Looking Both Ways

Stephen DeGange
LOOKING BOTH WAYS

No one came to visit unexpectedly. Months or years appeared and disappeared. Summer afternoons evaporated in a slow blur. Even in the autumn when people return from the lake or the shore or Europe, no one got in touch. It was odd. She was well liked and respected, had been. She had been elected head of several faculty committees. A few former students wrote her amusing notes or sent unorthodox poems now and again. One summer, forty years ago, two men fell in love with her, very much in love with her. There was no paucity of memories, no dearth of characters encountered along the way. But over the years no one came to visit and she noticed it particularly in the fall.

She detested breakfast. When she was younger she would dress as quickly as possible as early as possible and leave the house. She wanted nothing to do with food or morning smells in the kitchen. Her walks were just right, quick steps along a familiar path before the sun could burn its way into the damp early mist. There was a spot along the trail that ran off west of the paved road, a cubby hole, just where the woods began to climb into the hills. This was her nest, found when she was thirteen and cultivated sparsely through the years. No friends or visitors or lovers or relatives were taken there, ever; not because it had to be such a very secret place but because she imagined others would not appreciate it. She was generous in so many other ways. This was an escape from the unwanted, putrid aroma of coffee brewing and strips of bacon frying. Occasionally she considered going to her nest at night but never followed through. It remained year after year as a place to watch the first streaks of morning light rain down through old, flexed branches and new, shaking leaves. The roots and lower trunk of a dead elm held her back perfectly. In a favorite position her legs stretched out into a small crevice. She could pretend that she was paralyzed and could only move her eyes. Nettles and twigs and mossy rocks and wild mushrooms and jiggling ferns absorbed all sounds but the screeches and hoots of a few birds and the dull, distant bass rumble of a transport truck's gears. Her visits to the nest melded together. She could recall all of them, but not one. More
than eighty years of morning visits, eighty years of stolen quiet moods accumulated like pennies in a glass cannister. And best of all she avoided the foul bother of toasting bread and squeezing oranges for juice. Nest or no, she refused to walk into a kitchen before noon.

One of the men who courted her so zealously, the summer of her two men, had a special fancy for blueberry pancakes. He loved to make them. He loved to serve them and eat them with clumps of butter and showers of powdered confectionary sugar. Their romance suffered greatly on the blueberry pancake mornings. Her love, frisky and genuine as it was by day and night, could not embrace his morning banquets. As if he did not exist on those mornings she would stride out the back door, down the road, down the trail and straight to her nest. Minutes and hours were the same measure there. She gathered in as much time as she needed. When she would go back to the house, he would be sitting in an old bamboo cane chair on the side porch. Breakfast had been devoured with glee and the dishes washed and stacked. Each was ready and they loved each other very hard then.

Mornings now were ripe with thoughts of those mornings and all the others. She took her backward glances under darkness of covers. Early afternoon was soon enough to make a first appearance. No guests were kept waiting, no visitors or acquaintances put out by her gay lethargy. She used to think that you could never have too much solitude. Solitude is good for the figure, she used to say. She did not like to eat by herself. One of the charms of her longer and longer mornings in bed was the elimination of lunch from the day's agenda. Cooking and cleaning up always spoiled the fun of her exotic, improvised meals. So one diminutive feast in the evening was enough now. She dressed for it, nurtured a glass of sweet vermouth for some time before entering the kitchen. She dined in the pleasant calm which was so like the calm she cherished in her little woods.

One morning right after World War II she had taken a camera to the nest but did not take any pictures.
Her gift for recollection was well developed. After so many walks, so many dawns alone in the shadows and rustling underbrush, she could put herself in the nest without leaving her bed. Now as she awoke later into the day and not as spryly, she would hide. Up and over her head the covers would come. Into her bed, her vault, her womb, would file an endless queue of remembered faces, memorized phrases, underlined chapter headings, street names and favorite lyrics.

Her fortieth birthday happened to fall on an Easter Sunday in the middle of the war. She spent the day and night alone. The next day she met two men, one in a coffee shop, one in a hardware store. Each was a voracious bringer of freshly cut flowers. After a time she abandoned the need to explain her multiplying bouquets to either of them. The blueberry pancake maker favored pink or white gladiolas and an infrequent mixed bunch of roses and daisies. The other chap, the president of Historical Restorations Incorporated, brought lilacs exclusively. His business amounted to restoring the interiors of churches in two counties. He would spend the night in her bedroom, in her arms, only if his lilacs were right there on the night table in an old Mason jar. This ritual was as sweet as the slow, article by article undressing they performed for each other. One morning, up first as usual, she noticed that his undershorts were Size 34 and his trousers, Size 32. She wondered about it but it did not matter.

