

IS IT OVER?

She told me to beat it.

This was the second time she had drawn the curtain, although the first time it was done without words. She walked out without so much as a word.

As I lay on the sofa, Tony Bennett K D Lang singing *Because of You* in a way you never heard at weddings, as I lay there my head kept saying uh-ah. It's not over.

---"Why does my head do that?" I mumbled to myself, "Why".

When a woman says we're done, my mind keeps coming up with scenarios by which we'll get back together at least briefly.

I once asked a scientist-friend whether there's anything to the belief that when somebody's stirring around in your brain it probably that you're stirring around in the other's brain. The idea is that forces are at work between individuals.

It is also said that we can get a glimpse of events about to happen because of these or other forces. In my case, I dreamed my mother, who had been ill for a while with no signs of a sudden turn for the worst, discussed with me her imminent departure and a day later it happened, a massive stroke. On the day after the dream and before the news I described it to the lady I was seeing then.

---"Of course," she said without showing any concern that it might happen. "We all experience waves in dreams or while walking down the street. The world around you is filled with waves."

So, I had asked the physicist, filled with waves?

---"Well," she said, "here's what we know. The energy created by brain neurons can be measured, and when it is, we find out that the distance they can travel is small, certainly not beyond the skull."

---"Is it possible that something else – maybe a kind of brainy dark energy – comes into play?"

---"Probably not but don't know for sure. We've all experienced those odd coincidences when something happens or someone calls after you've had some premonition. Of course there are lots of times when there are happenings without warnings or warnings without happenings. Why should some be tagged to warn and others not? I don't know. Maybe somebody has the data. So much about the physical world is random. Once in a while a couple things coincide."

---"Is it possible that our heads or minds or wherever these things actually take place have developed a defense mechanism that allows us to conjure up scenarios, which are unlikely and if measured seldom happen, just to smooth the way, especially if bad things are coming? Of course I've certainly heard tales where these waves have made matters worse."

---"Possibly but you have to talk to someone in that other branch. Like you I have asked the same questions. The mind seems especially active when relationships close down. Just a form of longing so long as it doesn't push you over the edge."

Her words weren't about to push me over the edge, I'd been through this once before, but they had enough of an impact to make a supine position preferable to any other right then. I met her just after my divorce. We were both younger and she was younger than me. I'm not sure why I was attracted to her. I recalled I was seeing four or five different women then, and she was not one of them. But the young woman kept inquiring about me through a friend with whom I drank coffee every morning, and that fed my ego as well as my curiosity.

Our hellos became more extended conversations. One thing led to another, and we ended up spending a couple of nights together. Then she disappeared. A few weeks later I ran into her at the coffee shop. She did not acknowledge my presence. She looked mean as hell.

And that was the last time I saw until she popped back into my life several months ago. I was at the office of a travel consultant who used to be a ticket agent. When I met her years ago, she booked my air and hotel reservations and made sure the limo picked me up. The Internet destroyed that business, and so now we consult for a fee, and what we were consulting about was how I was going to handle a bunch of speaking engagement without going crazy. The woman I was seeing I had named the expeller. She hated my traveling because she hated traveling. She didn't trust me, probably for good reason. She once vowed to expel all the women then in my life, none of whom was a lover. The travel schedule was so complicated I decided I needed a consultant. .

During one of our consultation around a beautifully-designed glass and chrome desk, which I threatened to steal, I noticed a brochure. It advertised a trip that started in London, moved to Paris and Rome and ended up in Tokyo where during a single month the "cruises" would visit with a half dozen *haute couture* designers. I could care less about clothing designs but I did care about print designs. This brochure was brilliantly done in alternating light pastels and darker acrylics and a line that was elegant and muscular at the same time.

---"Who did this?" I asked..

---"A marvelous, half-starving illustrator from NYC. You would like her, but I don't think she'd like you."

---"Am I paying you to be insulted? By the way, the wine this time is very good. You're learning," and with that came a glare plus more information, as I knew would happen.

---"Here name is Beth, Beth Vacarro. I really don't think that's her name, but..."

---"Oh, yes it is. I knew here years ago. You're right, she didn't like me."

