

I SEE DEAN'S

By Albi Gorn
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He came from somewhere back in her long ago

“Anyone who’d have an affair is out of his mind,” Larry said, typing in “Dean’s Farm.”

“I’m not having an affair,” I answered in a Jack Bennyish exasperated inflection. This was the third time he said it, and with Larry there was no telling if he was joking, I doubt if even he knew. “And I tried that,” I added, indicating Larry’s Google search, “that’s not going to get you anywhere.”

“Patience, like dad always said when we were fishing, patience.”

“The place was taken over by someone years ago. I just don’t know the name of the new outfit.”

“We’ll find it,” Larry said confidently. He was good at finding things on the computer, not so much in real life. “What was that town where the train stopped? Athol, right?”

“Yeah, Athol, right. Try that.”

He already had, of course.

“See, here’s the problem – hmm, that didn’t help.” The search results were useless. Who knew there was an Athol in Massachusetts?

“Add an N-Y to it, see if that does it.”

“The problem is,” Larry went on, ignoring my advice and instead Google Mapping Athol, “first, you end up with a second wife. Whoever you’re diddling –“

“I am not diddling anybody.”

“– is going to start making the same demands as you get at home. Who needs it twice? Do you recognize any of these roads? I don’t. County Rd. 13?”

“It was like you went on this road into the mountains, dirt road, and it just wound up.”

“Yeah, I remember. No turns. Anyway, that’s the first problem.”

“Oh, like the fact that when you have an actual affair you’re cheating on your wife and actually also on your kids, that’s not a problem?”

“That’s a moral problem. When you weigh a moral problem against some hot cutie that wants to sleep with you, it’s a test of willpower. It has nothing to do with being blindsided or being stupid, making a choice that yields five minutes of passion and five months of nagging.”

“Why are we talking about this? I’m not having an affair.”

“Me thinks the lady – wait, what was the name of that place we went for Carvel?”

“Carvel? In Yonkers?”

“No, no up at Dean’s. I mean it wasn’t Carvel, we just called it that. But it was soft serve ice cream in those funky cup cones –“

“Oh, yeah, the horseback riding place. Sun Canyon.”

“Right, good, Sun Canyon. Might still exist, you never know. And it was on a road that branched off of the road to Dean’s.”

“Great, Larry. Try that.”

“But the second problem,” Larry persisted as my head slumped to my chest, “is that it becomes the most important thing in your life, and each night when you come

home to your wife you can't talk about it. The best part of being married, you have someone to talk to, and you can't."

"In the fullness of time, if I ever contemplate having an affair, as if any woman under the age of seventy would ever look twice at me, I am sure to reap the benefit of your remonstrations – wait, go back." Larry had found a history of Thurman, the town next to Athol up in the Adirondacks. And there was a mention of the Sun Canyon dude ranch, undoubtedly the same place we went to as kids for ice cream.

"All it says here is High Street. Well, if it hasn't moved, that's a start," and Larry brought up a map of High Street in Thurman. It didn't really help much. And there was no date on the history and no indication that Sun Canyon still existed. A Google search came up ambiguous although one hit mentioned Warrensburg. Warrensburg was the town we went to for movies, the biggest town in the area.

"Infidelity, it's not what you think it's going to be. Keep that in mind, kiddo," Larry continued, as he quit the site.

"Wait, you –"

"I'll work on it some more. Might have to make some phone calls or maybe even take a drive up there, but we'll find it. I'm just worried about you, that's all. This is some ten year old girl from 1957 and –"

"And now she's 64 years old and engaged, apparently, and I'm happily married and I'm not about to try to get in the sack with her."

"Then why are we going through this, remind me?"

"To find out the answer to that very question," I said.

There was a pause as Larry looked at me with severe incredulity.

"Anyone who'd have an affair is out of his mind," he repeated.

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The sentimental fool don't see

Janie and I were a good match. We effectively double-teamed our parents in the front seat for most of the four-hour ride from the Bronx up to Dean's in my father's blue and white DeSoto. Janie fended off all the parental suggestions of games we could play with her incomparable *Idon'twanna*, while my *whocares* effectively cut the legs out from under any wildlife sightings.

"Look, kids. Cows!" enthusiastically intoned my mom.

"Who cares," I grumpily answered back, even as I was looking at the equally bored bovines with a fair amount of interest.

The conversation between my mom and pop and Janie's mother was mostly indecipherable but at best it was just conversation which did little to alleviate the tedium. We lived right by Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx and were not as scenery starved as much of the rest of the City. And while there were no mountains such as we were riding into, scenery was kind of invisible to most kids, unless it was on TV. But by the time we turned onto the dirt road that signified the final leg of our journey, the grumbling and whining stopped, the tacit partnership between us ended, and the tension mounted.

We were engaged in the ritual that officially ushered in our summer vacation. The first person to actually see Dean's would shout out: I see Dean's. You didn't win

anything but bragging rights, but that was no small prize for ten year olds. And of course, we would be spending the summer with a half dozen or so other kids who had engaged in similar contests in their respective cars, so even the bragging rights were diluted. There was, I suspect, a feeling of self-satisfaction at having been the one to have opened the doors to this unlikely paradise. The tension was unusually keen this time around as my brother Larry, who invariably won, was staying in the city this summer, so it was up for grabs.

Independence – that was Dean’s most appealing aspect. Other than the pool, the kids could go anywhere at any time. Parents were there to minister to bumps and scratches, cut up your meat or transform a soft boiled egg and cut-up buttered toast into eggie-in-the-cuppie, or chauffeur you to ice cream or the movies. But the kids, as a group, set the day’s agenda, the rules of engagement, and generally owned the world of Dean’s.

The kids were the children of my parents’ friends, or friends of their friends. And most of the families lived in the same neighborhood in the Bronx. How they found this place was yet another question I stupidly left unasked during my parents’ lifetime. How the elderly, widowed and recently remarried Mrs. Dean felt about having a bunch of New York Jews eating at her dinner table was still another insoluble mystery.

“I see Dean’s!” Janie shouted out. She had the window seat behind the driver, and as Dean’s became visible right after a sharp right-hand bend in the road, it was a foregone conclusion that she would see it first (in addition to all the other perks of the window seat) – but it was our car and she was our guest, the kind of courtesy that would disappear once we disembarked into our summer world.

“You can’t see it yet – there it is. I see Dean’s,” I protested. It was expected of the loser to raise this objection, and it was telling that in the quarrel that followed, “did so,” “did not,” we neither asked the parents to arbitrate, nor did they make any attempt to.

Independence.

As the parents started to unload the baggage from the trunk, Janie and I went immediately to our favorite spots. Janie ran into the Main House to get an orange soda from the vending machine there. She did this every summer when she arrived so she could go feed a bottle to the lambs. We were strictly forbidden from doing that, but Janie was getting a running start on her teen years. I walked over towards the New House, outside of which, just opposite the shuffleboard court, was a truly unique item: an Adirondack swinging bench, a kind of loveseat suspended in a frame on which you could gently sway. I had issues with swings, not being able to pump my legs, but could easily manage this apparatus, which might have accounted for how much I enjoyed sitting there.

But that day I was surprised to find someone sitting in my chair. A blue-eyed, blond-haired girl, looking to be about my age, with the thickest eyelashes I had ever seen.

She looked up and smiled at me, and for the first time in my life, I fell in love.

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Trying hard to recreate what had yet to be created once in her life

V-A-R-D-A space B-R-A-H-M-S and enter.

How many could there be, after all. It was an August afternoon. I sat in my office with nothing to do, idly surfing the net, one hit suggesting another, in just the same way as my mind was idly surfing my memory. And then she popped up.

The Google search produced a slew of hits, but all seemingly about the same person, including one small, not terribly focused picture of a woman of about the right age pointing to a sign that said “Rose garden.” I enlarged it a bit and damn if it didn’t look like her, a sixtyish version of her in any event. A listing in a synagogue newsletter from Albuquerque included an email address. I gave it a try.

“Varda, first, I’m not sure you’re the Varda Brahms I knew, but since there don’t seem to be any other Varda Brahmses around, I thought I’d give it a shot; and second, I have no idea if you’ll remember me.”

I continued on about Dean’s and told her I’d love to hear from her.

And I quickly did.

A few weeks prior, I had reached out to another friend from my past whom I hadn’t seen in several decades. I found her number and called her. When she picked up the phone I said:

“Harriet?”

“Yes,” she said tentatively, sounding a bit cautious.

“Albi Gorn.”

“ALBI GORN? NO FUCKING WAY,” was her satisfying reply, which I could have heard all the way from the west coast without using a phone.

No such luck with Varda.

Her reply was terse and reserved. She kind of remembered me, although apparently not in the way I remembered her. She vaguely remembered Dean’s. As it turned out, I was just the latest in a series of unexpected reconnections that she had experienced with folks from her past, which she found curious and perhaps to be some kind of sign. She thanked me for reaching out and invited me to share any other memories I had.

Not exactly the tone I was hoping for.

But regardless, it was in this inauspicious way that our correspondence began.

And once again I encountered the conundrum of all these reconnections. I had reached out to someone I once knew at a specific time and place, at a specific point in my life. And I had reached someone I didn’t really know, at a different time and place, and a different point in my life. And while I was happy to make a new friend, at the same time I wanted to connect, to reconnect to the old one. Her kind of vaguely remembering me put a serious damper on that possibility.

