

Carol

Driving To Allentown

Traveling from southwest Connecticut through New York into Pennsylvania in 1981 ranged from tricky to treacherous depending upon timing and dumb luck. Routing decisions were made with little or no real-time information and the resulting traffic obstacles endured. Trying this on a Friday evening was even more random. The trip to Allentown might take as little as two and a half hours, or some nasty multiple of that time. But luck was with me, traffic was flowing, and I settled in to consider the prospects of the weekend visit ahead. This reunion was a long time coming and had interesting possibilities, yet I was not nearly so excited as I would have been a few years back.

Cards

I grew up watching my parents gear up each Christmas season to engage in the light manufacturing process known as sending-out-cards. They had a growing list of valued friends dating back as far as 1940's high school scattered across the nation, with little hope of keeping meaningfully current. Work and parenting made wide-ranging travel impossible and Facebook was a long ways off, so Christmas cards it was. Maybe 150 of them, most simply signed, some with short handwritten update notes. This was how the ever-busier greatest generation, after winning World War II, stayed in touch, at least a little.

As soon as I was old enough to have friends scattered about, I took up the practice myself to a limited degree. So it was, at age 26, I sent a card with a short note to Carol.

Coal Country

My freshman year at Plymouth State College in Plymouth, New Hampshire was a time of personal growth and significant recalibration. Plymouth State had a nice brochure, appeared similar to Penn State academically, and offered the tantalizing prospect of being in the heart of New England ski country. Reality on the ground does not always feel like the brochure. The dreamt-of college experience did not spontaneously spring to life wholly formed. It was a bad snow year. I did not have a girlfriend. The academics were a little light. By early spring some switch in my head was thrown, and I was now committed to transferring down to Penn State, a stronger school, closer to home, and a bit less costly. Not willing to give up on the ski country dream entirely, I opted for the Hazleton branch campus near the Pocono mountains for my sophomore year before being permitted to move to the main campus for the final two years in pursuit of an undergraduate degree.

So it was that I stood in the sophomore's line on the Hazleton campus waiting to register for fall classes. And there she was, right next to me in line. Were I to make a composite sketch in that time of my perfect girlfriend, it would be Carol. She held herself in a manner that suggested athlete one moment, dancer the next, with a lovely flow of neck and set of shoulders. Lean, with finely made facial features and wide set green eyes. Inside of five minutes of conversation she had me, and I was keen on getting a lot closer.

Carol proved less keen over the coming weeks. Happy to have me as a casual friend, she held me at a distance. Skiing was my big and defining thing at the time, and I felt that if I could get

her on the mountain with me once or twice she would understand what a shiny and wonderful fellow I was. She remained disinterested. She lived at home in nearby Conyngham, and I came to know her parents pretty well, landing at their dinner table several times. Kurt wanted to be with Carol. Her parents wanted Kurt to be with Carol. Carol did not want Kurt to be with Carol.

She was instead taken with Fred. In several of my classes over that year, I thought Fred to be pretty ordinary and down-slope of me in every dimension that seemed to matter. How Carol found Fred so attractive was a bothersome mystery. My sense was that Carol's father was not all that sold on Fred either, yet he agreed to set them up in a single-wide trailer home a few miles off campus in State College, PA for their junior and senior years. I had zero interest in befriending them as a couple, and so contact became minimal.

Alas. In this way life offers growth.

Connecticut Gold Coast

Upon graduating Penn State with a degree in finance, I found work with GE in Erie, PA, where I logged three cloudy, rainy years. There were bright moments in this time, but the brightest came when I found the motivation to insist upon change and took a position with GE Credit in Stamford, Connecticut. The skies were clear, career options were shiny, and social prospects were greatly improved. Women were abundant. Driven by high living costs, I answered an ad to share a rental house, found that the other two renters were attractive women, and in short order we aligned our purchasing power and found ourselves in a beautiful garden apartment overlooking a pool. Sue and Wendy were both in relationships, but they brought a parade of their single female friends through our living room for my consideration. On the heels of my time in Erie, these were high times and I wanted for little.

And yet, when I went through my Christmas card list, there was Carol. I wondered where she was, who she had become, who she might be with. And so it was that I sent off a card with a nice note in care of her parents, who I hoped still lived in Conyngham.

A New Beginning

A few weeks into the new year I got a letter from Carol. She had gotten a degree in Industrial Engineering like her father. Fred was no more. She had taken a job with a small engineering firm in Allentown, where she had set up house in a one-bedroom apartment. She would be happy to have me come visit from Connecticut for a weekend. A few more letters back and forth and a weekend visit was set after so many years with no contact. I crossed the Delaware into Pennsylvania rolling this history around in my mind. The miles were ticking away and I was feeling distinctly mixed as I found parking outside her apartment building. I had felt so much yearning for her years back. She was a long held dream. An idea of what perfect attraction and love could be.

