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CAMARILLO REDUX

When my wife Cynthia told me she had applied for a job at Cal State Channel Islands, I kept most of my thoughts to myself, but I knew how the hiring process worked, having taught at another university for thirty years. Cal State Channel Islands, a new campus, would want young PhDs just out of graduate school. Cynthia was just out of graduate school, but she was middle-aged, a “returning student.” However wise and worldly she might be, she had no chance unless as a fill-in or temporary. I wanted it to be otherwise. Our true-love, late-in-life, remarriages had cost us dearly, literally. We needed the money the job would bring.

One day in July, I came home after my summer-school class and found her exuberant: “I got the job; I got the job.”

“What job?”

“In Camarillo. At Cal State.”

“Camarillo?”

“Cal State Channel Islands. In Camarillo.”

She took my hands and swung me in a circle. Then she did a little dance. “A late-in-life marriage, as you’re always saying, and now a late-in-life career. Lucky me. I’m so happy. It’s so exciting.”

“I didn’t realize it was in Camarillo. I guess I wasn’t paying attention. My mom was always saying you don’t want to end up in Camarillo. She meant the state mental hospital.”

“Same place. Cal State took it over after the hospital was shut down. I thought you knew.”

“Maybe I did. I must have forgotten. Sorry.” But, no, I would not have forgotten. I could not tell Cynthia just then about the underwater kelp-like tangle of associations the name Camarillo evoked in me.

It was a long drive from North Hollywood in that pre-freeway era, and I thought my parents were taking me for a picnic in the country. We did sit at a wooden picnic table, and I remember green grass and tall trees. There

were many other tables. But I kept hearing distant wails, howls, and shouts. I must have asked my parents about the noises, but I don't remember their explanation. Now I know. Then I didn't.

My father left us at a picnic table and went into one of the buildings. He came right back, with another man, a tall, thin man wearing a blue denim shirt and jeans. The man was crying. My father was crying. I had never seen my father cry before. I remember wanting comfort from my mom. I remember looking up at her face. She glanced down, put her arm around me, and drew me to her side. She was not crying.

During the next few weeks, Cynthia visited the campus several times for meetings and orientations. She usually asked if I would go with her. "It's so beautiful," she said. But I always had an excuse. Camarillo is forty miles down the coast from our house, but she seemed to love the long commute. "It gives me time to think. Mostly about you." But late in September, after school was in session, the day finally came when I had to visit. She drove. She talked about her students.

"They're not as good as yours, not as well-prepared, but, my God, how they work. They're really motivated. I love them. They're so earnest."

We drove south on 101 past Ventura. Big-box malls and car dealerships with their familiar logos and brand names seemed attached to both sides of the freeway. All my adult life I had driven this highway, but I rarely rode as a passenger, which might have accounted for my noticing more than usual.

"A lot of them," Cynthia went on, "are the first in their families to go to college. Practically all of them work."

"Not like at my place."

We had reached the point on 101 where open fields loom up behind the wholesale outlets and the fast-food restaurants. Cynthia's students probably had parents or grandparents who worked in these fields. We took the Las Posas off-ramp, and within minutes the scene changed. The ground became littered with the aromatic debris of the recent harvest: cauliflower, cabbage, broccoli. This was the great Oxnard flood plain, among the most fertile places on earth. Tomatoes, squash, strawberries, lettuce, celery, eggplant, red peppers. In a few years, it would all be housing tracts, no doubt.

Cynthia turned left on Cawelti, and we headed toward the foothills. Off to my right was Port Hueneme and the ocean. For several miles we traveled past abandoned shanty communities where farm workers had once lived. I remembered such places from my childhood.

"I've been here before," I said.

"Where?"

"Right here. On this road. There were walnut orchards then."

“Tell me.”

“Later.” I pointed to the stop sign ahead. We had reached Lewis road. Cynthia turned right and in a few minutes we slowed down for the campus entrance. In the distance I noticed the hangers at the Point Mugu Naval Air Station and realized we were much closer to the ocean than to the City of Camarillo. I thought for a moment of Reagan. Air Force One used to land at Point Mugu; then Reagan would drive to the Western White House, just north of Santa Barbara. His latter-day mental disintegration reminded me of the tall, thin man. “Al Lehman, that’s his name,” I said, snapping my fingers.

“Who?”

“Oh, I just remembered something.”

She reached over and touched my forearm. Then she turned left between the stone pillars marking the campus entrance. Between here and the first building was a mile of winding road lined by sycamore trees. On the right was an abandoned, tangled walnut grove. That matched my memory: more walnut and lemon groves then, fewer open fields. On the left, foothills covered with cactus and ceonothus rose up from the flatland. Outcroppings of sandstone towered over the chaparral.

“This is where they hid the madhouse,” I said.

“I guess you’re right.”

“You can’t see the place from Lewis Road and certainly not from Highway 1 or 101. And trust me, Cynthia, it wasn’t always this serene.”

“That was then, this is now.”

“Think of the tens of thousands who drove up and down the coast and never knew it was here.”