We pretty quickly exhausted our memories. She had none; that made it even quicker. The emails were a mix of the metaphysical places we had gone, bits and pieces of our histories, and thumbnail expounding of ideas and philosophies we had traversed and treasured in the fifty plus years. But whenever I could, I brought up that summer. I asked if she had photos of herself at that time. She didn’t, but she said she had a tape her brother had put together of film her mother had shot of her and the family when she was a kid that included a bit of that summer at Dean’s. I told her I was anxious to see it.

On my computer at work I had set as wallpaper a picture I had recently acquired of another girl from my past, Carolyn Marcus, who had made an indelible impression on my heart as a young teenager at sleepaway camp in the Poconos. She was sitting on a

bench with her bunkmates and counselors. A brief look at those haircuts, the sneakers, the Camp Big Pocono logo on the t-shirts, and Carolyn's sweet face was enough to transport me back to that bittersweet unrequited summer. I wanted a similar magic talisman from Varda.

At one point early on she asked for permission to write to my wife, Robin.

"Hello, Albi – I realized that I would like to clarify whether your wife knows about your communicating with me, and whether that is okay with her, and whether she would be comfortable with whatever you are writing."

I forwarded the email to Robin who wrote back to reassure her.

But I wondered if part of her needing reassurance was the tone of my emails. Was Larry right? Was there some aspect of what I was doing or the way I was doing it that communicated something not threatening but perhaps overly passionate in my wanting to recapture the past. Forget about what it communicated to Varda, what did it say to me?

What did I really want?

Why did I want it?

I spent very little time on those questions, however, since my mind was resolutely focused on:

How am I going to get it?

Whatever it was.

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She had a place in his life

Nelson, British Columbia, is a lovely, unassuming tourist town nestled in the Rockies. I had an old neighborhood friend who had lived there for many years and earlier that winter she announced that she was going to be married (for the third time) and invited the old gang to her wedding. This was not the Dean's crowd, but another group of Bronxites with which I'd bonded starting in junior high. Her fiancé was, coincidentally, another lovesick nostalgic veteran of 1957, some guy from our neighborhood whom I didn't remember at all. After fifty years he had summoned up the resolve to search for and find his childhood obsession, and this time around was able to win her heart.

Judy and Jonathan's wedding was pure 60s, the ceremony performed by a Jewish Renewal rabbi (with some help from Robin, who is a cantor), in some kind of stand-alone meditation room in the woods, part of a retreat at which a number of the guests stayed. This was followed by a reception under a large tent. There was an impressive succession of speeches, songs and skits from the guests. The wedding, in late August, was just a couple of weeks after my reconnection with Varda, and I thought it made for an interesting parallel, Jonathan and I both drawn to and acting on our ten year old first love memories. I spoke about it when my turn came, focusing on how these kinds of reunions can lead us to rediscover the language of childhood. I had no idea what that meant, but it sounded good and folks were generally moved. And there was something about the recurring references to Jonathan's odyssey through the decades that eventually brought him back home to Judy that on the one hand justified for me what I was doing, but on the other made me wonder yet again what was stimulating my energies. After all, I wasn't,

like he was, some lonely sixty year old living in the hills of Medford, Oregon, seeking a life partner to grow old(er) with.

The speaker after me was another member of our old neighborhood gang, Pete, a bluegrass banjo player of some renown. I lingered by the mike as he approached, as he got Judy and Jonathan to join us in a rousing rendition of our elementary school alma mater¹ (which incredibly we all remembered every word of). As we walked back to the table Pete said to me:

“That Varda you mentioned, is that Varda Brahms?”

My jaw remained dropped as we sat down to the cedar-plank grilled salmon.

“I knew her. She went out with Jody. You knew Jody, right?”

Jody Stecher was another bluegrass musician I had first met when we all played together on Sundays in Washington Square. I didn’t know him well but I knew Pete had both a social and professional relationship with him.

“Really lovely girl,” Pete continued. “We used to hang out with them in Berkeley.”

After the shock wore off, I began to feel oddly jealous. How dare he wrest my Varda from her slot in my past and transform her into somebody’s lover, somebody I could picture, somebody I knew. But I was snapped from my brooding when one of the other speakers approached me.

“Hi,” she said sweetly, “I’m Helen.”

Helen had spoken briefly about personality types when she made her speech, and the compatibility of the bride and groom. Her field was human consciousness, intuition and something called the enneagram, a system for classifying and determining different personality make-ups. She was staying in the same lodge as we were, and I had overheard her the night before regaling a bunch of the other guests with a discussion of how one’s inner patterns drive one’s outer behavior.

“Right,” I said, “we met last night.”

“Yes,” she continued. “I just wanted to mention that that woman you mentioned, Varda. I think she studied with me back in the early seventies, I want to say. She was short, light hair...”

I didn’t really know what Varda looked like in the early seventies but I quickly confirmed that it was the same person. There was something obvious about this very unlikely set of coincidences, something that made its implausibility perfectly logical.

Once the dancing started, I made my way back to my laptop to let Varda know about all this. When she answered me the following morning, her reply was characteristically low key and absent any sense of wonder, apart from being mildly surprised that Helen remembered her.

Her relationship with Jody had started in City College. She was playing fiddle then and she accompanied his mandolin playing. After a few years she felt she needed some distance and they separated. When she came back to him, he had a new girlfriend.

“I think she was a better fiddler,” Varda said.

Another sad chapter in her life.

And where was I?

1

He never made her think twice

“You can rock on that, you know,” I offered.

“Uh-huh,” she said, moving the chair slightly.

“Fun, isn’t it?”

“Uh-huh,” she repeated, with a slight change in her smile. And then she looked back at me. “Did you want to sit here?”

“Nah, it’s okay. You can use it.”

“We can both fit,” she answered, as she scoonched over to one side.

I was frozen in one of those minisecond intervals that feels so immeasurably long.

“Okay,” I finally said, walking over and sitting next to her. As we swayed, time showed me its other hand, as that gently-rocking silence jettisoned any possibility that I had ever not been swinging with her on this bench or that we ever would stop. A breeze fluttered up.

“We just got here,” she said. “My parents are unpacking,” and she pointed back to the Main House, “up the hill behind that house.”

“That’s the Cottage,” I said.

“Oh, have you been here before?”

“Oh yeah,” I said, leaning back a bit into a veteran’s pose. “We’ve been coming up here for years.”

“Is it nice?”

“It’s great,” I answered enthusiastically, momentarily blowing my cool. “There’s all sorts of great stuff, and the parents leave you alone so you can do whatever you want.”

She looked away off at a distant mountain. “That would be nice,” she said somewhat dreamily.

“I can show you around, if you want,” I suggested.

“Great.”

“Come on,” I urged, as I got up. My arm made the slightest motion towards taking her hand and helping her up, but I quickly squelched that notion.

“Okay.” She got up daintily. I was finding everything she did interesting.

“That house is called the Annex,” I said, pointing to the house we were right opposite from.

“Why is it called the Annex?”

“Well, this used to be a farm,” I said, realizing if I got too many questions like that I’d have to be making a lot of stuff up, since I didn’t really pay much attention to these things. “And then they had people like us coming up and they needed more room so they built this building and they called it the Annex.” That sounded right to me, although I had no idea what annex meant, but it seemed to satisfy the girl. “Those are my folks,” I said, pointing to my mom and dad and Bessie carrying the bags into the building just beyond where we were sitting. They didn’t notice us as the trees partially hid where the swing was. “And they’re going into the New House. That house was just built a few years ago,” I said as we walked towards it. “I heard Mrs. Dean say they built it special for me,” I added.

“Who’s Mrs. Dean?”

“She’s the woman who owns this place and she’s the cook. You’ll meet her when they call us into eat. She’s really nice.”

“They built a whole house for you?”

“Well, I didn’t really understand that, but it has something to do with my leg. Here, come this way.”

We turned and walked back towards the entrance.

“What’s wrong with your leg?”

“I had polio,” I explained.

“Couldn’t you get the shot?”

“I got polio before the shot. This is the pool room,” I explained, leading her into a small rec room with a pool table and ping pong table. “Do you like pool?”

“I never played,” she said.

“And this is Smokey,” I added, pointing to a deer head mounted above the door.

“Hi, Smokey.” She looked up at him curiously. “Why do they call him Smokey? I thought Smokey was a bear.”

I had retrieved a cue stick from the table and handed it to her. “Hit him under the chin,” I directed her. She did so and a puff of dust came out of his mouth. She smiled broadly.

“Wait ‘til Jonathan sees this. He’s my brother.”

We exited out and walked up to the biggest building on the premises, two stories with a railed-in porch on the lower level, and a similar balcony on the top. We walked up the steps and I stood by a huge, inverted artillery shell.

“See this,” I said, indicating a long, thick metal rod that sat in the shell. “When they want us to come to lunch or dinner, they clang this.” We walked over towards the screen door. “And that’s a fly swatter,” I said, indicating one hanging up on a nail. We pushed our faces up against the screen. “That’s where we eat.”

“Oh, a piano,” she said, looking in an adjacent window.

“Yeah, they have a piano. My mom plays.”

“I play violin,” she said as we walked back down the steps.

We started walking down the dirt road towards the barn.

“Does it hurt?” she asked.

“What?”