Who would she be? Had she grown? And in what direction? What would I feel? What would *she* feel?

The apartment door swung open and there she was, appearing much as I remembered her. Still attractively slim, still with the stance of the athlete, but the intervening five years were noticeable on her face and somehow her energy was off.

Carol was subdued, cautious. I imagine she had as many doubts about this venture as I did, maybe more, now that I was on her threshold, her weekend guest. She invited me in, I dropped my bag in the living room, she opened beers for both of us, and we sat at her little dining room table.

Then began a deep dive into our years since Hazleton. Carol struggled some with the engineering coursework but got through. She did not really like it all that well, but had her degree and landed this OK job with an OK firm in this rather grim place called Allentown. Hers was a tale of following in her father's path, doing what she thought he would like for her, and not all that happy with the outcome.

Open another beer.

If she did not like her own story, she liked mine even less. After covering my also grim, dues-paying years in Erie, I carried on quite enthusiastically about my brighter days in Connecticut. The wide-open career prospects. The sunny skies. The proximity to New England skiing.

And the women. Without dropping into obnoxious detail, I developed the current picture of my moving easily among a variety of women. Maybe there was enough detail offered to be a little obnoxious. In any case, I set out the facts of my current life in all its shiny glory, without much empathy for how all this would land on the ears of the Allentown inmate across the table.

Open another beer.

I like to think that I possess a workable level of emotional intelligence, but I must have developed this later in life. After flapping my jaw way too long about all my Connecticut-based happiness I became aware that maybe Carol was not sharing my joy for living, and certainly had had enough of my telling of it.

Noting that it was now well after midnight, I declared that I was pretty tired and asked where I might bed down. Carol pulled the couch cushions onto the living room floor, produced a sheet to envelope them, a blanket, a pillow, and bid me a good night, disappearing behind her bedroom door, and her cat with her.

So that was that, I shrugged to myself. A long held dream brought low. A shimmering, cherished fantasy snuffed out. Yet I was not receiving this as much of a loss. Maybe more a relief, all things considered. In any case, with the accumulation of the day at work, the drive to Allentown and the beers, I was not likely to be awake long, living room floor or no.

Fifteen minutes later there came a sound. The cat wandering about? I hoped not, since I tended toward sneezing fits with some cats, and did not want this one walking about on my face.

Not the cat. My eyes were by now well adjusted to the dim light penetrating the living room, and standing over me silently was Carol in her robe.

The Motions

Without a sound, she dropped her robe, revealing in the dim light a taut and attractive form, and in one smooth motion dropped to the floor and slid under the blanket next to me on the sofa cushions.

Reflecting back on certain moments of my life, I have the desire to shout back across the years to myself. Wait! Don't do it! This is a broken person! Touch her yes, but with your mind and

your words. Understand who she is. Find the hurt and try to smooth it. Talk her off whatever ledge she is precariously balancing on. But under no circumstances should you claim what she is now offering.

But no amount of shouting down the corridor of time would be heard. Without reservation, thought or empathy I proceeded to do what young men often do, hearing no more than a biological imperative.

Carol lay completely still. She neither spoke nor responded to my touch in any way. She might well have been a first-rate sex doll as she offered me no sign of life aside from her steady breathing and compliance. Young men are fools and I continued past all these signs of a troubled soul and performed a basic, mechanical act of copulation. I suggested that we move to the comfort of her bed and there we slept through the rest of the night.

The morning was marked by an awkwardness shaped by Carol's notable regret and discomfort met by my forced cavalier sense of the ordinary. We went about the day according to plan, both of us now engaged in a conspiracy feigning normalcy. A hike. A film. Dinner out.

The couch cushions stayed in place Saturday night and we went to bed in our extended play at being a well-adjusted couple. A second run at love making yielded roughly the same outcome, and we slept through the night.

Sunday Clouds

Allentown in that time had a gritty greyness and the overcast morning contributed to a sense of sadness, remorse, loss. We had taken a tasty bit of possibility, a tantalizing sense of what might have been, and could yet be, and traded it for a morning devoid of energy and light, with a dead end squarely in front of us.

We both knew there was nothing more, and after a breakfast in, a last hug and kiss, I got in my car and started making my way out of Allentown and east.

As I regained Route 22 East I remember feeling first elation at getting clear of Allentown and Carol. Only then did I begin to consider the brokenness I saw in her and the added damage of our weekend together.

Like the well-heeled banker who strides past the beggar's tin without a glance, I drove on.