

The Wake of Prufrock

I keep an album with pictures of people I by and large don't know anymore; in some cases I can't even remember their names. Years pass at an alarming rate; not too long ago I thought I'd always know them. Two photos on opposing pages—Here: all three of us smiling. Here, for a joke: all three of us trying to look brooding, though Sonny never could clear his face of a certain beatific joy, and you can tell he's faking.

Kentucky, 1990

So the thing is I was awfully in love with Sonny, or a seventeen-year-old's version of in-love, and the other thing is that so was Susannah.

Susannah and I used to read T. S. Eliot to one another on the phone and things like that, and finally I came out to her because it seemed like she might be romantically interested in me. Her response was to hoot with laughter and shout "oh, thank goodness!" because secretly, she'd been afraid I was romantically interested in her, so that was settled.

How we ended up confessing that we both loved Sonny is lost to me now, but there was no animosity because we both knew perfectly well that neither of us was going to reel him in. She was certain of this because she could tell he was gay; I, because I could tell he was not. We made a bet, because unrequited love didn't seem awfully serious at the time. In the course of a sort of slapdash self-education we had just watched *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Whoever won the bet got Marlon Brando.

Sonny got a girlfriend at some point, or in any case a female companion of unknown parameters. She could easily have been to Sonny what Susannah was to me.

Elsewhere, later

Years pass here with unsettling speed, again. Susannah and I had had some teenage melodrama and we didn't speak for years. She got married, had a kid, wrote a book, had no real use for Marlon. I grew up a little and understood that old friendships are a comfort and old grudges are not. We got superficially but I suppose warmly back in contact. I was mostly bitterly single and could have used the company of the young Mr. Brando.

Sonny married in college, hyphenated his name with his wife's, adopted two or more children, and became a psychiatrist or something very like. Susannah and I followed this with faded interest. All this ran on a parallel track to my actual life. And then:

New Year's eve, 2012. By this time, Susannah and her husband had moved to Vancouver and I to New York, where I was unhappy for a few years and then happier for a few, and then no longer bitterly single. My boyfriend and I had gone to Philadelphia where his cousin had an enormous house in a charmingly shitty neighborhood, and they would always have an absurd number of people to spend the holiday.

All this merriment whirling around me and what I remember is that I was lying on top of the bedclothes and looking online on my phone, and I saw that Sonny had listed himself as being in a relationship. With a male person.

Embarrassingly, my heart leapt up. It would be hard to say whether this was out of some fossilized impulse of infatuation my soul, such as it is, had saved up over the years just in case, or the thrill of having been less alone at one point in my life than I thought I was.

I emailed Susannah immediately. “Marlon Fucking Brando, baby.” I felt as if we were sharing this funny little revelation in person, laughing loudly. We had both won the bet, of course, which made the whole thing funnier.

“Marlon Brando,” I perseverated, unable to leave it at just the punchline. “Look online. Might be a joke.” Tossing decorum lightly aside, I emailed Sonny to find out. Graciously, he confirmed, but not before I spent a few hours excited, heart aflutter, disgusted with myself for being excited, and finally in absolution of my own absurdity because really it was justified. How often do you get to settle a bet (that was secretly rather important to both of you) two decades later?

I thought mostly right then about Susannah because that relationship had been the soil that first love grew in. I tried to remember how she and I had met, but couldn't quite. I remembered our parents approving our first non-date, a concert by the shoddy local philharmonic, and how there had, orientations notwithstanding, been that almost romantic tension of finding out if the other person wants from you what you want from them.

I relived the moment of coming out, which had taken place over the phone, unplanned, maybe spurred by some convenient conversational hook to hang it on, or maybe just in the wake of Prufrock. “I think I'm like your Uncle Ned,” is how I put it. It sounded like a clumsy translation of an idiom but was only a reference to her mother's conveniently homosexual actual brother.

I recalled the notes we had exchanged for years though we saw each other every day, hers clever and referential; mine dour and rather earnest. These still exist, in a shoebox in a closet, but it's overwhelming to read more than two or three of them. Just the same, I'm dying to

know if any of them reference Sonny because, among other things, it's hard to keep track of when I had fully allowed myself to think about men during the day.

Youth was long gone and not truly missed. I thought of the little group that had been, smart, strange kids serving as mutual lifelines in a smallish southern town. Love was gone, but only the kind that is always gone by the time you grow up. I would surely not see Sonny again, and though I would see Susannah, we would be such different people now.