Sixty years is a long time to live in one house. She resented the house for that sometimes. She started out renting it for her first year of teaching. English Literature was her hero, university freshmen the captive antagonists. The Fothergills, owners of the house, were about to move back to Glasgow and asked if she would take care of the place indefinitely. Years went by, her correspondence with them gradually failed and the house became hers without another word being spoken. It was small, made of stone and mortar and local wood, with large windows and a porch on two sides. Rose bushes on trellises, maniacal ivy, an antique willow, twin mountain ash trees, shrubs and vines and plants without names so dominated the house that everything looked slightly out of proportion. This was a garden with a house, not the other way around. The house was set over to one side
of the lot, almost hidden from certain vantage points, like a child playing hide and seek in a room with too much furniture. It seemed to be edging away from the only other buildings for miles, those belonging to a neighboring farmer. The roof was shingled and pierced through by a crude, crumbling stone chimney. The living room to the left of the entrance foyer was spacious but the rooms petered out after that. The bathroom was a frustrating thing for grown people. The bedroom walls looked like parentheses around the bed. There was a walk-in closet barely wider than a hanger and filled with white clothes and a pungent, musty scent. And there was a good, big window on the east wall which looked out onto her orderly vegetable patch, layers of unbridled growth, a tool shed and the endless woods beyond. The house did not come with dogs or cats. Nor were any added. She thought that animals should not be converted into pets.

Nor did she like the idea of the neighboring farmer. For one thing, he was the local leader of something called the Southern Ontario Adjunct Nazi Party. (He said this was just a hobby.) For another, he was obese. She thought obesity was unnecessary, an unnecessary protest against something or somebody; almost a crime, in fact; the way a wicked drug addiction or extreme parsimony is a crime against one's self. She had less than nothing to do with the farmer and his chubby family. One or two brief conversations in all these years were more than plenty. The side of his property which touched hers did have a pond, however, and she skated there late at night, long after they were all in bed. Cold moonlight is an ice-skater's best friend and she made the most of her clandestine meetings. She imagined she was skating, cutting across the farmer's fat, hideous stomach with her blades.

The pond surfaced in her memory for other reasons. Her forties, visited early by the two explosions of romance, were easier to conjure than, say, her thirties, visited only by routine and nonsense. All women have at least one experience in common: a moment which brings an unwanted suitor to the door. It might happen at a high school locker or in a nursing home cafeteria but every woman knows the burden of being loved by a man in whom she has not the slightest
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interest. She knew many of these moments in her twenties and thirties. She liked not to think of it, the wasted time, the excuses. It did not make sense that entire decades could be lived out in dull frustration. Much better to have nothing at all than a taste of something unpleasant. Better still to recall the intrigues that came to her as she headed into her forty-first year. Neither was unwanted in the least. The pancake man, Roger, was more persistent, more demanding, more attentive, less spontaneous, less erotic. The church restorer, William, took many different poses, left many disguises in an apartment he shared with somebody in the city and came out to her house, eagerly, to celebrate. She resisted, not too successfully, the tendency to compare. It would have been easier if she could have convinced herself that someday she would not have to make a choice. The more imminent a declaration or choosing seemed, the less attractive her tryst with each became. In fact, her loyalties were not divided. She disagreed hotly with the notion that passion was a fixed quantity to be metered out like sugar from a sack, or worse, conserved for future use. She knew she could love ruthlessly, fully, constantly and never run out. The object of her affections might be a man, a sonnet, a friend, her nest. She had enough and the variety to go around. This did not lead her to approve of squandering love, however. That was as undesirable as soft-boiling eggs. She was careful with her heart but exuberant with it, too. Her bonds to each man would tangle before they would break.

In one of her classes she spoke derisively of desperate heroines. She was of the opinion that a husband was not a prerequisite for one’s life but rather a bonus, if the right one appeared and stayed on.

The second summer of her forties, of her complicated loves, had almost exhausted itself in bouts of humidity and thunder storms when it became evident that Roger sought a commitment, and a clear one. In a strange way, her lavish physical intimacies with William made her less respectful of his feelings. She realized, much later, that she had confused the absence of lust for Roger with friendship.
On the Labor Day weekend of that year she invited Roger to dinner for Saturday evening and asked William to meet her at a campus coffee shop on Friday afternoon. She was going to tell William, calmly, smoothly, that she could not see him anymore. They spent Friday evening undressing one another, swimming naked and splashing loudly with the ducks in the pond and making love for hours all tangled up by a lilac bush out beyond the vegetable garden. At midnight, William threw his clothes into the back seat of his car and drove away.