“Your leg. Does it hurt?”

“Oh, no,” I said. “I don’t feel it at all.”

“Oh.” We had stopped walking at that. She looked down at my leg and then up at my face again. A new smile. “My name’s Varda.”

“Varda? Wow, I never met anyone with that name. My name’s Albi,” I added.

“Wow,” she said, gently mimicking me, “I never met anyone with that name.” And we continued on down the hill.

The second she saw the lambs, she ran off ahead of me towards them, but then stopped without looking back and slowed her pace so I could catch up. I looked around for Janie, but she was nowhere in sight. It doesn’t take long for a lamb to down a bottle of pop.

“Can I pet him?” Varda asked, and started to without waiting for an answer, only to have the soda-addicted critter lick her hand a few times in the process, which delighted her all the more.

“That’s a salt lick,” I said, pointing to a salt block erected on a wooden post. Varda looked puzzled. “The sheep lick it,” I explained. Varda nodded her head like she understood but the puzzled expression remained. I was really enjoying being able to show her around and explain things, but seeing as I had no idea *why* they needed to lick salt, I suggested we move on.

I pointed to the chickens but didn’t walk into the hen house since I didn’t like the smell. “If you get up early you can come down here and get eggs and bring them up to Mrs. Dean and she’ll make them for you for breakfast.” This definitely seemed to interest Varda. We walked off towards the Log Cabin and then on to the pool.

“That’s where we swim,” I said. A mountain brook had been dammed up to create a small pond. One side was a cement wall that rose a few inches above the ground. That was the deep end. The other side was where the parents sat. “Over there,” I said, pointing beyond the beach area to the far corner that was somewhat weedy and where the forest had almost come down to the water, “we catch frogs.”

Varda looked over there, hoping to see one. “I don’t see any frogs.”

“You have to be closer but we can’t go there without parents. That’s the only place we can’t.”

We started walking back up.

“Why do you catch frogs?”

“It’s fun,” I explained.

“Not for the frogs,” Varda said, a little cross.

“We put ‘em back. We never hurt ‘em,” I explained weakly. Varda didn’t seem particularly convinced. We walked the rest of the way in silence. Varda looked all around her, trying to get as much ‘country’ as she could into her senses.

“Oh,” she suddenly said, in a voice only marginally more elevated than her normal speech, but still conveying surprise. “The wishing well.” We had come back up to the Main House and to a well by the side of the road.

“That’s a wishing well?” I asked. “How do you know?”

“I made a wish before.”

“Oh,” I said. “When? You just got here.”

“Well, we were unpacking and my dad – I didn’t want to unpack anymore, so I came down here and made a wish.”

“Oh.”

“And it came true,” she said, looking at me and smiling. A smile that wrapped itself around my insides. A smile that would haunt me forever.

“I want to make a wish,” I said “How do you do it?”

“You have to throw money down there,” Varda explained, eyebrows knitted as she peered down into the darkness.

“I have this,” I said, producing a dime that I had been given to buy a soda with, Nehi orange being the beverage of choice.

“Okay,” Varda said. “Now toss it down, no, no, first make the wish and then toss it down.”

I did as she told me and listened for the sound of the dime hitting the water.

“Good,” said Varda.

“Do you want to make another wish?”

“I don’t have any more money,” she said.

“Here,” I offered, pulling another dime out of my pocket.

“Okay,” she said, taking the dime and looking down. “Let’s see. Okay, I wish I was a magic princess,” she said, letting the dime go, standing on tippy toe and peering after it.

“Does it work if you say it out loud?” I asked, as that seemed to violate the most fundamental rule of wish-making.

“Sure,” she said. “The wish fairy hears it better if you say it out loud.” We walked off with Varda now taking the lead, making sure we steered clear of the path up to the cabin where her folks were presumably still unpacking. “What did you wish for?” she asked.

“Oh, something,” I said, not particularly wanting her to know.

I had wished that I could find a way to get both of us back on that bench.

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As she rises to her apology anybody else would surely know

“Why are we eating here?” I asked. The diner on Broadway in the upper west side was surrounded by every imaginable variety of ethnic restaurant and was certainly the least interesting place to eat on the block.

“Good French fries,” Larry said. He smiled at the waitress and sat without being seated. As soon as I sat the waitress came over and plopped a couple of glasses of water down.

“What’ll it be, boys?” she asked, although she was maybe forty years younger than us.

“Umm, a menu?” I asked cautiously.

“It’s a diner,” Larry interjected scornfully. “What do you need a menu for?” And then turning to the waitress, “A cheeseburger and French fries, and in a separate dish gravy for the fries, not on the same plate, a separate dish.”

“I know what separate mean. How would you like that burger?” she asked. Larry just looked at her incredulously and she turned to me. I went through a mental stammer and finally defaulted to:

“Umm, I guess tuna and lettuce on whole wheat toast.”

“Anything to drink?”

“No,” I said.

“Coffee,” Larry said, staring at me.

As she turned to leave Larry said, “Tuna? You are an embarrassment. You can have that at home.”

“I’m an embarrassment? Separate dish for the gravy?”

“It spills over and gets the bun soggy.”

“And who has fries with gravy?”

Larry smiled knowingly and took a sip of his water.

“How did mom and pop find out about Dean’s anyway,” I said after a bit. “It seems so unlikely, a bunch of Bronx Jews. This isn’t the Catskills, after all.”

“This wasn’t just a bunch of Bronx Jews,” Larry said. “This is a bunch of reds. They were a lot more comfortable spending their bucolic vacations with the anti-Semitic

Goyim than they ever would have been with the Yids and the tumblers up at Grossinger's."

"Still," I said, "this place was so out of the way."

"Leah Gelenter," Larry said.

I just looked at him for a beat.

"Leah Gelenter?" I replied in the appropriate tone of disbelief.

"Leah Gelenter. How she found it, I don't know. But she told mom."

Leah was a bit of a character in the neighborhood, definitely leaning towards the Bohemian side, and had reputedly been a dancer with Martha Graham. Her daughter, Louise, was Larry's age and was one of his closer friends back then. I used to go up to their house to read her Little Lulu comics.

"Were they up there, Leah and Louise and whatever her husband's name was..."

Larry shrugged. "Probably Irving, they were all named Irving. Yeah, they were there the first year we first went up there, and then I think not."

"Boy, I don't remember them being there at all. Are you sure?"

"Well, I was pretty sure. But then I called Louise to confirm it?"

"Whoa, how did you find her?"

"How did you find what's her name, Varda? On the internet. I knew she was in Taos."

"Oh, how is she?"

"Sounds the same. Has a grown son but apparently no husband. She's a weaver, has owned a yarn shop for a long time. Loves Paul Krugman."

"You can take the girl out of the country..."

"And one other thing. She knows your friend."

Larry seemed to have timed this with the waitress' reappearance with our food. She held the dish with the gravy in front of Larry's face.

"Okay?"

"Great, fine. You did good. Ask your boss for a raise."

"Ha!" she said sardonically as she left the table.

Varda had written in one of her emails a rather long list of things she gotten into in her life and for all I knew was still into. One of them was weaving. And I had learned that she lived for several decades in Santa Fe.

"Yeah," Larry said, after dipping a couple of French fries into the gravy and scarfing them down, "I asked her about Dean's and told her why I was asking, and when I mentioned Varda's name she said, after a totally unnecessary squeal, that she knew Varda. Apparently she had been a customer from time to time. Louise wasn't at Dean's in 1957, of course, so she had no idea Varda had been there. She got a huge kick out of that."

"Wow, curiouser and curiouser."

"I got more," Larry said smugly. He just looked at me and took an extra big bite of his burger, forcing me to wait until he finished carefully chewing and swallowing before he continued.

"I thought: who else was up there that might remember where it was."

"I tried Janie," I interrupted, as Larry's pace was insufferably glacial at this point, "and I –"

“Didn’t try Ronnie, though, did you?” He took another bite. Ron Dressler was another kid who summered at Dean’s.

“Ron didn’t remember much more than we do. He’d only been there for a couple of summers, which I forgot. He asked me why all of a sudden this interest so I explained it to him and when I mentioned Varda –“

“He wasn’t there that summer.”

“Right, but that didn’t stop him from knowing Varda. She should have run for mayor.”

“Wait, he knew her? How?” I was finding these revelations a lot more depressing than surprising, although they were obviously that as well.

“He says she went out with a friend of his at City College. He remembers her as, his words, “beautiful, sexy and sweet.”

This seemed like the right moment to take a bite of my pickle, which tasted better than it looked, and I quickly followed it up with a healthy bite of the sandwich, which didn’t. Another connection. There she was, popping up like Zelig or Forrest Gump in all these scenes from my past. I was an equal opportunity atheist and notions of kismet or destiny didn’t have any more play with me than prayer or blessings. I tried, like a police artist, to sketch the grown-up version of the ten year-old face I barely remembered, to place her with Pete, Jody, Ron and Louise. Larry must have sensed my vibes.

“What did you guys do, anyway?”

I just stared at him in limited comprehension.

“Up at Dean’s, you and Varda, what did you do?”

“I don’t know. We were ten. We played, I guess. Went swimming.”

“D’j’ever kiss her?”

“No,” I said emphatically, but really not sure at all. “I have a vague recollection of holding hands, maybe.” We ate without talking for a while. My mind immediately drifted off again to Dean’s, Varda and 1957. It had become my default setting.

