

## SPRING

IT WAS SPRING in 1952 when I stopped going to class at law school. I was a student at the University of Michigan Law School at Ann Arbor, and I think it was spring. There were red flowers, perhaps geraniums, just beginning to come in the Quadrangle. Maybe, though, it was winter. I remember that I had received a postcard from the university inquiring why I wasn't coming to class. I could have written back and told the truth, that I had begun a novel and decided to drop out of law school to work on my novel. Postcards kept coming, though, the last threatening that I would be dropped with failing grades in all my courses. This induced me to temporarily drop the novel and go to the law school and meet my faculty advisor, Professor Marcus Plant, who taught torts.

Professor Plant was a rather earnest young professor. He had a square, open, red face and wore wire-rimmed spectacles. He had a kind of Midwestern openness and frankness combined with a quick intelligence. I would have hired him as my lawyer to represent me against the university, if they were going to sue me, perhaps replevin me back to the law school, but that wasn't their intention.

"Why haven't you been going to class?" he asked when he closed his office door. "You haven't been in class for six weeks."

"I thought I'd quit."

He took my pronouncement with equanimity. "Why don't you go see someone at the Student Health Service and talk it over?" he told me.

I can't remember if I did go to the Health Service. It was so long ago and the scars of memory have annealed over the wound. I had let down my parents; even though I was paying for law school with my GI Bill tuition, I had let them down. I hadn't told them I dropped out of class. Maybe I'm still lying to myself. I had three years on the GI Bill and I probably used them up before I went to law school, so my father was paying, not me. The tuition wasn't astronomical then, not like today, but still, he wasn't wealthy. He was a salesman, a traveling salesman. He'd never gone to college, let alone law school. I still remember the color of his checks, light green checks with his strong handwriting and signature. They used to arrive like clockwork on the landlady's spindle-legged hall table.

I never finished the novel. I never got beyond three pages. It was about a young man in Ann Arbor who dropped out of the university. The young man is described sitting on the front porch of his rooming house, looking out on the world from behind a veil of hollyhocks. That's as far as I got, the veil of hollyhocks.

In the fall of 1952 I started over again at Northwestern. The only things I took with me were some of the books I had from my year at Michigan: Grismore on Contracts, Waite on Criminal Law, Bigelow on

Property. Almost all the professors taught from their own casebooks and they had captive audiences, and of course, captive customers. Even fresh-faced Marcus Plant got into the act with his new casebook on torts, but it hadn't been hardbound yet, so the students bought spiral-bound printed notebooks of Plant's book.

I have some difficulty remembering my professors at Michigan. I will always remember Grover Grismore. He was deathly ill as he stood before us in contracts, his face pinched and drawn by his illness. We were his last class, and I remember the way the clerestory light of the vaulted classroom fell across his gray face as he lectured to us, spectacles glinting from the light, in his worsted suit and vest, a very courageous man.

At Northwestern the books of the Michigan professors were replaced by the books of the Northwestern professors: Havighurst on Contracts, Rahl on Torts, Inbau on Criminal Law, MacChesney on International Law. Even Philip Kurland, newly arrived at the law school, had a red spiral binder on civil procedure. I had already taken portions of some of these courses. I was immediately regarded with awe by my classmates when one afternoon in Havighurst's contracts class I raised my hand and volunteered the theory of third-party beneficiary contractual liability, as if I had invented it. That caused heads to swivel and Professor Havighurst's bony finger to mark my name on the seating chart with his pencil.

Every morning at 8:30 we would begin our day by trudging across the Quadrangle from our dormitory, Abbott Hall, to the law school. Northwestern's law school was another gothic building with gargoyles built like a cathedral but with only one cathedral, and it was smaller than any of Michigan's. We were welcomed most mornings by Professor Daniel Schuyler, who spoke into a microphone about the intricacies of Future Interests. At 8:30 A.M. we would try to keep awake but many of us, having just rolled out of bed and skipped breakfast, fell asleep. I don't think I flashed my legal erudition before Professor Schuyler because, although I had already taken Property I at Michigan, it related only to personal property, and I dropped out after only three or four weeks and never got beyond the Law of Finding. But I did remember the cardinal principle of the Law of Finding was that the Finder had better title to the lost article than any other person in the world except the Owner. So I kept my mouth shut in Future Interests and didn't try to inject the Law of Finding into the Statute of Uses, although I could have done so brilliantly. I was too busy trying to find myself.

Another thing that bothered me at Michigan, other than my unfinished novel and my uncertainty as to the choice of a profession, was a small cyst at the base of my spine. It was congenital but could be

removed surgically. It got infected, and I couldn't sit comfortably, so my parents urged me to go into a hospital before I began Northwestern and have the cyst removed. I did, and in a sense I thought the operation would also exorcise the demons that had plagued me at Michigan. However, at the beginning of class in the fall semester, I sat on a small brown rubber inner tube and carried it with me to all my classes. I quickly became known to all my classmates, not only for my precocity but also for my inner tube.