In the morning she ran to her nest and cried. Cried as hard as she could for as long as she could. Later she rode a bicycle, the blue C.C.M. from her childhood, to the stores, came home to prepare hors d'oeuvres, set out her finest napkins and cutlery and goblets, bathed, put on a long, tight-fitting, white lace dress with short sleeves and went to the garden to pick a vase-full of lilacs for a centerpiece. Roger arrived, on time, politely, unaware that his dreams were about to come true. For a long time they talked about the war, laughed that it would show that the "colonies" were wanting to take control of things; that the allies would emerge victorious but not equal; that this one was about as noble as a war could be. She was glad for the chance to delay the revelation of her good news. After dinner, they took two chairs outside next to the strapping rose arbor. The melancholy of another summer going, another autumn coming pushed the sun behind the tips of the woods. She held his hand in her lap and told him.

They kissed and embraced. He said he must race into town before the L.C.B.O. closed and come back with bottles of champagne. Such impetuosity was not his way. He was ecstatic. He left and she started to cry, quietly. She went to the tool shed and took out a shotgun belonging to Mr. Fothergill. She did not know if it was loaded or not. She sat down in her garden and wanted to cry forever but her morning in the nest had used up most of the tears. With the gun across her lap she watched the trees and the dandelion heads and a struggling ladybug and a squirrel sniffing a cork. She thought she wanted to sleep. Her head fell against her shoulder and startled her.
Slowly she got up and wandered across to the pond. She stood at its edge. Two geese swam over to meet her.

"Stupid soldiers. Stupid men." She aimed at a goose and pulled the trigger. The right side of her body cracked against the rest of her. A splash of red went up from the water.

Roger shouted her name and came running across the lawn with a fancy green bottle in each hand. She turned back to the pond, aimed at the other goose and pulled the trigger a second time. Roger shouted her name again, and again and again, and grabbed her. Her recollections always stopped there. She loved holiday Mondays but that particular one was lost to her memory.

She used to sit in her nest, and now in her bed, and wonder how much was lost. How many people and scenes and remarks had been blocked out, erased, filed in unreachable drawers? She was conscious of trying to preserve the turbulence of her past, possibly to balance the isolated stillness of the present. Turmoil is always easier to recall. It was hard to believe, some afternoons, that no one was left but her. She had not taught a class for nineteen years. She had not made love in seventeen. She had not received a Christmas present in twelve. It was harder to believe that Roger and William had come and gone with half of her life still to be lived.

One morning a few months or a few years back she lost the thread of her sleep, felt pinned to the sheets, eyes stubbornly open.

"My appetite is gone. I will not eat again. That's it." She went to a desk and wrote out a change of address card to be sent to the post office. She filled in that she was moving to Kamloops, B.C. and her mail should be forwarded. She sent a post card to the telephone company asking that her service be discontinued. She washed her face hard. She put a chair in front of the back bedroom window, looked in her closet and drawers and found a navy blue bikini bathing suit, purchased in the fifties. Her figure looked good in the mirror. The suit was bigger on her than it used to be. She attached a portable sun lamp to a book shelf, pointed it at the chair, plugged it in and sat
down. Death need not be a noble thing as long as one keeps a sense of style. She stared right into the center of the heat lamp. Her eyes began to burn. She took in, gave out exaggerated breaths. She could see herself, in her mind, in the mirror. This was her final offer. The past and the future had converged and could be sacrificed.

“I'll heat up 'til my heart glows and stops. Board up my room with red filters.”

She found herself much later, in the dark, on the floor. The bulb in the heat lamp had died hours before. What exactly had happened? She put a white robe over her bikini and went to the kitchen. She sliced a peach into a glass bowl and covered it with red wine. The colors were cool, and the taste. She sat. Midnight coaxed her back into bed, back into a nervous sleep.

She had no interest in rereading old letters. All along she stored them, neatly wrapped in bundles, guessing incorrectly that they would help keep certain things in place. Even in high school she had a sense that records should be kept. Now the letters, the crumpled black and white photographs served only to remind her that everybody she had ever known had vanished. She had no interest in being reminded.

She was proud of her life, thought it a worthy creation. Still, it was remarkable that no friends, no former students or lovers, not even relatives of the Fothergills ever happened along. She had not received a piece of mail, not one, in a very long time. She could not remember the last one. It was easier to sleep than to figure it out.

The last day of her teaching career stayed with her, a bedside companion. It was an evening class. She avowed that forty years of strict grading was a legacy that might withstand a final, quirky gesture: each student in the class would receive an A.

