

You're a Long Time Dead

by Lou Godbold

The telephone rang while she was brushing her teeth. Let it go to message, she thought, seeing 'Anonymous' come up on the screen. These annoying people who don't let you screen your calls.

"... So I was wondering if you're free for coffee," she heard over the electric toothbrush.

Gil! I was just thinking about you!

What she had actually been thinking as the toothbrush pounded her gums was that he would be the person she would call for on her deathbed, this loyalest and dearest of friends. Of course, his wife wouldn't allow her anywhere near should the situation be reversed. Sometimes she wondered what he had told his wife. "A comet streaking through the sky," was how he'd once described her and a couple of other women whom he had known and lost.

She spat and rinsed and considered what her response should be. There were errands to run and work to do, but that deathbed scene was still in her mind. Incautiously, she picked up the phone and hit 'last call.'

"So where should we meet?" he asked.

Mentally she went through the options: Café Figaro, but that was too far west, and anyway the coffee was too weak. Fix, but there the coffee was too strong.

"The only place with good coffee is Trader Joe's," she pouted. "But then we'd have to stand and make nice with the samples lady."

He laughed on the other end of the line. Not only was he unflinchingly loyal, but he laughed at her jokes too. An idea formed in her mind. She knew he loved adventure and relied on her to come up with the unexpected.

"What time do you need to be back?"

"Oh, two."

That was four hours from now. Adventure it was!

Drawing up to the gates at The Huntington Library she held her breath and then exhaled in relief to see that it was open before

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noon. Not that it mattered really; the streets in this part of town were more lush than the regular city blocks and theirs was not a friendship that needed more than sharing a view of leaves through a windshield to be happy.

At the ticket booth she whipped out cash and paid for both of them. It was her idea, so it would be her treat. It was an extravagant gesture seeing as he was a successful lawyer and she an unemployed writer, but it was part of their code — to act like equals. Sure, she let him open a door for her, but then she would open one in return. He knew enough to let her.

“Everyone likes the cactus garden, but I like these winding, secret trails,” she said, darting off under the trees. “Look, look!” she cried excitedly, spotting the camellias beside the path. A shocking pink and a subtle, blushing egg-custard. It was too early for the camellias to be in full bloom, but on a December day they seemed the very generosity of God.

The trail led them into the Zen garden, where milling visitors gazed at neatly raked designs in the grey stones. It was as barren and cold as Brighton beach.

“That’s next for me in my spiritual journey,” he announced. “Meditation.”

“I can’t see the point of emptying your mind. I’d rather it be filled with color, like those camellias.”

“Yes, but you’re not supposed to have all those thoughts and colors charging around. Meditation is a way of achieving peace, slowing things down.”

She was doubtful. Peace was the luxury to savor thoughts, not to obliterate them. “You know, all that yoga and meditation and stuff. It started out as a way for old Hindu men to deal with their mortality. They believed you only had a certain number of breaths and so by restricting them you would live longer!”

“I believe that too.”

“I believe in an allotted span, but not that if I hold my breath I’ll somehow stop the clock! You’re a long time dead. I want to live as fully as I can while I’m still here!”

Their circuit had brought them to the cactus garden.

“You wanted to know why I can't join Facebook,” he said. “My wife is on it and she would see all my friends — she'd be very threatened by you.”

Being cast as a femme fatale was actually quite flattering until he added, “We even argued about me staying in touch with Sue and Tiffany.”

Sue was in her sixties and probably grey-haired by now. Tiffany was fifteen and Gil's goddaughter.

They sat down on a bench facing a slope dotted with the brilliant vermilion of Red Hot Pokers — an impressionist masterpiece in ridged and feathered oils.

“But why is she so jealous? I know some men can't be trusted, but you would never betray your wife.”

“Ah, you see that's because we're not normal. Most people would think that you and I, like this (he motions to the companionable gap between their shoulders), is not normal. They'd attribute something else to it.”

She pondered this looking up at the branches overhanging the bench. Dark fronds like ungroomed whale's teeth against the blue, blue sky. She was suddenly very sad.

“It's funny,” she thought, “There are some moments that could tip from extreme sadness to extreme happiness.” She willed the moment to tip but it was suspended like the excruciating pause, the chronic hesitation, before the free-fall of orgasm.

“We really only have today,” she said, thinking again of the deathbed and glad that they were building memories before the regrets of a last parting. She saw that scene so clearly in her head. She wondered what is love when you already fear its loss? She wondered what other people would attribute to it.