---"Keep your paws away from her."

---"You know the power of the expeller, To the point, when I knew Beth, she wasn't an illustrator. She was doing some field in science or quasi-science. What a surprise, though. I wonder if it is the same person. Oh well, if you ever see her, tell her I stole one of the brochures instead of your desk, and I'm going to hide it away for old times' sake."

We finally got our business done, and I remember now on that cold, winter day as I walked home “the waves” began to operate. Back in her world, as she in mine. What ifs - no end to the possibilities when the mind is let loose.

It didn't take me long to find her on the Internet, but not her web site. There was a picture which confirmed who I thought she was. She was married to a writer who according to the site had just published a book of literary essays. I went to Amazon, found the book and put in an order. I got out the brochure and spent the next half hour mulling over it. My first impression was right – brilliantly done. The web site had listed some other projects in progress and showed the brochure I had in my hands plus a couple more with the usual info about rates, contacts, etc. But the brochure in my hands was far superior in design and every other way to the others. Had the cruise company given her license to do what she wanted or had something happened in her life to inspire.

As I sat in front of the screen mulling over the contents on that wintry day I recalled again a show I had helped to curate 30 years ago at a small college where I employed for a year. My friend who was head of the Art Department had invited a New York painter to come to the campus for a week of lectures and conversations. As part of the visit there would be an exhibit of his paintings. I never asked my friend where he ran across this guy, but I had looked at photos of several paintings and agreed he might be worth showing. Several days before he was due and the exhibit was to open, the paintings arrived. Giff and I opened the crates, lined up the paintings in the Gallery and exclaimed in unison “Oh shit!”

We sat on the floor, lit a couple of cigarettes and looked across the room in dismay. My colleague, a good abstract painter with a regional reputation, summed it up succinctly:

---“This, this and this are fine, the other 12 are shit.”

---“What do you suppose happened?” I muttered “Did we get the wrong crate?”.

---“I haven't any idea,” came the reply.

The three good ones, all abstracts, had balance of color with bold splashes in unexpected places, an alternating light and heavy brush (all oils) and a wonderfully engaging dynamic. The rest were landscapes of perfect trees, perfect buildings (all monastic in character) and a total lack of engagement or depth. They looked as if they belonged in monasteries.

I being more the A personality picked up the gallery phone and called the secretary who had all the paperwork.

---“Hi, Janette, I'm calling from the gallery. Do you have the number of Larry Gould in NYC handy? I want to give him a call. I'll wait. Thanks.”

---“Why Larry?” asked my colleague. He liked Larry when he was here a last fall. He was also amazed that we were friends, close friends actually, had been since our freshmen year in college.

---“For information,” I said.

---“Ah, thank you Janette, you're the best.” And I hung up.

---“Do you say that to all the female staff,” queried my colleague, who was not very happily married.

---“No,” I said, “she is the best of all the staff, and I have never slept with her since I know that’s what you’re thinking.”

I then rang Gould, who lived and worked in high rise off 5th.

---“Hello, Gouldie here.”

---“Gouldie? Who the hell is that?”

---“Your old college drinking, trouble-making pal. Can you come to the city this weekend. A show you’ll love.”

---“Thanks for the advanced notice. I’ve told you before, get out your Bic and write the shows and dates on the backs of your hands along with all the formulas for those old college calc exams. That way I may get the info before the show’s over. Serious stuff. A NYC painter named Musser. I’m sitting in front of his canvases. What do you know?”

---“Don’t you feel like joining a monastery?” came the reply.

---“Indeed I do, not by choice.”

---“A good painter 10 years ago, then he converted while on a pilgrimage in Italy.”

---“I didn’t know Italy still allowed pilgrimages. There’s nothing here”

---“Absolutely nothing. His abstracts have personality, his landscapes have grass. And not the kind I care for”

There was a pause and then in a rush of word, typical of Larry, alias Gouldie, the solution.

