

THREE NIGHTS

Paul Shortt

1.

Bernie turned 'round to me, set down his coffee, leaned forward and smiled. (Why a smile? I knew in a second.)

"We're going to have to let you go. You're just not getting the job done. So, go to the box office and collect your two weeks pay – in lieu of two weeks notice."

He inhaled slowly, paused, and added, "Come see us again . . . in about two years."

And yeah, I freaked. But he said it wearing such a benign favorite uncle smile. He was a good guy, the producer, and definitely not a phony. He'd indulged me for a month and I'd pushed it, doing things my way instead of his. But I was soon relieved. I'd gotten boxed in with a dicey partner, and was trying to do it all myself – no longer a team player – and in theater, that's a problem.

That was in 1966, and two weeks severance pay meant five hundred bucks. That was a whole lot of cash back then. I had screwed up, but at least now I came away with something. Something hell, I was thrilled – a fat bankroll of small bills wrapped in a big rubber band! Better than that, I had a month and a half before drama school cranked back up in New Haven. I was newly-bounced from a summer theater at Lake Candlewood, in Connecticut, and suddenly free of obligation. So, with the bank in my pocket, I pointed my motorcycle east, back towards my New Haven apartment.

Having the time – all kinds of time – I took a detour along the scenic Housatonic River, riding over its beautiful wooded hills and farmlands, down a secluded two-lane back road. The natural beauty began to suggest ideas for a longer journey. I began to think of Cape Cod and New England, and other alluring parts beyond. And now, in mid-July, who knew how many parts, and how far beyond?

The Yale crew competes on the Housatonic, winding through this beautiful valley – a serene and secluded discovery for anyone. “Discovery” now became my operative word. My exit materialized: drop off my work gear, pack lightly, and be on my way to “discovery” in the morning.

Arriving on the sketchier edge of campus, I found my apartment secure, my belongings untouched. Now, with this appealing plan forming and reforming in my head, I was able to enjoy the first evening of freedom, rather than dwell on my many recent screw-ups.

In the morning, rested and excited, I clipped on two side cases, strapped a full knapsack to the gas tank; bungeed a sleeping bag, air mattress, and ground cloth to the rear rack; and adjusted the narrow windscreen. (Note: when you see a helmetless, wind-blown “Easy Rider” barreling down the highway, don’t envy his exhilaration. “Easy Riders” are close to “deaf and numb” when they finally dismount.) Meanwhile, my piled-up load suggested more a safari or heavy bear hunt. Ironically, it would be only three weeks till I rode up to my first bear – in Yellowstone, of all places. *Yellowstone! Really?!*

My general Housatonic-inspired plan was to travel as many smaller two-lane back roads as possible. However, today, for the sake of speed, I would ride Interstate 95 east to Rhode Island, connect over to historic Newport, Fall River, New Bedford and finally Cape Cod. The lure of history was paramount: Newport and the Vanderbilt Breakers; the Folk Festival and electric Bob Dylan; Fall River and the Legend of Lizzie Borden – she of the axe and forty whacks; New Bedford and its whalers. Then, beyond to Cape Cod, Plymouth with the Rock, Boston and its Gardens, Cambridge, Harvard and the Charles, Marblehead, Salem of the Seven Gables, and Gloucester. All compressed between New Haven and New Hampshire. Incredible imaginings! Incredible beginnings!

Beautiful sunny weather followed me all day. Now driving into Newport, I circled the Naval Officer Candidate School – O C S – knowing my older brother,

David – less lucky than I with the draft – was currently an inmate, clad in khaki in a classroom, transforming himself into an officer and a gentleman. But I couldn't visit Candidate Shortt weekdays, and this was Tuesday. I was, however, to deliver his young bride Carole to those same gates on the last leg of my 13,000-mile, seven week, journey. (No kidding – 13,000 miles!) Back to sister-in-law Carole: impulsive and smiling, she'd giggled to me, "Wouldn't it be a terrific surprise riding into Newport on the back of your motorcycle?"