“So what did Louise remember about Dean’s?”

“One of Mrs. Dean’s sons she had a crush on and eating a lot of mutton.”

“She couldn’t have remembered where it was though.”

“No, she didn’t. But she remembered there was a cemetery there, which I –“

“Oh,yeah, I remember that.”

“Right. So I did a check of cemeteries, starting with one called Baker Cemetery.”

“Mr. Baker’s son,” I nodded.

“Exactly. A lot of Bakers there, it turns out. And there was actually a list of who was interred. And on that list, bro, was Fannie Dean.”

A slumped in my chair with a big smile on my face. My brother pulled a paper out of his pocket and slammed it dramatically on the table.

“Is that the cemetery list?” I asked.

“Better,” said Larry. “It’s directions to Dean’s”

-oOo-

He watches her go

Once we got into gear, the emails between me and Varda came fast and furious. Whether it was just her nature (something I mulled over quite a bit) or whether our reconnecting had tapped into some particularly overflowing keg, we were writing daily, sometimes twice a day. She wrote somewhat sketchily of her history, but what she mentioned had impact. Her teen years with an abusive father who was sometimes there and sometimes not, her mother's alcoholism, her grandparents' (who brought her and her siblings up) disappointment in their 'Vardenu' not fulfilling her potential, her estrangement from her brother Jonathan, which included a heavy dose of hostility, her exploration of much of what the Baby Boomer Generation had become fascinated with, Eastern religion and mystical disciplines, New Age occultism, transformational therapy, and a deconstructionist approach to establishment structure, particularly (at least as of the time I got in touch with her) the primary education system. All the while immersing herself in violin, sarod, several forms of dance (including folk dancing, a staple of leftwing culture with which I was intimately familiar), weaving and singing.

It sounded like she had been poor much of her life as well, two marriages that she only mentioned, didn't characterize, a son, and a new grandchild at whose homebirth she had participated. She was contemplating moving back east to live with an old boyfriend to whom she had become engaged. She had converted to Islam and become a Sufi and had spent time in Israel working with the Palestinians, both of which had utterly dismayed her family (particularly her brother Jonathan). She had just gotten an education-related degree and sent me a couple of her papers (which I read). It was from one of the papers about family history that I got much of my information about what her early life had been. And there was a suggestion of a breakdown at some point.

She also sent me links that reflected some of her connections: An alternative education guru and a Korean yoga center (that looked an awful lot like tai chi). She was constantly sending me links to the kinds of things I had routinely felt were well outside my frame of reference. But in every instance I found commonality in the thinking that was being expressed, even if the dressing was a bit outlandish. I doubt that she was sizing me up and figuring out what would fit. It seemed more intuitive on her part, that she figured whatever interested and stimulated her would likely be of interest to me as well. With one link she wrote: "please listen to this in full, it's fantastic. It may open up for you some of what you are looking to understand."

I had no idea what she was referring to by that, I hadn't suggested that I was on any kind of spiritual quest. Was she referring to my interest in our past?

I tended to be reactive but supportive in writing back, trying not to be at all judgmental, just asking further questions on the things she brought up, and talking about myself here and there. But I spent a fair amount of time on each letter, with as much attention to language and form as to substance and information. Letter-writing had always been a love and strength for me, and I wrote some letters which pleased me as much as if I had just written a new song or play.

I felt like a character in a Victorian novel, setting aside time each morning to tend to my correspondence.

But mostly I pored over each new letter trying to find my ten year-old love, trying to trace a line back through the haphazardly unfolding history to that summer, trying to see the dreams and potential she had and how she had gotten buffeted about so fiercely and hit so hard and so often by life that something essential had been lost or ignored.

A persistent yearning embodied me as I read each new revelation. I wanted to have been there to help, to protect, to cherish, to nurture and to share.

But I also began to suspect that Larry was right on some level. I didn't want her as a lover; that was never an issue for me. Looking at the few 2011 photos I had seen, I had felt nothing resembling that kind of a spark. In part because in our sixties we don't exactly exude a lot of sexuality, but more because that 1957 look in her eyes wasn't there; that look that I fell in love with and that I was so invested in rediscovering. That look that I probably totally made up.

But this correspondence did occupy my thoughts. I shared things here and there with Robin that Varda had written, but I didn't think it was particularly important to her. She wasn't jealous and she had, as she usually had, many balls in the air. Of course, she would listen to anything I wanted to talk about, but after she got home for dinner and we dealt with the kids, there were always phone calls to make and emails to check of her own.

Still, none of that was the reason I was so frugal in my sharing of what was to me the biggest deal in my life at the moment. I couldn't account even to myself for the passion I was bringing to my pursuit of the ten year-old Varda through the 64 year old Varda. And so I felt guilty and tended to be circumspect and somewhat disaffected in communicating whatever the most recent email revealed. For example, the great warmth I felt at reading the following:

"I am guessing that what you are sensing is what I would call a heart memory, that we were both touched or moved by the sense of connection, which was deep, and that the inner recognition probably contributed to seeing each other with a sense of beauty, with the eye of the beholder. I am sure that I had a romantic sense of connection with you too, and that it meant a lot to me too. Whatever memories or sense of things from then that come up as I'm reaching for trying to remember (remember that song from the Fantasticks, one of my favorite shows) what I might have felt from us being together there are connected to a sense of comfort and ease with you, a kind of quality of getting along in a simple way of feeling known and comfortable. So just because my memory isn't so hot doesn't mean that it wasn't meaningful and significant for me too, because I am sure it was."

That's the stuff I was looking for, the shared appreciation of how precious that summer was; the validation of this effort to rediscover it – no, not rediscover. Recover. But I was nagged by the notion that she was just humoring me.

Larry was right. I really didn't want to, and perhaps felt I couldn't, share this obsessive focus of my life with my wife. She would have every right to ask where that passion is in our marriage.

One Sunday afternoon I called her.

"Varda, it's Albi."

"Yes," she said.

Not hi. Not wow, it's great to hear from you. Not I'm so glad you called.

Just yes.

But my takeaway was form, not substance. I thought for a brief and yet far-reaching moment that I recognized her voice.

The conversation had much the same effect on the tone of our communicating as the emails did. The more familiar we got with the present, the less accessible was the familiarity with the past. I didn't want to be rude, but part of me wanted to ask:

"Excuse me, is Varda 1957 there?"

She would be coming back east to see her fiancé, Daniel, who now went by the name Abdul Rahman, and would make it a point to find time to visit. It seemed likely that she would be accompanied by Daniel and that she would want to meet Robin. That was all fine, in fact I looked forward to it.

Forward was the only option, apparently. Sadly, there was no reverse gear.

-o0o-

What a fool believes...he sees

"What's fen?"

It had rained all day, and my friends had all driven into Warrensburg. I had opted to stay with Varda. We had exhausted all of our usual games, so I got out my mom's Scrabble set, which I liked mainly because she kept the tiles in a blue, pull string cloth bag that had originally housed a bottle of Royal Crown (a few years later, I took the plastic crown that was attached to the carton and glued it on my guitar).

"It's like a swamp, I think." I knew the word from having listened a gazillion times to my folks' copy of Gilbert and Sullivan's Ruddigore. It was mentioned in the ghost song. I didn't really know what it meant, however.

"I don't believe you," Varda said, smiling impishly at me.

"There's a dictionary up in the --"

"Let's go outside," Varda said, jumping up.

"It's still raining," I protested, but quickly poured the tiles back in the bag and dutifully followed her to the front door where we pressed our faces against the screen.

"Let's go to the pond."

Technically, we weren't allowed to, but that rule was frequently disregarded. Varda went out without bothering to put her shoes on, so I did the same. I walked better barefoot in any event. The path was muddy, the grass quite slippery, yet Varda danced over it all, with me doing my best to keep up.

"What do the frogs do in the rain?" she wondered. We couldn't find any, so that imponderable remained unresolved. We saw our share of earthworms, and I showed Varda a red eft I spotted. Being so unstable on my legs, I spent a lot of time looking down when I walked, which had some collateral benefits. But that little salamander made her day.

The rain had stopped. We meandered over to the barn and as we passed the Log Cabin, Mr. LaSousa came out. He was a very friendly older man, and one of the few up there who was not one of my parents' crowd. He had been coming to Dean's for many years.

He had an easel under his arm and a large pad and some charcoal. He loved to sketch.

"Albi, Vardenu," he called out to us. Looking back I strongly doubt that Sal LaSousa was Jewish. But these things rub off, I guess. We looked forward to the

communal lasagnas that Mrs. Dean let him organize a couple of times each summer. Varda's grandparents, who were about his age, had spent a week up at Dean's and he and they had become quite friendly. This was par for the course at summer resorts. It just seemed that much more organic at Dean's. He must have heard them refer to her that way.

"What are you drawing today?" Varda asked, peering at the pad, which was blank.

Mostly we saw him doing landscapes of the mountains.

"I'm going to try something different, I think," he said with a wink. "Always growing. That's what my father said. Always growing."

We walked with him as he started singing:

Hot diggity, dog ziggity

And I joined in. I made my folks turn on pop music every time we were in the car. Perry Como was a favorite. I had seen him sing this on TV and I particularly loved the Boom!

Boom! What you do to me

It's so new to me

What you do to me

Mr. LaSousa smiled broadly to encourage me to keep singing, and not missing a beat he sang even more lustily.