In addition to leaving the hospital with the rubber inner tube, I also left having met several nurses. One in particular, Janet Kurstmann, I thought of constantly. She'd been the nurse assigned to the evening shift and every evening would enter my room at midnight to check on me. I remember the way her starched skirt would rustle and the fragrance of her entrance—there was a certain cologne or hairspray she wore. The first thing I did when I left the hospital was to ask her for dinner.

The nurses at Northwestern Hospital still remain vivid in my mind. There were three of them assigned to my room: Janet—tall, shy, round-faced, sulky, very pretty with her gray eyes and curly brown hair; Connie—short and perky, red hair, tart-tongued; and Mary—tall, thin, also very shy, with auburn hair and bangs. I was the only young man on the floor, and they would each rustle into my room, trailing their respective fragrances, and sponge my face and arms, and take my temperature. I was in a body cast covering my stitches and I was weak, so I was a passive patient. If there was such a thing as a reverse sexual harassment action for unnecessary lingering, brow-wiping, hair-to-cheek touchings, and laughter and teasing, I would have had an extraordinarily strong case. But I never filed it, and instead asked out their ringleader, the night nurse, the sulky Janet Kurstmann.

I had never seen her out of her nurse's uniform. She wore a blue dress that night and looked lovely. I picked her up at the nurses' residence in my father's car, a Buick Roadmaster, shined and waxed for the occasion. This was to be the beginning of a great and enduring love. After all, I had three years to spend at the law school, and she was just down the street in her second year of nursing.

I took her to the Old English Room at the Hotel Pearson. It was a beautiful old room with white tablecloths, heavy old silver, and bone-ribbed framed portraits of English hunting scenes. Janet Kurstmann had silky, long eyelashes and beautiful gray eyes that looked like the eyes of a glazed enamel cat and flashed at me with chinks of fire. How would I ever know that she would soon betray me?

As beautiful and inviting as she was in her blue dress, I blanched when she immediately asked me as the waiter lit the candles, "Do Jews believe in Christ?" I had told her I was Jewish. I felt that this innocent

question was the question that would be determinative of our entire relationship, and so I was careful with my answer, and she waited for it with a kind of dark intensity, half given, half restrained.

"You know that Christ himself was a Jew," I answered. I could see her face tighten into perplexity.

"The only Jew I've ever met sold caskets to my father." Her father owned a furniture store combined with a funeral parlor in upper Michigan.

Later in the back seat of the Buick I kissed her once and she immediately fell into a kind of trance. I'd never experienced this before and perhaps never since. All I remember is that I kissed her and she seemed after our first embrace to remain in a trance. Her body had gone limp, she didn't move. She was breathing heavily. I didn't know what to do. I presumed that she was waiting to be made love to by me. I couldn't do it, not only because I was a gentleman, but because I was still in the body cast. It hadn't yet been removed.

A week later she accused me of sexual harassment in gossip with her friends. I don't know why. I think it was because I had done nothing. I had entranced her, but certainly not attacked her. Was there an action for sexual entrancement? She would never go out with me again, so I took out the other two nurses, the short redhead and the tall auburn-haired girl. One shook hands with me at the door of the nurses' residence, and the other offered her cheek. I could tell that I had been impeached by Janet Kurstmann despite my perfect defense.

Of course, some of you may ask what I was doing in the back seat of my father's car. I really can't remember. I do remember that the car had a very obstructive gearshift and that to say goodnight in a body cast one would naturally consider the rear seat. I may have invited her into the back seat, but I swear I had no responsibility for her trance.

So I had immediately in law school developed a reputation as a man who knew women, having set up several of my classmates with members of the nursing class. I was on a roll.

It soon became spring again, the second semester, the spring of 1953. Red flowers were sprouting again, this time in the grimy arcade between the law school and our dormitory. The flowers seemed so bitterly red because one of our classmates had committed suicide late that winter. He lived on my floor and shot himself in his room. I don't think it was because of his law studies. We all knew he was severely depressed. He'd stopped going to classes and we saw only flashes of him each day—pale, distraught. We knew he was very ill, and then suddenly he killed himself. Winter was over, and another spring had come, with its red flowers.

Why had he killed himself? I'll never know. Even today, when I bring up his suicide to my classmates some don't even remember him or that it happened. Life has a way of erasing things we don't want to remember. He was a brilliant student but he was so full of pain he withdrew from all of us and became almost a wraith, a pale figure who wandered the dormitory halls. None of us, including myself, reached out to help him. I remember his angry blue eyes, the slight sneer on his lips, as he would pass us unshaven, in his pajamas, as we all rushed out to our morning classes. And then, suddenly he was dead.