---“The landscapes have no tension. Art needs tension. It’s like friendship with you – if I can’t tell you you’re a loser with women, it’s pretty dull. Here’s what you do. Put a wall just inside the gallery door. Mount the abstracts on the wall in good light. It’s important that they can confront these abstracts. As folks walk around the wall into the gallery, have a bevy of coeds handing them glasses of champagne. Mount the landscapes from best to worst in soft light. Music is a bit much but it would help. Make sure Musser is standing in the middle of the main gallery. Don’t let him near the paintings. They’ll love it.”

---“A wall? Two days and you want a wall built at the entrance? As usual, I think you’ve got it right except about my women. At least I’m consistent. I’ve got to run and save Giff whose about to put a shoe through a monastery.”

---“You know what he really needs. Musser can’t help him.”

---“Right. Thanks again, and tell Amy I’m still interested.”

I actually ended up marrying Amy, a mistake.

---“So we have a convert on our hands. Our due diligence sucks. Here’s the plan according to Larry Gould....”

And they built the wall, hung the show, adjusted the lighting, ordered the champagne, lined up the coeds and hoped for the best.

The folks loved it. Musser was a gentle, urbane sort who reassured them that art could really be therapy. Our friends quit speaking to us.

In front of the computer after thinking about that earlier exhibit (how many times have I told that story, what was the real story, it has become a template for my own aesthetic) I picked up Beth’s brochure again. What was I looking for? A message? A statement? After all it was just a brochure meant to convey information. A come-on. And yet the shapes and colors conveyed something different. The colors were pleasant to the eye, but the shapes were challenging, no, disturbing. What about those few black holes? As I thought about it, I decided that this was not a trip that I wanted to take and yet I was being drawn in, held captive, not to the information but the artist. I reminded myself that I liked the brochure even before I knew who the artist was. Now that I knew, it was even harder to let go. Where’s Philip Roth when I need him?

Since an email address was attached to the web page I took a chance. What did I have to lose? I had survived her first assault. In the note I reintroduced himself, explained how I came across her brochure, brought her up to date briefly on my life since and praised her work. I didn’t solicit a reply. Off went the note, and off went I to meet the expeller.

I heard nothing from Beth until weeks later, sitting in CDG in Paris and checking emails.

---“It’s the same me, and you are you, although I’m impressed with the resumé. I would never have guessed it possible. Glad you like the brochure. My best thus far. Can’t see myself doing brochures forever. Thanks again.”

I had no doubt it was Beth, and I had many doubts about what to do next. Then after a few weeks I sent a reply to her reply in which I said among other things that I might be able to help her husband with his next manuscript. The President of Northwood Press was a friend. In my lawyering days I had saved his ass. That was the most substantial part of the message.

I heard nothing back. The expeller had expelled me, and I was heading to NYC to comfort Gouldie whose cancer had returned. I sent an email to Beth about the trip and suggested lunch with her and her husband. No word until the day before I left.

---“No dice. You’re erased.”

And that had sent me to the sofa with Tony Bennett now having hooked up Elvis Costello to sing *Are You Having Any Fun?* And the scenarios racing around in my head were both confusing and reassuring..

In one I could see her so madly in love that she would be too distraught to lunch with me in the presence of her husband; even I, a man of inordinately large fantasies, knew that was silly; it was Beth; I had seen her angry but never disoriented.

Another, somewhat more defensible, had her unsure how she felt and not wanting to risk whatever fall-out might occur she erased me; that seemed out of character for the woman who created that brochure..

A third scene, highly improbable, was that she and her husband had a squabble over the luncheon invitation; he was willing to knock on any door he could to get published; she prevailed, as she often did when I knew her, but I would receive an email from him, apologizing for his wife's obtuseness and hoping we could stay in touch; such divisions were known to exist in marriages.

The fourth, which I hated the most, was she hated me, period.

Before I could allow too many variations on these themes, I got off the sofa, fixed myself a drink, opened the suitcase and turned up Renée Fleming, Fred Hersch at the piano and Bill Frisell on the guitar with *Conção do Amor* – “to dream of the blue dusk of your love which is absent.” But instead of getting to work I just listened to the Portuguese which I knew a little of from the time I was bumming around South America. Is there only one Renée Fleming available in the world? I don't know if any love was absent at that moment, but she convinced me there was.