“To many of you, this will seem a gift. In return, promise that you won't abandon books the minute you graduate. Also. I want a paragraph from each before you leave today. In it state whether 5:15
a.m. belongs, properly, to the night or the day. I've enjoyed our classes. Keep well.”

She exited with more than a touch of the thespian. Her bicycle took her home to a packed suitcase resting on her bed and an airplane ticket. Her first month of retirement (a word she did not use) was taken in a second floor room at a small inn, south and west of Dublin on the road to Kildare. The innkeeper was generous with portions at evening meals and generous with the inn’s bicycle.

She rode each day until fatigue caught up. There were early, early morning rides, afternoon gulps of cool stout, long hillside naps in the open air, slow retreats to the inn, rambling chatter with everyone, and fine, heavy meals. Recollections of all those classroom hours, all the Augusts spent preparing outlines drifted through, were taken in a fonder light for having ended. It had been a solid career, of reasonable purpose, and a summer in Ireland marked its conclusion with aplomb. She mulled her prospects with care and some nonchalance. Her return was unplanned. She might have stayed in Ireland forever had she not missed her house in Ontario and had she not held hands one night with the innkeeper’s husband.

She was returning the bicycle to a hut behind the house. He was filing something down in a vice. After hellos and small talk, he had taken her by the wrist and kissed her fully on the lips for a lingering moment. His abrupt touch was not unpleasing. She excused herself as demurely as possible.

They went for walks and bicycle rides. One late afternoon walking across a shrub ridge she took his hard hand and laced her fingers with his. She let go of his hand as the back windows of the inn came into sight. And left Ireland the following afternoon.

The house, her all-time house, always looked good, sanguine if a little
slouched by the years. Not once in a lifetime had she rented an apartment. Always she unpacked from a trip as soon as she closed the front door behind her. Most of the summer had been consumed in Kildare... and now the autumn loomed ahead as an open pit to be filled. For the first time in fifty-six years she would not be a student or a teacher in September. There would be alumni projects to work on and several fill-in lectures and she would continue to help edit the college daily. But from now on, on any random Monday at 9:55 a.m. she would be unaccountable, unbound by clock or contract. Her plans to write extended profiles of all the meaningful people she had known might be realized.

That first free autumn, almost twenty years ago could it be, came in dancing colors and fresh, smokey fragrances and prism afternoons. In the march of seasons and centuries, certain autumns reign, stand out as exalted and perfect, biblical. Her feet mulched the morning leaves en route to her nest. Clean flannel rubbed against her neck and jaw. The sun lighted the claret, maple, auburn, caramel, buff, emerald leaves with vigor and imagination. Her thoughts were clear. Her cheeks were tight, polished hour after hour in the wind and cool sun. Unburdened by the daily duty of teaching, her life picked up new rhythms. She had started her profiles. Her walks helped her to arrange, recall, sketch. Her memories were preserved in the nest. Then, after several vermouths and supper, she would spend as much of the night as she could writing in longhand, writing in spiral-bound college notebooks. She began with family members. She was able to write lucidly and at great length about her father, which surprised her. Writing about her lovely mother was arduous and frustrating, which also surprised her. She avoided her sister, thinking that silence is the better part of contempt. An aunt who now lived in Calcutta took up almost two weeks. A grade school teacher was finished off in one solid seven hour stretch. A chemistry partner who always copied her notes and who smoked cigarettes in high school required less than six pages. The first lover called up hours and days of abandoned sensations and produced what she thought was particularly clever writing. And lots of it. Yet it was almost impossible to find a name for him.
She wrote something almost every night. Each selected subject had its own way of pushing or pulling her. She imagined this as a project without end. Lives intersected, sometimes by accident, and brought others out of the shadows to be scrutinized. The light, wet snows of Thanksgiving came before she had come close to resurrecting Roger or William.

The years, of course, deadened her pace. Her bursts of writing and reading were now less extended. She skipped more and more morning walks. Her midnight skating expeditions on the pond declined in frequency from once a week to once a winter. The fat farmer died of a heart attack back in the late sixties.

Her worldly contacts all but vanished. There was one major excursion out that she could not forget. Had it been her last? Some years after her retirement a former student, a tall woman in her late twenties, asked if she would agree to play a part in a film. The younger woman was becoming a film maker and had a grant to make a twenty minute short. A friend had written a script. The teacher agreed to be directed by the student.

The part was that of a sixty-two year old woman. (She was several years older than sixty-two at the time.) The woman in the film was being courted by a married man almost thirty years her junior. The character was to be elegant and strong and too cynical to take seriously the attentions of the young suitor.