“People know about it now. And they’ll know more and more about it in the future. Students will want to come here.” She pointed up a side canyon toward a phalanx of buildings under construction. “New dorms.”

“Nice,” I said.

We rounded a bend and the hospital, or rather the campus, sprang up before us. Neo-Spanish architecture of the thirties. Thick walls, arches, verandas, wrought iron everywhere. And, even now, bars on most of the windows. Forget it, I told myself.

On this September morning, the campus was shockingly beautiful and, yes, serene. Such a cozy nook, hidden away from the outside world. I felt Cynthia’s pride in being part of something new and important. I looked over at her and smiled. She smiled back as she turned into a parking lot. The moment I got out of the car, I became aware of the ocean breeze and the smell of chaparral, which grew to the edge of the lot.

“Follow me, my love,” said Cynthia. She took my hand and we crossed

the street. The two-story building in front of us reminded me of a California mission. “That way, through the arch.”

We walked along a driveway bordered by cobblestones into a small courtyard. A sign read “Future Home of the Food Court.” For now, a white van dispensed soft drinks and snacks. Around the van were blue mesh metal chairs and tables and a few patrons, most of whom read as they ate.

“Serious students hereabouts, just as you said.”

Cynthia laughed. “Keep going. Through the next arch.”

And through that second archway I glimpsed another world, like an open window in a Vermeer painting, full of a significance that eluded me for the moment. But I foresaw interpretation, if not clarity, soon enough. As we walked along, I noticed thick steel doors leading to wings of another building. A vast complex, I realized, buildings within buildings. I imagined hidden rooms and other, secret, courtyards. Then we walked into the painting: acres of bright green lawn, patches of flowers in bloom, stately sycamore trees, a few students strategically placed on the lawn, vine-covered arbors, absolute quiet. No picnic tables. A more bucolic scene was hard to imagine.

“What a surprise.”

“Meet you out here at two-fifteen?”

After her class, yes. “Show me where you teach.”

She led me into another small courtyard and then upstairs to a rooftop patio. “There,” she pointed through a window. “That’s where I teach.” It seemed like a pleasant enough classroom. I nodded and squeezed her arm. Her students awaited.

“Meet you at the lawn, after.”

I made my way downstairs and went outside. I walked a few steps along a central path and took a few steps to my left. I stood still. This is the exact spot, I told myself, knowing also that I couldn’t have known the exact spot.

To my right was an arbor covered with blossoming trumpet vines and bougainvillea. I walked over and sat down on a blue mesh metal bench. There seemed almost as many of these benches dotted around the campus as there used to be wooden picnic tables.

On our second visit, Al, the tall, thin man, reached out and took my hand and tried to crush my fingers. Or was he just giving me the first firm handshake that I remember? He kept smiling and nodding at me, but his face seemed twisted and broken. I do not remember him undressing, but he had taken off his shirt. Dark dots, like bug bites, covered his stomach. His back was crisscrossed with pale lines and dotted with bumps. My father

touched the man's back tenderly.

My mother had brought a cake. We sat at the picnic table while she portioned it out. Once again, I heard wails, howls, and shouts—but when I looked up at my mother, she kept smiling. Dozens of people sat at other picnic tables. The buildings surrounded us. I wanted to go home.

Many years later, in 1966, a few days after my father's death, my mother and I sat in the old North Hollywood house and she spoke about Al and my father. She shed no tears as she talked, and while that probably shouldn't have surprised me, it did. Before the war and before I was born, she said, Al had worked for several years in my father's plastering business. He was twenty years younger than my father. According to my mother, they were like father and son—which I think she found understandable but annoying. "He had no family that we knew of. Your father loved to talk while plastering. They talked about everything under the sun." The war brought the plastering business to a halt, and after Pearl Harbor my father was briefly employed by the government to help construct internment camps, first at Tule Lake, California, and later at Topaz, Utah. He spent the rest of the war years working at Lockheed Aircraft in Burbank.

Meanwhile, Al enlisted in the army, fought in the Philippines, was captured by the Japanese at the Bataan debacle, and spent the rest of his war years as a POW. "He wouldn't give up military secrets," my mother said. "And so they tortured him. Or so he claimed. But what secrets could he possibly have known?" For years after those two early visits to Camarillo that I remember, my father and Al exchanged postcards. Now and then my father visited him, alone. "Al was at Sawtelle for a while. Then at Camarillo. Back and forth. I don't know why." He was lucid as long as he took his medication, she said. He was finally discharged, part of the general release of inmates from mental hospitals during Reagan's governorship. "I never knew what happened to him after that. He was Jewish, you know. Maybe that's also why they tortured him. Anyway, they drove him crazy." After that talk with my mother, whenever I thought of Al, I imagined him homeless and wandering. During my childhood, my father occasionally mentioned Al to my mother, but never to me. My mother blossomed late into a happy woman and lived for another twenty years.

I had an hour to kill. I left the arbor and went through another archway to get outside of the buildings-within-buildings complex. I wanted to walk around the entire campus, but after a few minutes I happened upon another mesh bench facing a hillside. I sat down. Hawks circled overhead. Ceonothus bloomed. Game trails wound through the dense cactus and chaparral. I imagined rabbits and coyotes and rattlesnakes. I saw movement. A

deer! I saw a deer. Right next to campus. In the past, surely some of the patients must have enjoyed these sights.