I had a second drink, finished packing, listened to the rest of the Fleming disc and called Gouldie to use his alias.

---“How's it going?” I asked.

---“You know I'm feeling better this week. The new medicine seems to work. If nothing else, it calms me down. By the way I'm glad you're coming.”

---“Well, sometimes I forget I'm an asshole and do the right thing. Anything you need that I should pick on the way?”

---“Not really, just arrive.”

---“I will, tomorrow afternoon about 2 pm, unless LGA decides to fuck off the flights.”

---“They promised me they wouldn't. Tomorrow.”

It was hard to get used to the fact that Gouldie was a sick as he was. In my mature years I seldom talked to anyone about my love life, including my lovers, but I always talked to him. I can't make enough sense of it to describe it, but I don't have to with him. I need to let him jump all over me once again. I must remind myself to ask first if he wants to hear another episode..

I was shocked to see how well Gouldie looked when he opened the door.

---“My god, man, you look great” I blurted out.

---“Probably better looking on the outside than the inside,” as we embrace.

---“You know where the bedroom is. It was cleaned yesterday.”

---“I do, and it won't take much to be cleaner than mine.”

I stowed my bags, we sat next to each other on the most luxurious sofa in NYC and enjoyed the afternoon light through the 12-foot high window.

---“Larry, I know it’s been a struggle, but I can’t get over how well you look. What am I missing?”

---“Larry, that funny. Only you, Amy and my mom. The fact is that my appearance is not fakery. I’m better. Not yet in remission but closer than I’ve ever been. I can work, I can sleep and eat and I can celebrate albeit mildly.”

---“Amazing. Three months later. Amazing.”

---“The explanation, if any, is part medicine – lots of new and experimental stuff for someone like me with the resources – and part me. It’s not that it won’t be over, it will be sooner for me than others in my cohort, but with a medicinal boost I actually feel as if it ain’t over yet. I don’t try to figure out what the invaders have in mind. I don’t like having cancer, and I don’t feel that I deserve to have cancer. No doubt, though, it changes one’s perspective. So how many perspectives have I had during my 50 some years? I’ve lost track. How many am I allowed? I don’t care to be told. But I’m still here, and I’m willing to check out as many as possible. And before I forget Amy’s coming by in a couple hours. She’s like a hospital-life-support system for me – and believe me, I know about those systems. You lucky bastard, never been in a hospital, a pill for your cholesterol and a pill for your thyroid, and a weight-lifter’s body that defies the odds. Anyway I’m asking you to change your perspective just for tonight. Are you up to it?”

He could see I was nonplussed. He often offered me my cup of hemlock.

---“I’ll make myself up to it. Quite honestly I don’t think about her on a daily basis, but I’m probably ready to do more than I’ve done since our divorce. I can’t say that her success on Broadway without me pleases my ego. But we’re on.”

Gouldie put his hand on my knee, stared out the window for a few second and finally stood up with more agility than I had seen for several years. Even before the cancer was diagnosed he showed signs of troubling weakness.

---“There’s no plan really. When Amy shows up you guys can open some champagne, which I may take a sip of, and then we’ll decide. So how’s your love life? I know there’s crisis because there always is,” as he headed to the kitchen with me in tow.

---“My god, you prepared all this?”

---“I love hors-d’oeuvres, and these are among my favorites. When you and I couldn’t talk about anything else we could talk about food. Do you remember when we got our doctors to write letters about nervous stomachs and the onset of ulcers so we could get out of the dining hall and east downtown in those greasy spoons?”

---“Do they still have dining halls? I know what’s happened to the science of ulcers.”

---“Try this Wisconsin cheese. I know what you think about Wisconsin, but be open-minded and try this. We’ve battled over cheeses for years, and I can honestly say you’re a stuck-in-mud about cheese and let me add wine. France could fall off the globe, and the rest of us would be enjoying cheese and wine without you.”

---“It’s good – my guess is a European or French background.”