As it finally turned out, my return trip to New Haven timed perfectly with the Drama School kick-off party. And fresh bubbly sister-in-law Carole, my back seat traveling companion, having attracted great interest at said party, and even greater offers of alcohol, was too hung over for any further motorcycle rides. Instead, I'd helped her aboard a New Haven to Newport Greyhound, where she delivered her pot- and alcohol-reeking self to one very pissed-off brother, highly unappreciative of his greenish young wife risking her life and his legacy on an impromptu 700 mile, two-day, rainy motorcycle ride out from Detroit – the final leg of my mega-journey. Ah well, with very few real responsibilities, and distracted by 13,000 miles of memories, feelings, and freedom, what did I know?

Back to "Day One." Several weeks preceding my brother's "special delivery," I arrived for the first time at Newport's legendary "Breakers." Yes, the Breakers *is* very legendary *and* impressive, though this grand Vanderbilt mansion is humbly referred to by family and friends as "the cottage." But today, in mid-summer, "The Cottage" and all the other very grand and gracious fifty-room "cottages," ensconced along Newport's treed and impeccably manicured grass shoreline, seemed devoid of all eminent inhabitants. Where were the bluebloods in their July togs to complete the effect, even if just off in the distance?

By now I'd fallen in with a busload of white-haired day-trippers in casual cottons, all agog on our tour through the grand manse. In stark contrast to the elegant turn-of-the-century surroundings, my faded work shirt, Levi's and I gaggled along, gawking at the gilt, damask, and immense potted plants just as much. And I

eagerly bought the same glossy souvenir book – though mine would be research for designing a fancy manse some day.

Lethargic after the tour – (perhaps the midday heat?) – I wandered about the great lawn and expansive waterfront on my own, then around back, ignoring the “Service Entrance” sign to see where the Rollers and Bentleys might be polished and put to bed. All was extremely quiet, empty, and overly warm. Feeling very droopy, I was struggling to conjure up a gala soirée or even a genteel luncheon on the lawn. For fun, I’d imagined the Vanderbilts and their guests elsewhere, perhaps another gathering down the way, their cottage being otherwise occupied, their starched staff on holiday, or gently snoring in their snug attic dormers high above.

But having miles to go before I slept, I got back on my cycle and rumbled slowly off, past the other “piles” and the Point and finally the “Club,” where at last I spotted a few tony locals sunning on the spacious porch.

Heading north, I left Newport’s gilded village for Fall River, then further east to New Bedford, hoping to whiff a few more legends on the afternoon’s final leg to the Cape. The trip was slowly becoming one of eclectic and disparate impressions.

Soon, a familiar rhyme and distinct impression began running through my head:

*Lizzie Borden took an axe – And gave her mother 40 whacks
When she saw what she had done – She gave her father 41!*

This lurid tale of Fall River deserved at least a closer look, to learn more of her striking legend. Unfortunately, my weary state over-ruled. These were the days before energy bars, and I hadn’t the energy to linger longer, searching for illusive axe marks or supposed bloodstains. Besides, Fall River and New Bedford, with their Edward Hopper-like starkness and lonely melancholia, appealed to me more than Lizzie’s notorious slaughterhouse. I was also pressed for time, aiming for an inaugural campout on Martha’s Vineyard; so I pressed further east, around Buzzard’s Bay, and on towards Cape Cod.

Cruising onto the Cape, I headed down to Woods Hole, scoped out the legendary marine station and research trawler, and caught the ferry to Martha's Vineyard. The weather had turned cooler now, overcast and windy, the mood becoming stark and somber. Well, why not? It was reflecting the stark Cape landscape and my change of mood driving through working-class Bedford and Fall River. By now, somewhat energized, my cycle and I would brave the elements by crossing a choppy sea, on a windy passage, to a windswept isle – “Down to the sea in ships” lingered from a childhood movie.

Well, it wasn't that dramatic, but it felt good to enhance the experience – make it live up to ones imaginings. And it was a good though short-lived cruise: the diesel fumes and throbbing engine reminding me strongly of Norfolk, and a past summer cruise aboard a worn destroyer, in my brief collegiate Naval ROTC career. The moving deck of the Vineyard ferry required a compensating walk I hadn't forgotten, but it was only a tame version of that first midshipman cruise. But still, it took me back to the grey steel deck of DD 874, and gave me time to think and reminisce, as I stared out across the ocean, chin resting on arms resting on rail – only the lookout binoculars were missing.