After a half hour, I returned to the rooftop patio near Cynthia's classroom. I would not meet her at the central lawn. I had brought a novel to read, *Smilla's Sense of Snow*; it seemed utterly irrelevant to the corner of the earth where I now sat. Students moved to and fro.

"Did you read all three essays?"

"No. So what?"

"Korea came before Vietnam; that girl was wrong."

"But very, very sweet."

"Yeah, but she should have known."

"Whatever."

"That's why we're here, man."

"Korea has nukes. Iraq doesn't."

"You got that right."

When I realized we were driving a third time to see the tall, thin man with the crisscrossed lines on his pale back, I made a terrible mistake, among the worst of my life.

"I don't want to go," I told my father.

"Al loves to see you, Peter. It's good for him."

"I hate him," I said. "I hate him."

But did I? Or did I hate the haunting noises and the crowds of people around the picnic tables?

My parents began to argue furiously, and it was my fault.

"It doesn't hurt Peter," my father said, but I saw him staring at me in the rearview mirror.

"You don't know that," said my mother.

"Kids are resilient."

"Oh Christ, turn around and let's go home."

"What?"

"I don't want to see him anymore, either."

The car slowed. They fought even more. Finally, my mother said, "Stop the car, I want out."

"All right, goddammit." My father seemed purple with anger. His eyes were shining.

At the side of the road, my mother opened her door and got out. Then she opened my door and pulled me by the right arm, but my father had reached over the front seat and grabbed my left arm. I looked again at my father's face and for the second time I saw tears on his cheeks. "Please, son." I turned toward my mother. "Then go with her, Peter. Get the hell

out.”

My mother and I stood in the shade at the side of the road and watched the Dodge disappear from sight. Behind us, rows of dark tree trunks stretched out beneath a canopy of leaves, a tented, shadowy region that at first seemed alluring. My mother held my hand. Should I break free and go hide behind one of a hundred tree trunks?

“He’ll be back.” But she was speaking mostly to herself.

We stood waiting. Across the road and down a few hundred yards was a small colony of farm workers’ shacks. Several adults and many children watched us.

“Mexicans,” said my mother.

Before that moment I had not understood what the word meant.

“Here he comes.”

I wrenched away from my mother’s hand and raced back into the dark grove. “Peter! Come back here!” I reached a strip of plowed ground and tripped and fell and got up again and ducked behind a tree trunk. I peeked out. Now my mother was crying, holding her hands to her face. I ran back to her side. She put her arms around me.

Together we watched the Dodge approach. It seemed like hours. Attached to the front bumper were four canvas water bags which my father would use at the turnouts to keep the radiator from boiling dry as we labored up the Conejo grade on our way back to the San Fernando Valley. The Dodge came to a stop. My father leaned out the window.

“You win,” he said. “Let’s go home.”

“What am I going to do?” said my mother softly, looking down at me. “I have nowhere to go. I am at his mercy.”

Mercy? I didn’t know the word. Then, I didn’t know anything.

Cynthia’s class was entitled “Introduction to Multi-Cultural Literature.” As I waited for her to finish, I watched three young women sitting around one of the blue mesh metal tables. Two were Mexican, one Japanese. All wore low slung skirts, their midribs bare, rings in their navels.

“I went with Benny. We got wasted.”

“Like it was so sad. I cried.”

“When he thinks about her, like, dying, at the end. Oh God, please don’t let her die.”

“Benny is so cute.”

Two young men joined the young women, and I returned to my reading. The bells chimed, class over. Cynthia came out onto the rooftop patio. She was with three young men in baggy pants and white T-shirts, earrings and tattoos. She beckoned to me.

“So you guys are dolphins, huh?” I said. A Bottlenose Dolphin was the school’s mascot.

They smiled. “That’ll work,” said one of them.

As we walked back to the car, retracing our steps through the several archways, Cynthia and I agreed on the appropriateness of the dolphin as mascot, its apparent vitality, freedom, playfulness. And then, so that I could get a better idea of the whole campus, we drove around the perimeter road. At one point, behind the maintenance complex, I noticed a large fenced area containing discarded equipment—rusted boilers, old lockers, several tractors, and great stacks of decayed wooden picnic tables.

“Pull over,” I said.

“What?” She stopped the car as I gazed at the tables.

“Nothing, really. I just had a thought. Onward.”

We drove around the campus and back the way we came along the winding, sycamore-lined entrance road. I had watched while my father touched Al tenderly, embraced him, shed tears with him. “I hate him,” I had said.

“Did you enjoy yourself today?” asked Cynthia. “Wandering around the campus?” Her exuberance told me class had gone well, as usual.

“I did. I saw a lot. Maybe even learned a few things.”

“Something’s on your mind, obviously.” She smiled. She reached over and touched my forearm for the second time that day. “You’ll tell me eventually, won’t you?”

“Yes,” I said, but maybe not. “Think how most things in California change for the worse,” I said. “But not this place.”