she had both the body and the appeal. We then talked together about where the world was heading in years to come, for that matter where it was already, with so many pressures forcing youth into money-making endeavors and away from the arts. Like my own disdainful occupation, most desirable careers today seemed to be seriously lacking in artistic value. And, even though young people may be destined for careers where the primary focus is strictly making a living, shouldn’t college be the ideal time to explore artistic talents and exercise creativity?

Sometime later, we talked about the Blond Dingo and how it had just been put up for sale. And I remember Natalie saying something like “...*wouldn’t that be a great place for students to exercise their creative ambitions?*”

It was a surreal moment. We were contemplating an idea straight out of heaven. We only questioned if it were possible to establish a profitable business there while simultaneously fulfilling our budding dreams to give young people an outlet for their talents. Fortunately, financing would be no obstacle. My stock options, which had come due only a month or so previous, were begging to be exercised and put to good use, especially since the offer from Teledyne had generated a 35% run-up in MassDevices share value. Plus, investing in the tavern would generate some significant tax losses that could be used to offset the profit I would garner by cashing in the options.

After a week of planning and number crunching, Natalie and I agreed to tender an offer for the Dingo (property only, however). We had no interest whatsoever in the business or the liquor license. The business itself had no apparent value and the owners could easily sell the liquor license to any one of a hundred willing buyers. If our deal got accepted, we would establish the Café of the Arts, a coffee bar and restaurant designed to showcase the talents of students: fine art, sculpture, music, theater and poetry reading. Most important, it was something honorable that Natalie and I could do together. Our minds reeled, fascinated with the possibilities.

* * *

Meanwhile, back at MassDevices, with the heat turned to “high,” the stew I had carelessly stirred myself into a few weeks ago was reaching the boiling point on its way to reducing me down to Vice Presidential consommé. The hard facts about the Leap Frog project no longer seemed to matter to anyone but me, nor did the results of the pilot and what they clearly indicated. Nor did the array of problems my project team had encountered with Leap Frog. Though, on more than one occasion, I had clearly and accurately articulated these problems to my boss, Terrance McNabb. But, contrary to both deductive reasoning and common sense, he went on as though everything was fine. Upon his recommendation, Dan Davies, the CEO, gave assurances to the Italians that product development was on-schedule and that PEAT, as it had now unofficially been named, would be shipping in time for the Christmas shopping season. This was far more than hopeful anticipation; from my vantage point it was a pipe dream. Furthermore, if the schedule was not met, the blame could easily be placed on me. Though I tried, there was no other way to read the tea leaves.

Why me? I wondered, though I had an inkling. Being covetous of the Teledyne buy-out and the money it represented, Davies and the board of directors evidently were unwilling to allow anything to derail the deal, not even the truth. I imagined some other possibilities as well: that McNabb had been the sole manipulator at work here, or that his deathly fear of passing bad news up the organizational ladder had caused him to shield Dan Davies from the real facts about PEAT. But, no matter how I put these tidbits together, they spelled trouble.

There was one other possibility I could envision as well. Since the company had gotten through the initial phases of acquisition on greed and deception, perhaps Davies and McNabb would prove resourceful enough to get through what promised to be very stormy months ahead and still land the Teledyne deal, with or without PEAT. Time would tell, but, considering what I knew, “without PEAT” loomed as the only likely scenario, and that reduced the potential for the success of the merger to a very slim chance, indeed. And, under the “without PEAT” scenario, our polite Italian suitors could turn acerbic and some heads could be taken off at the neck. This was the most concerning reality for me because, clearly, I was being set up as the sacrificial lamb, should it become necessary to trot out a “guilty” party. No doubt, McNabb was confident he had successfully insulated himself from responsibility with what he did (or did not) tell Davies. And it was quite likely that he could manage to save his own neck if he had to. All he had to do was claim that the project team, meaning me, had fed him unrealistic dates and overly optimistic projections all along.

So, I was moving on. When our bid for the Blond Dingo was fully negotiated and a closing date was set, assuring Natalie and me of a future worth pursuing, the decision to quit my job with MassDevices became academic. I decided to immediately exercise my stock options and turn in a one-month notice. With any luck at all, I figured I could wrap up my responsibilities in a week or two and give Davies and McNabb good cause to ask me to depart early. Suddenly, it was as if a load had been lifted from my shoulders. And, having made my decision, I no longer cared one whit about what might happen to MassDevices or the merger. Justice could simply have its day at the fair. My neck now seemed safely outside the swing of the axe.

* * *

After taking possession of the Dingo, the pace of our lives accelerated rapidly, as did the costs associated with our new venture. There was so much to do to transform the place into our image for the Café of the Arts. Though the building was solid structurally, it needed a costly external facelift, a myriad of indoor improvements, a carload of new furnishings, equipment and supplies, and a modern HVAC system.

However, thanks to the uptick in MassDevices stock, resulting from the pending buy-out, my options netted me a profit of about six-hundred and eighty thousand dollars before taxes, a tidy sum. I was fortunate enough to fall outside of the “insider” management team, and thus, not restricted from exercising my stock options while the merger was in progress.

Believing the tax bite from my financial windfall could be minimized by the losses we would be showing on the café this year, I hired a tax specialist to help make this hope a reality. Upon his recommendation, I elected to set up the business as a sole proprietorship, with Natalie and my daughters named as joint beneficiaries. It seemed a logical and sound decision for starting out. I could always incorporate later. I financed half the purchase price for the building—about a hundred and twenty-five thousand in round figures. Jack Trecamp, the general contractor I hired, estimated the cost of improvements at about another hundred grand. The new furnishings, equipment and supplies were expected to come in at about sixty-five. Adding the costs for decorating and the initial order of food and beverages, and including the down payment and legal fees, my total investment in the Café to date was a whopping \$520,000. But then, this was going to be my future, actually, mine and Natalie’s together. So, after swallowing hard a few times, I decided to start looking past the price tag and to begin hoping for a profitable till, sometime in the not-too-distant future.