As the ferry slowed into Vineyard Haven, I took a quick look at the map. Then I kicked over the twin cylinders, clicked into gear, and rolled down the ramp, heading clockwise toward Oak Bluffs and Edgartown. I was also anticipating, somewhere down the road, a properly atmospheric and scenic campsite. 1966 was decades before the trendy bars, bistros, and harbors of bobbing yachts that have appeared with the mass invasion of investment bankers, hedge fund shrewdies, and the Clintons. Though I found the quaint century-old stick and shingle Victorian cottages of Oak Bluffs picturesque – and what stage designer isn't seduced, even temporarily, by its Victorian dollhouse gee-gaws and bric-a-brac? – I did sense a somewhat restrained, low-key vibe to the entire place. So I continued to push on, looking for something more dramatic or poetic in lieu of in-town action. It was a

weekday, but still, it was July and vacation time, and again, where were all the people? I would have to play the solitary card instead, and I soon found my solitary.

By the time I'd motored two-thirds around the island, I sensed that if I'd actually been an arriving Pilgrim, I would have certainly pressed on to Plymouth. Martha's Vineyard was quite a low profile, wind-swept, desolate island without much protection from the mighty Atlantic. Imagine the winters! The storms! Having grown up in Michigan and vacationed on the shores of Lake Michigan, with its beautiful high dunes, rolling grass, and thick woodlands, I can say I'm glad we never blabbed to Easterners how beautiful *that* is compared to some of their more touted vacation spots.

But I was a guest here and raised to be patient and respectful. And for that, I was soon rewarded with an absolute classic land's end point complete with the requisite lighthouse, set dramatically atop carved cliffs. This was Gay Head, a continuous rugged beach coastline stretching below a surf-carved sandstone bluff, crested by rugged rolling scrub, all facing an endless sea. The moor-like vegetation stretched in all directions, with a few isolated cottages and hunkered-down summerhouses sporadically dotting the low-lying landscape. Oh, it was perfect for a feature film or, even better, a first night camp-out. Here was 'picturesque' and 'atmosphere' in spades. Hitchcock would have done a jig, Stephen King sharpen a spike.

I parked my cycle on the bluff at the end of a trail, climbed down an easy cut in the cliffs, and made my way along the beach till I found a spot with the right feel. There was shelter from a few large rocks, spaced to leave a dramatic view of the cliffs above and the white-capped ocean beyond. The rocks also screened me from any wandering beachcombers, though I seemed to find myself completely alone. But still, one had to be prepared, if all those cowboy movies were true. I would snooze in my sleeping bag atop my air mattress, in lieu of a saddle for a pillow and Indian blanket for a cover, open to the big sky and bigger air. I would come to do this the entire trip, weather and local conditions permitting. I wasn't a tent guy – too claustrophobic, too little air – and I didn't want to be snuck up on, trapped inside.

And I didn't want to pop for motels either. Ahead and unknown, I would find some rather challenging conditions that would force me to be imaginative or ballsy in picking my camping sites. Meanwhile, that first night, I didn't give a thought even to the tide, because I didn't know better. Luckily, nothing bad came of it. It was a good night and I was pleased to be where I was, doing what I was. It was to be a preview of how nights out-of-doors would turn out, depending on the hunt and the luck – the good and the bad. And it would come sooner than expected.

In the morning, I awoke under a fine layer of dew and light sea spray. I again looked out at where I was and what it was, taking a long while to absorb it all. Being alone in a sleeping bag on the sand allowed for a tremendous sense of ocean, beach, and cliffs, with the lighthouse above on the bluff. There were no incidents to distract – no dog walkers, joggers or other campers – to draw me back into the ordinary world.

After enjoying that very first wake-up high, I rolled, folded, and packed my few things and climbed back up the trail to the cycle. No problems had occurred there either. In fact, I only recall a few mornings of the entire trip when the unexpected – funny, awkward, or dangerous – did occur. Good old peaceful, innocent 1966. But, one of those few very “iffy” occasions occurred quite soon, and in a very unexpected way. I'm still wondering how to classify it. But for now, the mundane and personal routine is herein catalogued, and only this once: pee, dress, brush teeth, wash, and comb hair. Reconnoiter and eat in the nearest passable greasy spoon, while reading the local paper to stay current and attached, in some way, to the place – larger or smaller – I'm passing through.