---“You’re right. Just enjoy it. It’s not a conquest. Let me check the champagne. Do you remember the night we were dining with JJ & C in their Paris apartment, and JJ refused to serve the champagne because it was too cold? He wrapped in a warm towel for 10 minutes while we were salivating like rabid dogs. JJ had the best vault of champagne ever. And C utterly bemused took the whole thing so coolly. I never found such coolness.”

Before I could respond the door bell rang.

---“Amy,” called out Gouldie, “the doorman lets her in without ringing up.”

I opened the door. There stood my ex after more than a decade.

---“You’re not Larry, you must be...”

---“The help. How are you, and please come in.”

No embrace but a hand on my shoulder. “You look great! Too bad.”

---“Don’t feed his ego.” Gouldie handed Amy a champagne, and they exchange kisses.

---“Please forgive an old sentimental goofus, but I love having the three of us together again. Let’s hit the sofa.”

We talked almost seamlessly for an hour. Both Amy and I began to relax. We hadn’t sat on a sofa together for probably a dozen years. She was still as smart, clever and attractive as she was then. We had both stayed single, but she had a child by one of her lovers. Ethan was now 13, lived with her part of the year and his father, a movie producer, the other part. I had never met him.

---“How’s Ethan?” I asked at one point.

---“Doing well considering it’s not an easy life with the parents he has. I’m hopeful. He and Larry have grown close and that’s been good for us all. How about you, anyone of interest?”

---“Not really. I just got expelled.”

---“Again?”

---“Again. Somehow I survive. Actually I’ve patented my survival kit.”

---“It’s poison, don’t touch it,” from our host.

---“No need right now,” said Amy who then turned to Gouldie and said,

--- “We have reservations at Gascogne for 7. Are you up to it?” The soft side of Amy I miss.

---“You bet.”

Gascogne was one of our favorites and after four courses we grabbed a cab home. After a short Armagnac poured by but not drunk by Gouldie, Amy prepared to leave. We both commented that the end of the evening was more relaxed than the beginning, and there were laughs all around. Staying in touch was not broached.

---“Let’s sit and talk,” said Gouldie after Amy left, “I feel good. I’ll tell you when it’s time to quit for the night.”

---“Fine. Do you want anything to drink?”

---“Bring me some Evian and pour yourself another Armagnac. It’s first-rate, no?”

---“Always at your place.”

When I returned with the water and the Armagnac, he had pulled the ottoman closer and had settled into the sofa in a manner that suggested he expected a long conversation.

I first told him about the expeller, keeping it brief for which he thanked me because she bored him.

Then I tentatively introduced Beth. He was clearly more interested. When I told him about the scenarios that made me think I was actually in touch with her he smiled and nodded.

---“So what do I do?” I asked finally.

---“Stay in touch because you need to be slapped around some more.”

Silence. It was not uncharacteristic for him to say something like, but this time I was unprepared.

---“More slapping around is good for me?”

---“I didn’t say good for you. I said you needed it. We’ll find out if it’s good for you. I can’t criticize you for falling for younger women and not being able to let go. I go to the head of the class on both scores.”

There was silence before he said,

---“I’m quick-witted, a fast learner, but you’re just deadly, scary smart. All those brain cells get in the way of your wits. You can’t change that, and you may even have figured out our differences. You can’t jump over the shit, you have to go through all the tears and scratching around. You’re too smart, though, to get clinically depressed. You aren’t comfortable with emotional short-cuts even though you’ve figured out all sorts of short-cuts in your rational world. Is Beth tuned in? You want to believe it so you will. Besides I’d hate to have science tell us it isn’t possible. It’s what we count on in those times when we need to count. You’re counting now, and you do it more deliberately than most of us. That’s the end for me tonight. Your arm, please,”

---“Thanks, and the TV won’t bother me. There is a pill for sleeping.”

The guest room was very comfortable with a fridge, TV, stereo, bathroom – everything. I turned on “The Daily Show” but I couldn’t focus. Finally I turned off the TV and watched the city’s night-light show. I knew I was going to try again. “Someone to hold you close, Someone to hurt you deep,” how many times had Sodheim’s lyrics cascaded through my head. “Being alive” is what we want, but then we keep changing our minds about what’s being alive. The guy at the end of the hall has made up his mind.