Clearly, I had myself convinced that Natalie and I were closing in upon a simpler and more elegant life. But, regrettably, the past and present dimensions of my life were not going along quietly.

By cashing in the stock options I managed to raise a few eyebrows, as if middle managers were not supposed to be savvy enough to take a profit when one was available to them. But, it was my resignation that really put the executive row into consternation and tumult. McNabb refused to accept it. Actually, he threw the letter back at me and stomped off to Dan Davies’ office like a third grade tattletale. I was immediately called to account for my “traitorism” in

a meeting resembling the Spanish Inquisition. Davies said he felt like he'd been "date raped." *After all they'd done for me*, here I was, deserting them in their hour of need. He said "need" but I honestly believe he meant "desperation." Without me they had no chance whatsoever to honor their deal with the Italians. They had doubtlessly deluded themselves into thinking that we would somehow succeed in pulling off the impossible—getting PEAT out the door by the Christmas season and, thereby, saving both their honor and their backsides. Now, with my imminent departure, all hope was gone. What troubled me most was the tone of the meeting. Except for a momentary half-hearted attempt by McNabb to get me to stay by offering a small salary increase, it was mostly a beat-up session. I was disloyal. I was greedy. I was a quitter. I was going to cost them the merger and millions of dollars of needed capital. I had "date raped" them. Yes, they actually used that phrase twice. I was horrified. For years, I had sensed (known, better-said) that I was not a part of the corporate mindset, that their thinking was something far different than mine. Now, suddenly, it all became real, like waking up in the middle of a Japanese monster flick at the point where Godzilla was about to bite off the protagonist's head, and that soon to be former hero was me.

The threats were piled up like cruise missiles in Turkey. If I didn't reconsider and stay with the company long enough to finish the PEAT project and save MassDevices from financial ruin, they would bring legal action, and then, "...there will be hell to pay!"

Never in my life have I responded well to threats. And, since my mind had already been made up irreversibly, I just took the verbal lashing, told them I would do all I could to bring the other members of the team up to speed regarding what I knew about PEAT that they perhaps did not know already, and left for lunch. As I recall, my parting words that morning were: "Sorry, but I have a very different future in mind and it does not involve high tech engineering. It's not personal."

"The hell it isn't," Davies said as I exited. "And you'll see how personal it can get."

How I survived the next two weeks is something I still don't fully understand. But I did—somehow. Sure, I kept busy enough, trying to live up to my commitment to train my successors. But mainly, I think my head was still in the clouds. There were two repeated attempts by McNabb to save me, one on my penultimate day as an MDI employee and involving a hundred thousand dollar raise. Even this lofty amount did not tempt me to

reconsider. What I was doing had absolutely nothing to do with money, but rather with freedom and peace of mind, neither of which Davies nor McNabb could offer me. And so, on July eighteenth, I walked out of MassDevices, Inc., carrying my personal belongings in a single cardboard box, completely at peace with my decision and dizzy with freedom.

The car was on auto-pilot on the way back to Boston. My mind drifted along considering the future, all the possibilities for the café, the wonderment of a new life, and a new start. So deeply in love with Natalie and what lay beyond our immediate horizon was I that emotion welled up within me and tears came to my eyes. I carefully replayed the dreamy months we had spent together—the glorious evenings together, her generous intimacy. Moment by moment, we had become part of each other. It was like nothing I had known before, nothing I had ever experienced, even considering our years together in college. This, it seemed to me, was what everyone on earth must be searching for, though few actually found it. How fortunate I was, I thought. And, all this after I had practically called off the search, essentially given up on love—one lost soul mate, one failed marriage. Then, in a benevolent twist of fate, it all came back to me, more than I would ever have asked for.

The whole burden of MassDevices and my now “former” career began to lift from my shoulders as I drove. I could feel the freedom, the wonderful freedom. The management goons could not touch me. Besides, Natalie and I had the café now. It was due to open in a week. *This* was my life—all I would ever need. I reached into my pocket for my handkerchief. There were too many tears now to hold back.

Parking the car behind the café, I proceeded inside to check on the work with Bill O’Dell, our construction job foreman. He told me about the inspections, the new signage, the “finish work” in the kitchen. And then I noticed an envelope on the bar addressed to me in Natalie’s distinctive script. Upon opening it, my heart raced. My world—especially the part in which peace of mind is held in suspended animation—crashed suddenly around my feet.

* * *

These days there is a healthy trade at lunch time and evenings, and especially on weekends. We’ve got devotees and we have had some favorable press. But, no matter how busy the café gets, I cannot glance around to the front of the bar without getting that same feeling in my gut. For that is the very spot where things started all over again for Natalie and me like a

welcome rain in the thirsty desert, and also where they ended, even more abruptly, six months later.

How could she have left? I don't know if I will ever understand. She seems to run as hot and cold as the New England weather. "Commitment," she had written in her parting note, "always seems to me like that beautiful bridge over the Charles. "I'd rather sit and enjoy it from the park than cross it myself. After all, it's just Cambridge on the other side and I've always liked Boston better. I love you, Connie. I always will. I'm sorry, but it just won't work for me. I'm taking the redeye back to Miami. There'll be some work there for me. I think waitressing is my thing, you know, no strings—just serve 'em and forget 'em.

"You deserve somebody who can love you with everything they've got. I hope and pray you find that person some day."

I thought I had.

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DJ Vallone is an American novelist. He uses fiction as a means of examining the human condition and societal values.

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