2.

Today, leaving Martha's Vineyard, I planned to drive up to the Monomoy Playhouse in Chatham, located up the Cape maybe an hour north of Woods Hole. I'd heard that two Yale classmates, David and Lee, both stage designers and a tight campus couple, were there. They were nice people and worth visiting, and would

probably be good about letting me hang around and maybe more. Even though Lee was a year ahead of me, she had graciously helped paint my first Yale production of “Mister Roberts” that past winter, so I felt I’d be welcome.

Meanwhile, near Woods Hole lay the legendary Falmouth Playhouse, and further on, an extremely popular Hyannis Port, summer home of the Kennedys. So it might take awhile to reach Chatham.

For this evening, I’ll skip my revealing Falmouth Playhouse discovery – an eye-opener of sorts, connected to my dubious Lake Candlewood partner and his inflated résumé. Too long and lame a story anyway.

Instead, let me take you on a tourist cruise through legendary Hyannis Port – bumper to bumper to bumper to bumper – where crawling along in traffic is much easier on four wheels than two. Soon, 1) I did find the Kennedy compound, well cordoned-off, 2) the appealing afternoon Nantucket ferry fully booked – note that, 3) the line at Dairy Queen running clear around the block, and 4) a sun too hot and too high, a light too flat and too blah.

So, passing up shingled houses, pristine beaches, and bobbing yachts, I instead encountered waves of Madras and Lacoste, in pinks and greens, all on mostly tanned crowds too large to feel at ease. I’d come back at some more appealing, less draining time of day – the shade-less, featureless glare of midday sun now becoming much too “debilitating.”

Let me explain: The summer hours between seven and ten a.m. and five and eight p.m. are the true “magic hours” for motorcycle riding. The sun’s low-angled sidelight casts long shadows – rich, beautiful, sculptural, and dramatic. The “middle” hours, however, one just endures and presses on. And today, midday, the landscape was flat, sandy, and dull-scrubby along each side of monotonous, glaring asphalt, with a sky too flat, washed-out, and colorless.

But it wasn't that far from Hyannis up to Chatham and the Monomoy Playhouse, so, despite all this complaining, the ride was easily endurable. Unknown, however, I had not yet gained the required stamina for the unendurably boring drive across the vast and endless "great middle" of America, nor its deserts. But I was to find cruising during the sun's "magic hours," even in the most monotonous and expansive regions, invigorating – and cooler, too.

Now, arriving at compact Chatham village, I easily found the theater, with David's station wagon parked behind it. I knew his car well – it had once dented my motorcycle parked in the Drama School drive. I had freaked, David had compensated (his father was an insurance agent), and we reconciled. I hoped all would be mutually forgiven and forgotten now that I was an unexpected invader on his turf. Fortunately he and Lee greeted me pleasantly, even interrupting their work. We chatted for a bit and they showed me around.

Actually Monomoy was Lee's design gig, and boyfriend David was there visiting and offering Lee moral support. He was also more experienced than most others at the drama school, so he was a good adviser. And certainly in terms of navigating dicey political and technical problems, something I could have used during my short tenure at Candlewood.

Lee was the set designer for Arthur Miller's "All My Sons," currently on Monomoy's small stage. The brick façade and porch of the backyard setting were looking quite good – realistic, robust and virtually complete. The young apprentices seemed intently engaged putting on the final touches, periodically turning to Lee for advice and approval. All seemed to be going well.

