

Lovely Friend

Anna Marie Gaetana O'Toole turned sixteen on the day I made her promise to meet me here in St. John's Church at noon, fifty years in the future.

"To the day," I said, "on your birthday." While our classmates munched on baloney and cheese whiz at lunch next door in the Catholic high school, we sat here near the altar, where I had convinced her to come with me. I hoped some of the solemnity of this sanctuary would rub off on what I prayed was our sacred bond. Having dated Anna for two years, I now sensed her tiring of me. Her only response lately to "I love you" had been, "Uh huh." I'd been yearning for some kind of definite feedback about her feelings toward me. Real sex was off limits, of course. After all, we were Catholics. So, here under the stony gaze of Mary Immaculate, Queen of All Angels, on what was also Valentine's Day, I invented a challenge for Anna to either accept or reject. Getting a commitment of undying love fifty years in advance would certainly be a statement, I figured. Maybe we'd be married then and I could give her a ride here. Surely, something like this must be written down somewhere in The Book of Love. Probably near the part that asks, "Will you dream only of me? Will you love me forever? Will you marry me and have my children? Will you at least go to the prom with me?"

C.G. Jung, commenting on the anima in, "Two Essays in Analytical Psychology":

"The whole nature of man presupposes woman, both physically and spiritually. His system is tuned into woman from the start, just as it is prepared for a quite definite world where there is water, light, air, salt, carbohydrates etc."

Such questions could elicit a stunned look from Anna, often followed by the rolling of her beautiful blue eyes. In fact, I'd voiced some of the stupidest comments just to see those eyes in motion. She had done it just the Friday before when I swore my eternal love on a pile of Saint Theresa devotional pamphlets that rose in a stack on the checkout table in the school library. She had even once handed me a quarter and told me to spend it, "on your trip back to Mars." But this time, she chose to look straight ahead and simply grunt. Not a good sign. Unaware I was dealing with my first unresponsive Irishwoman, I persevered, promising that no matter what, I would be right here in this very pew on February 14th in ... uh, let's see, carry the one ... 2008. "Really?" she asked. Now I had her interest. "I will honor my oath," I said. "I will be here." "But I could be married to someone else...." "Don't say that!" I interjected. "We could be dead," she continued. "Never!" I said. "No matter what, I'll be here." I should have added the Postman's Promise. Neither snow nor wind nor sleet would delay me.

So, last month on Valentine's Day, a half century later, I journeyed to St. John's church in downtown Utica on Anna's 66th birthday, not knowing if she would remember our tryst or even care about it. I suppose I should have felt foolish, but I didn't. If she showed, neither of us would feel silly, and if not, she would never know I had driven 135 miles through a snowstorm to keep our date.

²Outside the church, a gusty squall was churning up snow in the slushy street. The wind nudged me in through the huge brass plated doors, past Holy Water bowls the size of bird baths, and down the long nave into the old church. Walking among the pews, I felt

Jackson Browne, commenting on love lost in, "Love Needs a Heart," *"Running On Empty"*:

"Where's the heart that's been looking for mine?
I hope it finds me in time.
Love needs a heart and I need to find
If love needs a heart like mine."

the immensity of the structure as small sounds echoed about me to accent the silence. It felt odd to be in church without my wife and my hand felt empty without hers nestled in mine.

Looking around the huge and ornate 1800's house of worship, it was apparent that in the 19th century God and Mammon had run neck and neck in a race that God must have lost. Gold filigree wound around carved columns that arched up and over a 25 foot high altar. The white marble floors shined as bright and clean as my soul on the day of my christening, when Uncle Jim carried me up the steps to the gold baptismal font. One more Griffin reporting for duty in a line that extended back to my ancestor Patrick's baptism here in 1830. Afterward, my mother would have carried me back down the marble steps and past Stations of The Cross, each carved into the grey stone walls. If the morning had been sunlit, the high stained glass windows would have provided wonderfully colored splashes of reds and greens and gold to wash down the steps and out onto the expanse of white floor.

I looked up to the yellowing chandeliers and imagined that the great empty space that rose above me to the vaulted ceiling held the souls of countless men and women who had vowed their obligation to God and their love to each other. Many had been my family, husbands and wives, sons and daughters, mothers and fathers. One life after another consecrated to something that could only be felt in such surroundings, with hands holding the oil and water of baptism and hands holding each other tightly at the altar in marriage. And then a couple's hands figuratively letting go as the one left behind touched the casket for the last time in that awful and lonely moment of goodbye.