Hot diggity, dog ziggity

Boom! What you do to me

When you're holding me tight.

Varda's smile was more curious than joyful. She seemed to be stuck on trying to figure out what a dog ziggity was.

"Ah, this is perfect," as he cut off singing abruptly, and he set his easel down and started to set up his pad.

"You're going to paint the barn?" Varda asked.

"Sketch, no paint."

"I meant sketch." Varda said. "Can we watch?"

Mr. LaSousa and I answered "sure" simultaneously.

He worked quickly and brought to mind the goateed TV artist I loved to watch, Jon Gnagy, with his "kneaded eraser" which I thought was the coolest thing ever, despite the fact that I had no interest and less than no talent in art.

"It doesn't look like the barn," I said tactlessly.

"Yes it does," Varda insisted. "Stand back."

I took a few steps backwards. The lines got blurry and shapes emerged from strokes. It definitely looked like a barn now. Just not our barn.

"Do you ever draw people?" Varda asked.

“No,” Mr. LaSousa said. “It’s not nice to stick people in time like that. Even these little sheeps,” he added, pointing to some shapes in the front that I realized were lambs. There were no animals at all in front of *us*. They were either inside or around back.

“It’s really nice,” Varda said, and then turning to me, “I want to get an egg. Can you show me how?”

There didn’t seem to me to be a “how” to taking an egg out of a nest. They should have all been taken in the morning, in any event. But it was something to do together with Varda, so we started to walk off.

“Thanks, Mr. LaSousa,” I said as he continued his sketching and singing:

Said goodbye to my troubles, they went thataway

Ever since you came into my life

“Do you want eggs for dinner?” I asked as we entered the barn.

“No,” Varda said, trying to slowly approach and pick up a hen who just fluttered away.

“Why do you want an egg?”

“My mom is shampooing my hair tonight. She uses eggs.”

“Really? For your hair?”

“It adds protein,” Varda explained, trying for another hen.

The nests were all empty and I told Varda they collect all the eggs in the morning. But then I saw one that must have rolled off the nest and was partially hidden in some straw.

“Wait, here’s one,” I said.

“Oh, good,” Varda said, picking it up.

“I can carry it in my pocket, if you want. That’s what I always do.”

We started walking back up to the Main House. Varda stopped suddenly, looking up. She didn’t say anything, and I looked where she was looking and saw a rainbow. We both looked at it for a few minutes in silence. Then we started to walk on.

“I wonder how Mr. LaSousa sketches a rainbow,” she thought out loud.

I looked back at it and continued walking to keep up and my foot slid in the mud and I fell.

“Oh, are you okay?”

“Yeah, sure, but…” I stood up and pulled my pocket open a bit. The egg had broken.

“Too bad.”

All of a sudden Skippy, one of the farm mutts, came trotting up and without a moment’s hesitation stuck his muzzle in my pocket and started licking out the egg.

“Oh, good Skippy,” Varda said, squatting down and petting him as he ate. “Good doggie. Good dog ziggity,” she added.

It was all I could do to keep myself from petting her hair, just inches from my hand as she squatted beside me.

“I’m sorry I broke your egg,” I said.

“That’s okay,” Varda said. A few minutes of petting the usually frisky Skippy was worth a broken egg.

“I like your hair,” I added, after a moment’s pause.

Varda looked up at me with a look I hadn't seen before, not from Varda, not from anyone ever. I began to feel extremely uncomfortable. I wanted it to rain again. I wanted my friends to come back from Warrensburg. I wanted the dinner bell to ring.

I wanted her to never stop looking at me that way.

I wanted it to always be summer at Dean's.

-o0o-

No wise man has the power to reason away

"But how –" I stammered.

"I used the satellite view on GoogleMaps. There's one main road coming out of Athol and I just went bit by bit up the road until I saw something that looked like Dean's."

"So you don't really know –"

"I know, trust me. I had a nice chat with Cynthia Hyde, the town clerk, and she confirmed that that was the Dean's property. The owner is named Joe DeLongis. His wife is named Marlene, I got that from the tax rolls, and the address is on there. Cynthia said the number was unlisted but she was going to try to reach them because she knows someone who knows them and they're very nice so it shouldn't be a problem visiting the place, but meanwhile you have the address so maybe you want to write to them."

"Wow, Larry, I'm impressed." Larry dipped another fry into the gravy.

"It's the gravy. That's why I come here."

"Okay," I said, taking a healthy bite of my tuna which was tasting a lot better. I must have been grinning as I opened up the directions and started examining them.

"But I still don't get it. What are you expecting? What are you looking for?"

"You don't want to see the place again?"

"You think it's going to look like Dean's? What are you nuts?"

I finished chewing slowly, mulling it over. "I don't know. I don't know that I care. But it may feel like Dean's, and that's what I'm looking for, a feeling." Larry looked dubious.

"Wouldn't you like to eat a Dugan's cupcake again?" Dugan's was a local bakery that sold goods at our neighborhood supermarket. It was many decades out of business.

Larry smiled widely. "With that thick slab of fudge icing that you could pick up and mold like it was silly putty?"

"Yeah. Wouldn't you like to eat one again?"

"See, there it is. In your mind it tastes great, but I guarantee if you had one now you'd be sorely disappointed."

"No, but Larry, that's my point. It doesn't matter what it tastes like. It's the feeling of eating it. Wouldn't you like that feeling again?"

Larry spent a little extra time gravying up his next fry.

"I got a DVD of the Bilko shows," I said.

"Wow, how are they? Still funny?"

“Well, sort of, not so much like it was. *He’s* still very funny,” I explained, not wanting to get sidetracked. Phil Silvers’ fifties sitcom had been a big favorite in our house. “But here’s why I’m mentioning it. We watched that show every week,” I started.

“And then every week when it went into reruns,” Larry added.

“Exactly. I would have thought I knew every episode. But when I looked at the DVD case, I didn’t recognize more than one or two titles.”

“The Case of Harry Speakup,” Larry said enthusiastically. The classic episode that all fans of the show knew well.

“Right, and Doberman’s Sister,” I added, “but none of the others. And even when I started watching them, thinking seeing them I would remember ... nothing, nada. I didn’t remember more than one or two. But then something weird happened. There was one episode where some congressmen were investigating Camp Baxter to see if the army wasn’t spending too much money on the soldiers.” Larry shook his head indicating he had no recollection of that episode either. “I didn’t remember it all, just like the others. But at one point, as Bilko is trying to scam them into believing that the soldiers were living in abject poverty and very backward conditions, he’s asked if they have movies. ‘Oh, yes,’ he says, ‘we see movies every week. Although I’ve been lead to believe that some of the other camps are seeing talking pictures now.’”

Larry laughed. I think he mostly was just picturing the way Silvers would deliver the line, that phony earnest naïveté.

“The congressman stammered his astonishment, ‘You’re still seeing silent movies?’ and as he’s saying that, for some reason I’m thinking Francis X. Bushman.” I paused for effect. It didn’t seem to have any on Larry. “And the next thing out of Bilko’s mouth was, ‘Oh yes, the men are thinking about forming a Francis X. Bushman fan club.’”

“Hmm,” Larry said, getting a little more interested.

“I mean someone says silent films, how many dozens of actors come to your mind before you get to Francis X. Bushman? Larry, I’m telling you, although I had absolutely no recollection of ever seeing that episode before, I had seen it. We must have. And somewhere inside I remembered that joke. And somehow watching this otherwise totally unfamiliar episode was like a trigger, a gateway into some memory that I couldn’t get to any other way.”

Larry put the current gravy sopped fry down. He looked at me skeptically as he leaned back in his chair. “So what’s the gateway, Dean’s or that lady?”

“Well,” I sighed, “if I can get her to go there with me –“:

“And this isn’t an affair?”

“Stop it already, Larry. You know it isn’t.”

“It’s the kind of affair that only you could have,” Larry said, back at his food, “an affair of the head. A subconscious tryst, a mindmeld.”

The waitress came by unbidden to dump the check on the table and take away my plate. She didn’t ask if we wanted anything else.

“Let me ask you something, you tell me that this lady –“

“Stop saying ‘this lady.’ Her name is Varda, as you well know.”

“This lady sounds better. Okay, Varda has been through a lot. I mean we all have, right. And she hardly remembers that summer. You think her memories are going to be awakened, assuming you can talk her into driving up there?”

“I have no idea. Can’t hurt.”

“No?” Now it was Larry pausing for effect. “Abusive father, alcoholic mother, life has beaten up on her pretty bad –“

“Well –“

“I’m just going by what you told me. There’s probably a very solid reason why she doesn’t remember her childhood the way you do. It’s way too painful. And what you want her to do, I’m understanding this now, is find her repressed inner child and make herself vulnerable all over again so you can get off on it. And then where is she left?”

“Larry, I think you may be projecting a little bit here. She’s not a basket case. She’s very smart and functional and she knows what she’s doing.”

“Does she know what *you’re* doing?”

I just looked at him.

“Does Robin know what you’re doing?”

Another non-answer from me as I looked away and wondered did *I* know what I was doing?

“Have fun,” Larry said, pushing the check towards me. “This one’s on you.” I reached for my wallet. “But when this whole thing blows up in your face, I want you to remember one thing.”

“What’s that,” I asked, laying a twenty on the table.