The project was enriching and exhausting. She thought the film makers quite gifted and admired her own performances a little more each day. The final scene had the older woman allowing a rendezvous in her house for the first time after months of surreptitious lunches and concerts and meetings in dark, public places. The suitor enters her house timidly, suspecting a final, drastic stroke, a friendly halt to their pas de deux. Instead she pours tall drinks, tells some of her best, funniest stories and takes him up a long staircase to her bedroom. The
scene is hers to mold and make. Many discussions were held on the set in search of an honest portrayal. It was her idea that her character should undress in front of her suitor, in front of the camera. The scene was performed well after midnight on the final night of shooting. The director asked the lighting man to "keep it soft." Several afternoons later, when she saw the footage, she was alarmed at how beautiful she looked. She had taken her 'looks' for granted years ago. And she had always been unmoved by the compliments or criticisms of others. She looked as she looked. What point could there be in moaning about the color of eyes or the curve of a calf? Such things were irrevocable and rightly so. It happened that she was fond of her hair, had been since grade school. But the rest didn't matter. She had not stepped onto a scale to weigh herself in ages.

What she saw in the film footage came as a grand surprise. Sitting in a darkened screening room, she cheered. But the sensation passed. The last frames of film show her character as she sends the man away from her house, their moment of love fossilized, their time pressed between pages of letters. She smiles knowing they shan't meet again. He leaves, sober, sad, as timidly as he had arrived.

She saw the director, the script writer, the other actors at the first public showing of the film and never again.

She went slowly along with the years and kept utterly to her house, to herself. Months came between visits to the nest. Every five years she would ride her bicycle to the doctor's house. Each time he pronounced her fit. To celebrate her visit, the week of her seventieth birthday, she mailed off her collected profiles to a small publishing company affiliated with the university. She had met an editor there while she was teaching but doubted she still held the position. The manuscript had to be addressed to someone. In a letter of introduction she asked that the profiles be published in one volume and posthumously. She received a letter back from Margaret MacLeay Graham, Editor Emeritus, who said that there was considerable interest in her manuscript and that, if chosen for
publication, it would be published in one volume and posthumously, as requested.

Her recollections of the past decade, her seventies, the century's seventies, were not precise at all, much less precise than her recollections of preceding eras. She read in bed, mostly reread favorite books. She doodled and sketched with ball point pens in old notebooks. More and more she woke up in the midst of complicated, wild dreams, unruly dreams unlike the boring ones she had always had. They were so vivid now and confusing and seemed to dominate and bury her waking hours. Had an entire decade been spent dreaming and drawing figures and rereading The Sorrows of Young Werther? How had she spent the third Tuesday in July six years ago? Or the Friday before Easter last year? Or the winter of her seventy-fourth year? Were many more dedades still to come? How could you tell how much life was behind you and how much was ahead? There were no answers. There was only sleeping and dreaming and waking.

One morning her eyes opened, filled with a ragged dream of stolid, wan faces and sharp, unknown objects, corners and right angles, sharp edges, with faces or masks looking out. Everything in the dream was covered with dust or dirt. She got out of bed quickly and sat in an empty bathtub while it filled with hot water and the essence of musk oil and white hand soap. The water washed over her soft, wrinkled, flat stomach as she almost fell back to sleep.

She dressed, put on a short leather jacket and a woolly hat and sheepishly opened the front door as if she expected to find a void on the other side. She tried unsuccessfully to remember her last visit to the nest. She was dizzy, unfocused as if the lights had just come on in a theatre after a long movie. She moved down the steps. The air was cold and dry. Time was a bugger. What day, what damned decade was it? Did she have a class to teach tomorrow? Was she walking with excitement to meet her new friend in Ireland out beyond the shed? Was someone filming her steps along the lawn, or writing about them? Did the light-headed, lost feeling come from recent hours of love-making?
Am I twenty or forty or sixty or eighty on this path, through my woods, coming on to my nest again?

She could feel her heart working. She cupped her breast with her right hand, through layers of clothing. She tried to hide her exhaustion from herself. She sat down hard in the nest, against her elm, and positioned her face so it might feel the full force of the distant sun. Her legs stretched out into their favorite position. Her hands and arms trembled. She held herself tightly. She was confused; too much oxygen filled her lungs, her blood, her brain. She was afraid this might happen.

And yet the nest was always her well, her source. Being there brought a smug flush to her cheeks, a sense of control and vision, a grasp of the difference between life and its antonym. The nest was always there. And here she was in it. She could do without keeping track. Time need not be divvied up into even, square calendars.

How long will it be before I look back at this moment?