On this day, as the snow outside sifted up against the stained glass and I waited for Anna, the church was cold and dark and empty. I sat and thought of the young woman who had meant everything to me 50 years ago. I wondered if she had married a boy provided by her Italian mother's army of aunts and cousins or if she had chosen a dumb Irishman like

myself from her father's Hibernian lodge. If she showed up today, it would be the first time I'd seen her in the years since our last words on the porch of her parents' home. Anna had known we weren't right for each other, but couldn't find the words to tell me. Her sense of the world was much more practical than mine and I suppose she didn't want to spend her life pulling my head down from the clouds. But I understood none of that as I felt my world end at her final goodbye. I didn't know then I needed someone with a heart like mine.

I didn't expect Anna to come today. I wasn't sure I wanted her to, because I suspected this wasn't really about Anna, a girl who no longer existed. It was about a boy's attempt to do a man's job long ago, to build a life around a woman who was still a girl. Romance and hormones had rushed toward a union that could have proven disastrous for the two of us, knowing myself as I do now. Still, the powerful brew left a hangover in the psyche that could at times be felt a half century later. Young Anna had become part of and disappeared into the fibers of an old man's soul. But that girl was not the woman celebrating her 66th birthday today.

Soon after Anna and I parted, I met Elizabaeth, my lover and best friend. The redhead who had caught my eye, initially annoyed me, then captured my heart and bore my children. She had always reminded me of Ruth in the Bible, who had said, "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you." Ruth ... whose name means "lovely friend" ... represented what we all need and seldom get ... a love conditioned on nothing. A love that doesn't quit.

Elizabaeth, the woman who struggled so hard to find herself, and who was then able to help others as they attempted the same in 50 minute sessions which often changed their lives. Elizabaeth, a wife who would love me till the cows came home. She had stayed by me through all of the ups and downs of our journey, standing when I couldn't, loving when I wouldn't, when I made her happy and

when I made her cry. She had given me a little card once that promised, "... as long as I have the breath to speak your name, I will love you." And one night when we were very young, she had spoken with her eyes to me, as Ruth said to her husband, "Come, spread the corner of your cloak over me and set me free." And when I did, I was unchained. I had found a heart like mine.

As midday approached, the church began to fill with people. I had forgotten there was a Mass at noon and for some reason I wasn't surprised that schedule hadn't changed in fifty years. Soon, a crowd of worshippers began to assemble behind me as they prepared themselves for the Lenten service. Since I had sat down at the very front, I had no idea who was behind me. I wanted to turn around and scan the congregation, but didn't. I was afraid to, and I was beginning to wonder what the hell I was doing here.

At the end of the pew Elizabaeth genuflected and slipped in beside me. She took up my hand from where it sat on the pew and held it in both of hers. She squeezed it hard, as if she would never let it go.

"I thought you were going shopping," I said. "Don't like the weather. The storm is getting worse. Did she show?"

"I should have sat farther back," I said. "I didn't realize there would be so many people. I can't see who's here without turning around and being obvious."

"Doesn't matter," she said. "I'd recognize the back of your head anywhere with that silly hair. So would she."

"Even after 50 years?"

"Your hair is pretty odd."

Then she added, "So are you. It's why I love you so much."

She was still holding on to my hand.

"Elizabaeth, we're in our sixties. This isn't about meeting my old girlfriend. It's about whatever it's about."

"Uh huh."

"Really, Elizabaeth."

"Jung would call it your anima," she said.

"And I don't want to take up with her. There's something symbolic about all of this and I can't put my finger on it just yet."

"Well, when you do, make sure that's all you put on it."

"Elizabaeth...."

"It still hurts, doesn't it," she said.

Fifty years later, and yes it did. But I would never admit that to the woman who framed my life. And I knew it was the hurt, not the girl, who remained. I was silent.

"David, what a lovely friend you are to me," she said, "you have a heart like mine."

"And it's all yours."

"If I hadn't been sure of that," she said, "this trip to see your old girlfriend would have been over my dead body."

I stood up. "Let's get out of here and get some lunch."

"There are still more older women arriving," she said, looking airily around behind her. "Lots of 'em."

Ignoring her remark, I pushed her out of the pew and took her hand to walk down the aisle. Toward the back of the church I saw a face that looked somewhat familiar. But half a century is a long time and even if it had been Anna, I don't know what I would have said. I hadn't thought that far ahead. Maybe, "Thank you for holding my hand fifty years ago. I've always prayed you would find what I found." I don't know what I would have said. At the moment, walking through the snow with Elizabaeth seemed more important.

copyright 2008, David Griffin

The Press at Windswept Farm



Saugerties, NY

www.windsweptpress.com