“I’ve got dibs on Robin.”

-o0o-

What seems to be

It was Senior Day at the Bronx High School of Science in the late spring of 1963. After having the run of the school for most of the morning, I realized a fair number of my classmates were just leaving. So I headed for the train and made my way to 137th Street, up the hill to Convent Avenue and the High School of Music and Art. There were a few Bohemian girls at Science, but mostly it was what we called back then the “teased hair” set. Music and Art had much better pickings.

On this particular day I was looking for April Lang. A friend had told me about her (most of my friends were at M&A) and said she was probably the most desirable girl at the school, but he didn’t need to get too descriptive as I was already seduced by her intoxicating name (or so it seemed at the time; I had never known anyone named April, and in any event, I was easily intoxicated by what to me were exotic names). School had just gotten out when I arrived, with many kids milling about outside on this lovely spring day.

I spied several people I knew, including Sally Mechlem, another beauty whom I oddly wasn’t attracted to (particularly ironic since thirty years later we would reconnect and have a brief and somewhat disappointing fling). I asked her to point out April to me and as we waited I saw a boy walk out somewhat flamboyantly, shouting to a group of kids I didn’t know. His face was unmistakable, however. The pouting, sexy lips and the thick eyelashes. It was Varda’s brother, Jonathan.

“Sally, do you know that guy?”

“That’s Jonathan,” she said. “We have a couple of classes together.” Sally, unlike most of my buddies at M&A, was there for art, which meant Jonathan was as well. My only memory of him was his penchant for interrupting my intimate moments with Varda.

I watched him for a while. I didn’t think I wanted to talk to him, I didn’t think I had anything to say. And he and his friends were laughing it up pretty raucously. But I soon found myself walking across the street to him. He looked over and saw me coming, but didn’t register any sense of recognition.

Because I’m crippled I’m always surprised when folks don’t recognize me. But of course, I didn’t walk with a cane back in 1957. That actually came the following year as a result of an operation that didn’t quite work out the way the doctors had hoped.

“Jonathan?”

“Yeah,” he said, more indifferent than curious.

“You don’t remember me?”

“No,” he said, smirking at one of his friends who wasn’t paying any attention in any event.

“Albi, Albi Gorn.”

Still nothing.

“You spent a summer up at a resort called Dean’s a few years –“

“Oh, yeah, I remember that,” he said, without any apparent fondness. “Oh, you’re that guy that was with my sister.”

“Right,” I said, smiling broadly. “How is she?”

“Okay, I guess,” he said. His body language strongly suggested he’d had enough of this conversation.

“Well, you know, I’d love to talk to her. Do you mind giving me your phone number?”

“Um, I guess so. Sure,” he said, and as I pulled out a pen and the notebook I always carried, he rattled off the number. I thanked him, he said nothing, and I walked back to Sally.

Later on that evening, my heart was pounding furiously as I dialed the number.

Varda answered.

“Varda?”

“Yes.”

“It’s Albi, from Dean’s?”

“Yes,” she said. No surprise, no delight, hardly any affect at all. We talked for a while: Didn’t Jonathan tell her I met him? No. Was I at M&A? No, I was at Science. She was at Hunter.

And then I asked if she wanted to meet somewhere.

“Oh. Okay.”

“How about the Cloisters?”

“Okay, I go there a lot.”

“Me too,” I said. “Funny,” I joked, “I never saw you there.”

Crickets.

I suggested a day and time. She wasn’t sure of her schedule but thought it was probably okay. She took my number and told me she’d get back to me to confirm it.

She said bye. It was a “bye” I recognized, said in two syllables, almost musical. It was the only ‘Varda’ thing she said, the only time her voice, no not her voice, the only time *she* sounded familiar.

About an hour later, she called back.

“Albi?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s Varda. Look, I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Well,” I said, “we can find another time.”

“It’s not the time,” she said. “I just don’t think it’s such a good idea.”

“Oh.”

I had had plenty of practice in rejections, and I knew they began to fester the longer you held onto them. So I said my bye in one, very unmusical syllable, trying hard not to sound angry or hurt. For one brief moment there was a sense of possibility in the silence that followed, but then...

“Okay, bye.”

And I started my 47 year vigil.

-oOo-

Is always better than nothing

I waited in my car at 242nd and Broadway. Varda’s bus was supposed to pull into Port Authority a little before four. Her fiancé was not coming with her, so she had to take a bus down. It was an overcast Friday afternoon. I got there at five and called her cell but I assumed if she was in the subway there’d be no reception. I just left a message that I was there, and where “there” was since she could exit the station via various staircases on either side of the street.

Eventually she called back. Torrential rains in Massachusetts, delays on the subway, she was at 205th (where the train comes up from underground, giving her phone access).

It was another half hour until she finally arrived and she called again as she wasn’t sure where north and south and east and west were. Finally, I saw her walking towards the car in a light mist.

I had seen pictures of her, so I knew what she looked like. I hadn’t anticipated how short she was. Scoliosis had given her a slight hump (which she had told me about) but also taken about four inches of height from her. She was probably the same height now as she was back in 1957.

She smiled very warmly and we hugged. The scoliosis had compressed her body a bit as well. I could see the ten year old Varda’s features, but they came together differently and made for a different whole.

As on the phone, her voice, her cadence, her affect were all familiar. And talking came easy for both of us. As did listening.

We made our way back to Hastings and she met Robin. We had a quick bite and I drove her to the synagogue as she had asked to attend service. It was Sukkot, and there is a tradition of inviting a stranger in on this holiday, an Ushpizin. So Varda took on that role.

She chatted up the rabbi after the service and it turned out he had officiated at a marriage of someone in New Mexico that she knew. She told a congregant that she liked her purple shoes. After a brief conversation it turned out they knew someone in common.

She had always been there, just beyond the periphery.

We talked late into the night and much of the following day, never leaving the kitchen as I cooked and baked for a temple sponsored, once monthly participation in a soup kitchen for the homeless in nearby Yonkers.

She did most of the talking, filling in some of the details of her life. Whatever bright moments she alluded to were invariably followed by disappointment, frustration, betrayal or tragedy. There had been a few men, including two husbands. The relationships ended poorly. For most of her life she had had no profession, only very recently earning a master's (and accumulating a huge student loan debt in the process). There was a period where she was on welfare and cleaning houses to get by. Her relationship with her family, particularly with Jonathan, had been quite rocky over the years. She had met her current partner several decades ago when they were both studying Islam and converting to Sufism. He had gone with her to Israel/Palestine, to work with Muslim and Jewish children. He had asked her to marry him then, but she didn't feel right about it, and then many years and several marriages later they had reconnected.

Her current situation was dire. Owing to some unspecified incident, which I did not ask her to flesh out, she had been coerced into resigning her teaching position and in the process having her license suspended. Daniel had partial custody of two adopted girls, eight and ten, and his ex and her new partner were splitting up, with the girls acting out and the dynamics getting extremely volatile. He had no money either and lived in a Collins Brothers like apartment in Northampton that Varda had made some token attempts at organizing while he sunk deeper and deeper into his computer trying to reconcile cold fusion and being an administrator for Wikiversity. Varda was still trying to figure out whether her love for him could sustain her through the daunting complexities of entering his entangled life.

And she talked about being the target of great hostility from a number of people in her life, like the wives and girlfriends of some of her exes, including Daniel's, and most painfully, her brother Jonathan, whom she had hoped to see on this trip but who had answered her email with a characteristically vituperative reply. Her mother had moved to Israel with her two youngest kids; her father died alone in New Jersey.

"The men in my life, I looked to them for shelter, for protection. And when I came to realize how futile that was, I swore off men for over a dozen years, before Daniel and I reconnected." There were pauses in all this that themselves spoke volumes. "I'm tired," she added, as she refolded the paper napkin in front of her for the umpteenth time.

Was I just another predatory man in her life, wanting to get off on that ten year old beauty that had haunted me all these years, and leave the 64 year old Varda to fend for herself once I had my way with her, once I had wooed her into allowing me to once again see the love in her eyes?

After dinner, as the kids ran back down to the computers and Robin set to work casting the 4th grade musical she was directing, we went into the living room to watch the video of Varda's family.

Varda walked over to a framed sketch on the wall. It was Sal LaSousa's picture of the barn that we had seen him draw all those years ago. He had given it to my mom as a

present since she would play all his favorite pop tunes that he loved singing along with on the dining room piano. Varda looked at it for quite some time.

“Is this Dean’s?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said, a bit relieved that she recognized it. “We actually saw the guy draw this, don’t you remember?”

“Maybe,” she said, very weakly. Maybe she was just trying to please me. Maybe this was a Bilko episode for her.

We sat on the couch and started the video running. It was a mostly chronological series of short clips of family events. It started with a seder when Varda was two or three. It included shots of her grandparents and parents (whom I did not recognize at all) and a lot of interactions with Jonathan (whose face I had remembered with incredible accuracy). There was footage from vacations on Long Island and some other, unspecified, upstate location. Shots of them playing in the snow with her father rubbing some slush in Jonathan’s face.

“That’s what he would do,” she said, “rub snow in our faces.” When she spoke it always sounded like she was very carefully choosing her words. You could see her thinking, editing. Her speech had very little emotion in it. But in the increasingly illuminated context of her history, the emotion was obvious. I felt as though her calm and dispassionate manner was a calculated attempt not to interfere with the feeling expressing itself in some other, purer, intuitive way.