When spring came at last that year of his death, I was finally out of my full body cast and had discarded my inner tube and had survived one semester of grades. One Saturday evening, I invited several of my classmates to a ballroom on the North Side of Chicago, the Aragon, where we could meet young women and dance away the cares and sadness of winter. I had promised my classmates an evening of frivolity, and seven of us set forth on the El, a Chicago elevated train, to Lawrence Avenue on the North Side to the Aragon Ballroom. We were dressed in our tweed jackets with rep striped ties, and gray flannel trousers. We were ersatz Ivy Leaguers on the El, the flower of Northwestern University Law School out on the town. The story of Janet Kurstmann, the Sleeping Beauty of the Nursing School, and her trance had been so often repeated that I had become known in the School as "The Prince," and various versions of my kiss were retold by my classmates that night, riding the El to the Aragon, typically:

*Sleeping Beauty (asleep for 100 years) is finally about to be kissed by me:*

*S.B.: At last my prince, you are here. Kiss me. (laughter)*

*or*

*S.B.: My prince, I have waited for you for such a long time. Kiss me. (intense laughter)*

*or*

*S.B.: Is it you, my prince?*

*Me: Yes, it is.*

*S.B.: Do you have the shoe?*

*Me: I thought you were Sleeping Beauty.*

*S.B.: I'm Cinderella, you fool! (maniacal laughter)*

Our fellow passengers on the El looked at us with bewilderment and amazement.

The sign of the Aragon Ballroom was mammoth and blinked at us that April night like a lighted minaret of a Moorish castle, spelling out the name A\*R\*A\*G\*O\*N majestically, it seemed, from the El platform. It was indeed a magical sight, a bright invitation in the darkness of an

ordinary Saturday night. We quickly went down the platform stairs to the ticket office.

We were determined to find frivolity in our springtime away from the law school and the shadow of our dead classmate and when the ticket taker told us that we had arrived on "over 40" night, it didn't deter us. I remember ascending the great staircase, the wafting fragrances that came filtering down from the ballroom, the funereal marble vases and urns in alcoves, and then the sudden darkness of the huge ballroom floor, an artificial sky twinkling above us, and shadowy forms of dancers twirling across the floor, the band far in the distance, in a blue haze.

We moved counterclockwise around the women seated on velvet banquettes and tufted chairs lighted by soft red and violet lamps. The colors and lights were so heavily filtered that no one could really see each other, and so as we asked the women to dance, I'm sure they weren't aware that we were in our early 20's, and we refused to believe that they were all over 40. Anyway, being law students, we were always taught to look for the exception, and as the lights on the dance floor turned blue and then orange and then violet, and Glen Gray and his Orchestra played "Stardust," we danced away into the artificial night.

I, of course, being the progenitor of the evening, would be held responsible for its outcome, but far from being angry, my classmates all seemed to be very happy to have each found an older woman. My roommate seemed the happiest because he never did ascend the mammoth staircase and spent the evening in the lobby with the pale, thin 17-year-old flower girl who was selling flowers from a cart and who looked to me like a student nurse wearing a gardenia.

At the end of the evening some of the frivolity had gone from my classmates' initial assessment and I, being wise enough not to subject myself to more Sleeping Beauty jokes on the El, offered to see my dancemate home. The fact that she lived 6300 South, almost 100 blocks south of the ballroom, one hour each way on the El, didn't dissuade me. My roommate and his new friend, the fragile-faced flower girl, smiled at us as we left. My classmates nodded benignly and smoked their pipes at the cloakroom as they each waited for a woman older than their mother. All of us bought gardenias for our "dates" from the flower girl, and each of us, as a gentleman, escorted our ladies into the soft spring Chicago night.

My friend was a very pretty, red-cheeked, big-busted Irish-American woman of about 45 who had danced and laughed the night away with me, and we became quick friends. I was no longer in my body cast and our age difference really meant nothing to me. I was intent on taking this woman home to her apartment where we would be at last alone and

I would overcome the curse of Janet Kurstmann and her league of false-tongued nurses.

We rode the El 100 blocks, holding hands amid all the drunks, me in my Brooks Brothers tweed jacket, she in her black Persian Lamb cape pinned with my gardenia. We were a lovely couple, and Chicago never seemed more magical, until after arriving at 63rd Street when we descended the stairs, I met her policeman brother standing at the bottom. He was waiting to take his sister home. He grunted at me when she introduced us and then I shook hands with her and watched them walk to his car. He was dressed in civilian clothes, had a thick neck and wore an open blue jacket. He looked past me and said nothing. There was nothing to say. I was not the man for his sister, not that night nor any other night. So I shook hands goodnight with her, went back up the stairs and waited for the train that would take me downtown and back to the law school.

When I finally got back to Chicago Avenue, instead of going to my dormitory I walked into the Quadrangle and sat down on a stone bench. It had been a long night. The essence of spring was in this courtyard. Here in the heart of the city there was the odor of damp earth. I could see young buds upon the trees and slips of flowers, always red flowers, heralding new hopes and longings, and also the death of my classmate. So young, such an unnecessary and horrible tragedy in the midst of all our scholarship and energy and all of our desire. Still, it had been nice to dance this night under the false sky, in the Spanish ballroom, moving away from the tragedy of his death, dancing in and out of the lights, feeling the woman's breasts against me, the light touch of her face, the movement of her eyelashes. It was our shame that he had died and in some sense, our fault, because we could all sense what was happening and we ignored it. We did nothing about him, carrying on with law school and our studies as if nothing was happening to him. We were too foolish, too full of ambition, too angry, too filled with hope, too full of lies, too self-concerned to acknowledge death that spring, when everything around us was just beginning to fill and burst open with life.