Now we three were standing around talking in the sandy area outside the backstage, as I recall. Perhaps I was being woeful about my Candlewood debacle, or telling David how good the front fender repair was on the cycle. Just chit-chat. All of a sudden this black Ford Mustang convertible shoots up the lane, comes to a sudden stop, sand flying, and out jumps this thin young shoeless girl in shades, tight low-slung jeans, T-shirt, and long flying hair. Smoking the entire time, she takes a final

drag, tosses the glowing butt onto the sand, and *grinds it out with her bare foot!*

Introduced, my simple “Hi” conveyed how speechless I was, but not how stupefied. And how incongruous it became: She had just graduated from Miss Porter’s (elite and conservative), was headed to Bard (elite, liberal cum radical) in September, was now working (apprenticing) at the theater (interesting, artsy, not required for Junior League), chain smoking Marlboros (obviously), with her parents and older brother summering nearby in Chatham (oh my), and looked like she was okay hanging out with me (*Oooh-Kay*). Long story short, she invited me to dinner at her parent’s home nearby (more later), and to stay overnight (motives either considerate, charitable, or ulterior).

Back to David and Lee for a moment: I soon found that David’s visit to Monomoy was brief, so he and Lee were temporarily “camping out” in the back of his nomadic station wagon. Without the offer from the gypsy-like little rich girl I would have gone off to scout the sand dunes for a likely spot. So actually, her timing was quite fortuitous.

As the afternoon was waning, I followed behind Miss Mustang’s convertible to her family’s shingled Chatham pile. And yes, family and classic digs virtually matched the image forming in my head. Inside, her mother was gracious; her older preppy brother friendly, on break from business college; and (luckily) father, absent, in attendance only on weekends. Later, the dinner with rebel daughter, the prep son near my age, and the properly gracious mother was cordial and stereotypical – meaning polite questions and nice manners all ‘round. I don’t even recall the chain-smoking rebel lighting up once at the table. And in my faded work shirt and Levi’s, I was relying on my best manners to blend in, the evening meal reminding me of my Aunt Myra’s near-formal dinners – beautiful, pleasant, and cordial. Antique hardwood table and chairs, polished silver candlesticks, enormous fresh-cut flowers – the entire House Beautiful effect.

After dinner that evening, rebel girl showed me placid Chatham before our drive back down to Hyannis Port, she on the back of my motorcycle. Earlier at

dinner, her mother remarked how dangerous motorcycles could be, and daughter promised we'd take her car. But out of sight, daughter made the switch. So we flew down Route 6 on the BMW, the wind whipping her hair and the smoke from her ever-present Marlboro. In Hyannis Port we toiled around a bit, saw what little we could in the dark, and all we could in the brighter lights of the still-crowded main street. We pulled into the Melody Tent theater-in-the-round, with a performance going on, spotted two other Yale classmates, Mitch and Steve, in the light booth running the show, said Hi to their backs and split. Returning to Chatham unscathed, our windblown appearance corroborated her Mustang convertible alibi.

I was graciously put up in the guesthouse, settling deep into the down comforter and overstuffed pillows of Ralph Lauren's best, in navy blue, green, and red plaid, complimenting the country pine. It was classically "casual" posh. I behaved accordingly, the daughter never snuck in, no mischief occurred. (Sneak preview: Till a night later.)

The next morning, over a pleasant breakfast, her older brother, who just happened to have his pilot's license, offered to fly us both over to Nantucket. At dinner, I had told of the fully booked Nantucket ferry, and this was his generous and very surprising suggestion. Mustang girl and I could then catch the return ferry, making it a simple day trip. It must have been her day off at the theater, or she was one of those fair weather apprentices. I could guess which.

Previously at the theater, on the day of my arrival, a little backstage drama had occurred. The director, a veteran Ohio University drama professor with Monomoy Playhouse – OU's official summer theater – was insistent that Lee's setting for "All My Sons" needed a realistic tree next to the fence. Lee argued the leaves of a real tree, even fresh cut, would wilt, die, and fall off, hardly lasting the week of the run. David agreed and bolstered Lee in her stand against the director's wishes, and up for Lee's "artistic integrity." I cringed, silently mortified – recalling the outcome of my several similar Candlewood insubordinations. Now I thought, wasn't there a creative solution or compromise? Lee was arguing that whatever

was used for leaves would appear false or dead. I kept my mouth shut and slinked away. I'd screwed up at Candlewood and didn't want to witness another. I could picture Lee and David driving off in a huff, and sure didn't want to be around for that spectacle. So the offer of a courtesy flight over to Nantucket couldn't have afforded a more relieving and opportune exit.