Her narration was sparse, mostly just identifying people and places. But sometimes more pointed.

“We were so close,” she said of herself and Jonathan, as they cavorted for the camera in partial nudity after coming out of the bath.

We soon reached Varda at the age I knew her.

“God, you were so beautiful,” I said, immediately regretting it. In the first instance because using the past tense seemed a bit tactless; second, because it underscored how much more passionate my feelings for the memory of her were than my feelings for her now; and finally, Robin was sitting in the room with us, looking up at the video from time to time, and I rarely said things like that to her, despite the fact that I found her, even at 47, every bit as beautiful as Varda ever was.

And then, Dean’s. There was only fifteen or twenty seconds worth all told, but they hit me like a long lost smell or taste. A Dugan’s cupcake. One section was at the cottage behind the Main House. And another very short snippet of her father and one of the kids by the pond, which I wanted to freeze so that I could explore every pixel.

Varda’s younger brother David had been born shortly before that summer and her sister Monshu was born within the year, and so the video became mostly about them for the next half hour, with Varda and Jonathan being relegated to the occasional shot holding or playing with the infants. There were the obligatory shots of some school performances, dance, puppetry and general mugging. And it seemed that every time she looked at the camera she either closed her eyes or made a face. Finally, I got to see her in her teens, where her body had filled out and she had found grace and the beginnings of sexuality.

She had apparently gotten into folk dancing at Ethical Culture, and there was a shot of her and Jonathan dancing the Salty Dog Rag, a staple of any folk dance evening, as idiosyncratic as it seemed amidst the Balkan, Greek, Russian and Israeli dances.

“Oh, Salty Dog Rag,” I said, another warm wisp of memory washing over me. I thought back to how whenever this song started to play, there would be a mad scramble on the dance floor as people sought out their favorite partners for this particular number, as she and Jonathan must have just before the camera started rolling.

The dancing was organic between the two of them, comfortable. You could see they had danced this dance together many times before. Although the film was, of course, silent, I could hear Red Foley singing:

*One foot front, drag it back
Then you start to ball the jack.
You shake and you break and then you sag,
If your partner zigs you're supposed to zag.*

I didn't look at her, sitting next to me on the couch staring up at the screen, nor was her crying audible. But I could feel her tears, crying for all that was lost that seemed now impossible to retrieve.

I don't know if she felt *my* tears, though, as I looked at the vulnerable, innocent and lovely child unaware of the heartache to come, like I was reopening some novel and being reintroduced to the tragic heroin whose dreams would soon founder and shatter upon the shoals.

If your partner zigs you're supposed to zag.

-oOo-

And nothing at all keeps sending him

Varda and I had spent the late August afternoon by the pool swimming, splashing, finding meaningless projects for Jonathan to keep him out of our hair, and even catching frogs, the guilty pleasure of which Varda had rationalized by naming them and having conversations with them each day. The lives of a couple of them had become quite complicated but she followed it all closely and chronicled their day-to-day activities (anticipating Jane Goodall by a good three years).

The nights had grown colder and the pool was noticeably cooler, particularly when going back in after the obligatory half hour wait following eating the afternoon snack.

“Come on,” I urged her. I was swimming in an inner tube and I had another one I was holding for her. We had gotten back in before the other kids so I grabbed these incalculably desirable objects for our use.

“It's cold.”

“Just dive in,” I yelled back. “You'll get used to it.”

“It's cold,” she repeated, taking a tentative step further, and allowing another inch of her body into the water.

“I'm in a warm spot,” I said, not too loudly since that observation always evoked pee jokes from Jonathan.

“It's cold over here,” she said, taking another step.

“Swim to the warm spot,” I said as I drifted back, leaving her tube to mark the spot.

She dove in and quickly found her way to the tube.

“Oooh,” she said. “It is warmer here.”

We paddled around in the tubes for a short while, and then remembered, as we did every day, that it was more fun without them.

When the time came on any particular day to go back to our houses, which were at opposite ends of the farm, we walked together until our paths diverged. At that point it was always Varda’s habit to keep walking in my direction and to only say goodbye when we got to my house. On one occasion when we got to the divergence I suggested walking up to her place, but she clearly didn’t like that idea. The small talk just before we actually separated was perhaps the sweetest part of the day. Every second was precious. And our folks always left us alone.

Independence.

“Later, alligator,” I said as I walked into the New House.

“Soon, raccoon,” she answered.

I went back and changed out of my bathing suit. I picked up the current issue of *Mad*, which I had read probably a dozen times, as had every other kid up there, and I leafed through it idly, without really paying attention.

The dinner bell rang.

I jumped off of the captain’s bed that I had from somewhere gotten the notion had been specially built for me when the New House was erected. I hit the door just as Janie did and we walked off to the Main House. Hank Pizer (from Brooklyn) and Andy Meltzer (from the Bronx) came out of the poolroom as we passed, with Hank intoning in TV voiceover style:

“Dumbbells are not dumb!” and Janie and I joined in. This line, also from that issue of *Mad*, Ernie Kovacs’ *Believe it or Don’t*, had become a signature line of the summer, and invariably set off a general exchange of further lines.

“Ducks do not fly,” Andy said, and Hank added at a somewhat lower tone, “they’re actually great jumpers.”

“You can boil an egg,” and we all laughed, although none of us knew why that one was funny.

We walked up the steps and into the dining room.

“Going to sit with your girlfriend?” Andy teased, only to get jolted by an elbow from Janie, who had established herself as my bodyguard, and was in any event sensitive to this kind of teasing since her several year crush on Herbie Dean, one of Mrs. Dean’s sons (who must have been in his thirties), had opened her up to her share of teasing.

I had taken to sitting with Varda and was disappointed this evening to see that her father had apparently driven up from the city. His schedule seemed quite different from our fathers’, and he would appear at quite unpredictable times. Varda spied me as soon as I walked in and placed her hand on the seat next to her that she reserved for me. This was the ritual for every meal, but there seemed to be some sense of urgency in her beckoning me this evening. And instead of her usual smile at me, there was a different look, but I couldn’t tell what it signified.

Varda turned impulsively to her mother.

“Can I stay with Albi’s family tonight?” she asked. We hadn’t talked about this at all, so I was quite surprised.

“I don’t know if there’s room there,” Mrs. Brahms started, but I broke in.

“Varda can sleep in my brother’s bed. He stayed in the city this year ‘cause of his asthma.”

“Oh,” she said, concerned. “I didn’t know you had a brother. I hope he’s all right.”

“Yeah, he’s fine,” I said.

“Well,” she started, looking back at her husband who was preoccupied with trying to get Jonathan to sit still in his seat, and then back at Varda “you know, honey, your father came all the way up –“

“Please,” Varda said, employing the unmistakable pleading tone that passed for logical reasoning in the language of ten year-olds.

“Hmmm. Let me make sure it’s okay with your mom,” she said.

Despite the remote, secluded and rustic atmosphere of Dean’s, the dining room was just another typically noisy resort dining room during meals. I tended to hear sounds selectively. When they brought out the platter of corn, I heard Hank and Andy almost in unison start singing:

The corn is as high as an elephant’s eye

And then Hank continued in a diminuendo born of the realization that Andy was no longer accompanying him:

And it looks like it’s growing...

I didn’t particularly pay attention to Varda’s mom going over to my mom, as I knew she would say it was okay. But I did hear my mom say:

“Of course, dear. She can stay in Larry’s bed. We’d love to have her.” There was some other interchange that I didn’t get, as Varda’s mom had her back to me. But then my mom observed: “Varda and Albi have really found each other this summer, haven’t they?” I looked to see if Varda heard that, but she was distracted, trying to prevent David from throwing his corn kernels, and maybe more distracted by her father’s increasingly vicious pulls on Jonathan’s arm.

We skipped dessert and joined a bunch of the other families on a trip to Sun Canyon to get ‘Carvel.” I went with Varda’s folks in their car. We drove off down the dirt road for a while.

“Jonathan,” her dad suddenly yelled, “put your arm inside. How many times do I have to tell you.”

There was silence and Varda, who had seemed more relaxed after we had set up the sleepover, tensed up again.

“Remember Mr. Baker’s son,” I said.

Varda’s mom looked back at me, and I notice that she was nursing David. I had never seen anyone do that before and it definitely threw me.

“Who is Mr. Baker?” she asked.

I had no idea. It had become standard among the grownups to chastise us for sticking our arms out of the car windows by issuing that warning. We had been told that Mr. Baker’s son lost an arm by sticking it out the window, but we had heard it so much that it lost all of its impact and we typically cheekily repeated it in answer to any cautionary warning we received.

“Don’t run in the dining room,” a parent would say.

“Remember Mr. Baker’s son,” we would reply.

“Is this it?” Mr. Brahms asked, referring to a turn off the road. Mrs. Brahms turned back and nodded and we drove into Sun Canyon and everyone forgot about Mr. Baker.

When we returned about an hour later, Varda and I tried to find some private spot away from my friends and Jonathan, but privacy was hard to come by at Dean’s. Eventually we all went in and a few of us, including Varda, went upstairs in the New House to listen to my mom read a chapter from Winnie The Pooh, the incomparable chapter about the heffalumps which had us all in stitches, as it always did.