I slept until well past 9 o'clock. In the living room Gouldie was busy on his cell. The computer screen was flashing as well. He gave me his arm and guided me into the French press on the table.

---“Do you also control the weather? It looks gorgeous outside.”

---“It is. The croissants are from down the street, and you know where the coffee is from. How long has it been since we discovered our coffee? The only thing we ever agreed on. By the way your phone went off a half-hour ago.”

---“I forgot to shut it off or take it into the bedroom. I'll check it after some coffee.”

---“How'd you sleep?”

---“Better than I thought I would after last night.”

---“Amy called earlier. She always does before leaving for work. I'm to tell you, you're ok, she's ok, whatever that means.”

---“And old joke, not worth retelling,” I said laughing. “It's too late to say I'm sorry it didn't work out for us, but I can say I'm glad last night happened. Do I need her slapping me around?”

---“An emphatic no! Of all the women in your life you have arrived at a point with Amy where the two of you can exist post-divorce. Keep it there.”

I looked at the message on the screen, and it was from Beth. She asked I call ASAP.

---“It's from Beth. Do you mind if I call her?”

---“Of course not. I'll clean up the kitchen.”

I called, recognized her voice right away, and found myself agreeing instantly to an invitation for coffee in two hours. Gouldie asked if I needed his old goalie's helmet? I left the apartment about 11 for an 11:30 meeting at a coffee shop about 10 blocks north. I discovered to my surprise that the brain scenarios were totally gone. No waves at the moment.

She was waiting for me. She stood. A bit heavier and certainly older and to my surprise dressed in a uniform with a Sloan-Kettering logo. She could see my puzzlement and explained in a sentence it was her other job.

---“Shall I order us some coffee?” I asked since she only had water in front of her.

---“Shall was always your word, wasn't it? No thank you,” she said.

Then without taking her eyes off me she continued,

---“I'm keeping this brief. I don't wish to be in touch because I don't like you.”

The pause was no more than five seconds, time enough to recall one of the scenarios.

---“I can't forget you even though I've tried. And you were always right, I was the one that initiated the whole thing and led us into your bed. You don't deserve to be hated because you're

not a mean person, regrettably you're the opposite, but I hate myself for making it happen and you for letting it happen. I could tell from your emails that you haven't forgotten, and I've already confessed I haven't either. Let's just say at this stage in our lives we need to be each other's enemy because we can't be each other's friend. I don't want to be in your world and I don't want you in my world, but let me add I need you to help me with this. If you take that as admission of something deep-seated, fine, but I need your help. I don't want your reaction or any further discussion. You can join me by not joining me. That's how you can help. Two more things: age doesn't make much difference in bed but it does afterwards; and stay close to Larry, whom I know because I was his health-care aide for two months. Eventually it will be over."

With that she left. I sat there stunned. It was masterful. Never lost a beat. All in seven minutes. I now needed coffee. I drank an espresso and headed to the apartment. No waves to be sure.

When I opened the door the apartment (having been let in downstairs, I'm sure by Gouldie's instructions) Gouldie was standing by the tall window. I closed the door and stood still for a moment or two. Gouldie never turned away from the window.

---"Should I have lent my goalie's helmet?"

---"It was one hell of a show. Unlike anything I might have expected from her. I know more and less."

---"True for all of us. Of course, now you will know why I can say she's a tough cookie. She took care of me for two months in a way that may explain why I'm still here. She doesn't have a heart of gold, and she will end up throwing whatever his name is out into street. You knew her 15 years ago as a lover, but don't really know her. Do what she says. She's right."

I walked toward the window, and by the time I had reached Gouldie's side he had put his arms out and we embraced. Since I was leaving the next morning, we spent the rest of the day pattering.

The next morning while waiting for the limo we made some plans, always tentative in his case. After a difficult farewell, I was home in three hours. It was over, the scenarios were gone, but I knew I'd work out, open a good Bordeaux and write in one of those three dozen journals for an hour or more. Gouldie became Larry again, and we would stay in touch. I knew I would think about Beth every day, and I was willing to bet she had an occasional thought about me. But no waves for days. A lot isn't over yet but one thing is.