All but Varda, who smiled, but never laughed once.

In fact, she had never laughed once the entire summer.

After Pooh figured out how silly he had been, we went back downstairs and settled into bed in my room. After my mom had turned out the lights, we lay there in silence for a while. Finally, Varda said.

“My dad yells a lot.”

There was more silence. Our eyes were now accustomed to the dark and we could see a little. She sat up suddenly in bed.

“Oh, there’s a meteor shower tonight. Do you want to go see it?”

“Where?”

“Anywhere outside.”

I didn’t think we were supposed to go out after we were put to sleep, and I had never been a disobedient kid. But it was Dean’s.

We cautiously opened the door and I could hear cackling from the kitchenette down the hall where the grownups gathered to play cards. We walked outside and straight to the swinging chair.

We were neither of us sure what to be looking for, but soon enough the streaks shot across the sky as we gently rocked. The countryside was as noisy as the dining room with the crickets and tree frogs, but it was a much more soothing noise.

“We’re leaving tomorrow,” Varda said, without looking over at me. “That’s why my dad came up.”

I knew I was supposed to say something. But nothing came out.

And then almost imperceptibly, she moved her hand on top of mine, and with a first-time gentleness I would never know again, squeezed, as we watched the Perseids, listened to the croaking chorus, and both started to silently cry.

-o0o-

Somewhere back in her long ago where he can still believe there’s a place in her life

Varda stayed with us for a week. I went to work, she went into the city, visiting relatives (although, much to her regret, not her brother Jonathan), classmates from Hunter, associates from the alternative education organization which conference she had been attending when I first contacted her, a Dahn Yoga Center, and even joining the Occupy Wall Streeters one day. She would take the subway back each evening, call me, and I would come pick her up at 242nd in the Bronx. We’d then start talking on the way

back to my house and then on into the night for a couple of hours, about her day, my day, and all the loosely related histories and philosophies that suggested themselves to us.

There was an incident back at Northampton with Varda's fiancé and his ex-wife and kids. Varda finished a long talk with him, and just sat in the kitchen, looking depleted.

"Complicated," was all I could offer. She smiled and said silently *What can I do?* with a surprisingly Jewish upturned palms shrug. This week had been a vacation from the arduous business of relationship building that she would the following day return to, the oppressive student loan, the dim prospects for employment, the lack of funds to even allow her to move east, all things pulling her back to her life, when I felt that I still had unfinished business with her here. I clearly had no idea how to get what I wanted, due in large part to not knowing what I wanted. But I knew that I would recognize it when I got it.

"I have like nothing going on at work tomorrow," I said. "I can take the day off." She looked at me slightly perplexed. "I'd be happy to drive you back to Northampton," I explained.

"Okay," she said, not making any attempt to try to talk me out of it.

We left early the following morning. It was a three-hour drive to Northampton...if I went straight there. I got on the Saw Mill and drove north until the exit for 287 that would take us to 95 that would take us to Massachusetts. The exit also took us the other way to the Tappan Zee Bridge and to 87 north.

I took a deep breath. "How do you feel about going to Dean's?" I said, not looking over at her.

"Oh good," she said, in her usual tone, "I was hoping we could do that. I'll phone Abdul Rahman and let him know."

I exhaled my breath as she got out her cell and I headed over the bridge.

The trip up took us four hours. Much of the time was spent looking at the increasingly beautiful scenery, as the further north we got the more aflame the woods turned. I shared with her other memories I had of Dean's, ones in the years before she came up. I told her about my years at summer camp that followed, and my summers in Goldensbridge, the old lefty community my folks had moved into in the 60s. I began to note that every story I told seemed to be connected to another summer romance.

"Warrensburg?" Varda said as we exited at Exit 23.

"Yeah. We went there for movies and ice cream," I explained. "You may not have ever actually gone. I don't remember us going there together."

"Oh," she said.

"Look," I said, a bit hesitantly, "Dean's is currently owned by a guy named Joe DeLongis. I actually wrote to him a while back, asking if I, if we could come visit. But he never answered my letter."

"Oh," said Varda.

"So I'm not quite sure," I continued, "if we'll --"

"We'll knock on the door and introduce ourselves."

Another hurdle disposed of, at least temporarily. Not being able to have access to the property after such a long and impulsive drive would have been quite a letdown. At least she was willing to be aggressive about the issue.

We made a convoluted series of turns in rapid succession and found ourselves at Athol. I didn't remember the town at all. A couple of more turns and we found Mountain Road, which seemed somewhat familiar. It was paved, which I don't believe was the case back then, but I didn't really know. In less than a mile, and much less time than I remembered it taking, I saw Baker Cemetery looming in front of us.

"Mrs. Dean and her first husband, Arthur, are buried in there," I explained. "Do you remember her?"

"I think so," Varda said. "She had a very warm smile, very sun-wrinkled face."

We drove a bit more and I saw the driveway. There was a garbage can shed at the base as we made our left turn. I stopped for a second looking to the right.

"What are you looking at?"

"There was a tree there, I don't know what kind, but the branches were down to the ground and yet if you crawled through them there was like a space at the base of the trunk you could sit at. It was like a secret hideaway."

"Ours?" Varda asked.

"Umm, I don't remember if you and I went there."

"I think we did," Varda said, after considering it a while, again with the smile. "But I don't see the tree there now."

"No," I confirmed sadly, "no more."

The Main House was in view. On the side we were approaching from the porch and second floor balcony and the outside stairway leading up were still intact, although a different color. The steps leading up to the porch remained and looked to be the same concrete steps from the 50s. But at the top was just a flat landing, not the semi enclosed porch where the dinner gong, screen door, shuttered windows, Adirondack chairs and flyswatters had so indelibly etched the time and place in my mind. There were two cars parked outside. I parked mine next to theirs and heard a dog barking from inside the house. I had a foreboding image of some surly dude coming out with a shotgun as we walked up the steps and Varda rang the bell.

No one answered. The dog kept barking, although without a lot of spirit. There seemed to be a light on in the room beyond the room visible through the window, the room that had been the kitchen.

"Hello," Varda called out, "anybody home?"

I walked around to the enclosed porch and looked at the various objects located about. No Adirondack chairs, just a lot of very contemporary junk.

No inverted artillery shell for calling us in to eat.

Walking down the steps, we quickly saw that the rec room and Annex were gone.

"Wasn't there a well here?" Varda asked plaintively.

"Did you have a wish?" I asked.

She smiled and walked off down into the field.

"Well, we're trespassing now," I observed. This didn't seem to phase Varda at all.

The barn was gone, replaced with a new barn. The Log Cabin was still there, but with a curiously anachronistic roof. The field was totally overgrown. A machete would have been useful as we walked to the pond.

There was still water there, but it was at least three feet lower. The concrete retaining wall was there, although a bit broken up. The amazing underwater bridge

seemed to be gone, although it was impossible to see under the water very far. There were no frogs anywhere to be found.

We walked up the hill to the New House. It had apparently been torn down and replaced with a mundane one-story dwelling. The shuffleboard court next to it was almost completely faded and cracked. Varda stayed by the house looking at it for a while.

“That’s not the same –“

“I know,” she said.

We turned to go back to the car when we saw, under the tree, a swinging chair. Maybe it was in the same place, unlikely that it was the same swing, although it was in the Adirondack style. Varda walked over and sat down. She looked up at me and smiled and patted for me to join her.

I sat down and we sat in silence for one of those impossible to time moments. I was feeling quite disappointed, in Dean’s, in myself for having expected anything else, and for having dragged Varda back here, for having dragged Varda back.

And then I felt her hand rest on mine.

“I’m really glad we came,” she said.

Someday, somewhere, she will return

“I always wanted to join the Peace Corps,” Varda said. “Plus, if you take a public service job, they forgive your student loan debt,” she explained. “They need people to teach English. I could go to Korea and teach English there.”

“Hmm,” I interjected, not thinking she was particularly inviting comment.

“I am a magical princess,” she noted, more to herself than to me.

For the first time in our week together I heard hope. I realized I was really quite worried about her.

We talked in the present tense. We chatted. We experienced the view. We sat in comfortable silence. I was happy to be there with her, sad that we would soon be saying goodbye. Varda 1957, whom I had so fervently hoped would come into much sharper focus when I first emailed her back in August, had instead begun to fade and recede. That hope was DOA as soon as I got back her answer. My previously vague but otherwise unsullied memory of her was now being crowded out by all she had shared with me, every Varda of every decade and every lover, every home and every discipline, every joy and every sorrow. She had become unfixed in time. She was not just that little girl on the bench, but everything she had been since.

And I liked her.

And I felt like I liked her.

My new/old friend.

A warm spot.

When Varda had written me about ‘heart-memory’ and ‘inner recognition’ I happily embraced those images, or maybe more accurately, I embraced the language, without ever really buying into the concepts. But here, as we entered Massachusetts, I was totally comfortable with the notion that as hot as I had been that summer for those cobalt eyes peering out from those thick blond lashes, some other part of me was touching some other part of her. That’s what my heart remembered. We were a good fit. If we had ever become lovers, it probably wouldn’t have lasted a month. But being

friends, that had the potential, albeit somewhat retroactively, of being a lifetime deal. As a guy in one of the links she sent me said:

The misconception: Seeing is believing.

The reality: Believing is seeing.

I see Dean's.

-o0o-