3.

So, in the morning, Mustang girl and I cycled to the small Hyannis airport, met her brother, climbed into the rented Cessna and took off. Of course we were without an overnight bag or kit because, after all, this was just day trip. At altitude, engine droning, we saw Nantucket just ahead, surprisingly close; darkish green and spotted with specks of white houses, the early sun glinting off the rippling ocean far below. It seemed we could gently glide down to Nantucket, all so wonderful and comprehensible from this altitude. We landed shortly and stuck out our thumbs, and a friendly driver, on his way to Nantucket Town, cheerfully detoured to show us his favorite beach.

Now in town, on foot, we wandered about, saw the usual tourist sites, had lunch, and checked out the in-town beach. Then we moseyed down to the ferry wharf to get tickets for a return, *but found the return ferry fully booked!* Not Again! I thought, as I quickly considered the consequences. By now it had struck me: passengers who'd ferried over in the morning were all ferrying back in the evening – full in, full out! “Round trip tickets only, kids,” the ticket master reiterated. How had we – how had I – missed that? Now we were in a big fix. But, it was still early, and I'd improvise something . . . later. So I didn't mind that much, and neither did she. And then there was this . . . ah . . . undercurrent of the unexpected. I knew I was resourceful and creative, at the least, and could take care of us both, one way or another.

Surprisingly, 18 year-old Mustang-girl took the first step: she called her mother, concocting the story I'd run into a Yale friend who invited us to stay over. (And I thought, “She's done this before!”) “How fortunate for you,” her mother

seemed to reply, but I couldn't quite overhear the inflection. Meanwhile, I was silently mortified with such a bald-faced and clichéd fabrication. I couldn't believe the mother was buying it, her daughter only recently out of high school. Through the phone, I felt Mother could detect the redness of my face. I recall now perhaps our fish story may have popped into Miss Mustang's head after we'd passed Kingman Brewster's son on the sidewalk, and I'd remarked, "Hey, that's Kingman Brewster's son we just passed!" Kingman was then sitting President of Yale. So it turned out Mustang Sally was the much more opportunistic, facile, and convincing improviser; *especially passing along "to me"* the permission and blessing bestowed upon us by her mother! Was this some kind of unspoken coming-of-age ritual? Despite my confusion and naiveté, off we went to celebrate our "adventure" with a pizza. Meanwhile, out of the corner of my eye I noticed clouds moving in, making the mood slightly more . . . what? Ominous? Dire? Hmm.

So there we sat, face-to-face, for an intimate "first pizza," underscored by the prospect of an entire evening together, alone; and me, much too tight to pop for a Nantucket guesthouse. I figured we'd have an improvised adventure, roughing it instead. Perhaps even one more fitting for a girl who ground out cigarettes with her bare feet! So, why the Hell not?! Oh, did I mention how exceedingly quiet this girl was?! It's true. She was. There were gaps in the conversation I could drive my motorcycle through. But did I have to provide the questions *and* the answers? And the humor?! How much of a price was I going to pay?

Now let me explain what I actually felt: she was eighteen, and barely out of high school; I was twenty-two, and a grad student. I felt like a cradle robber, even if I did look her age. But it was how I actually *felt* that affected me most. And I didn't feel like taking advantage. Because the truth was, there was no chemistry. I think I just might have made some kind of move if there was. But it was all feeling a bit sham-like. Artificial. Made up. I did feel brotherly and protective, but detached physically. Not quite the expected story, but if you wait, there will be a few "unexpecteds" momentarily.

Soon it began to get dark. And cold. We walked the streets, and our walk turned into a “prowl,” and our prowling into desperation. We began to feel homeless and unequipped – “helpless” in other words. We tried car doors for a cozy back seat. All were locked. We tried a church and found one open, and felt lucky. Lying down, the pews were much too hard and uncomfortable; and, staring up at the ceiling, each in our own row, it felt totally ridiculous. So we got up and left. Now, as we wandered, it grew later and later. And we became more exhausted – but not quite desperate. No panic yet.

We eventually found ourselves back down on the wharf opposite the Futile Ferry Concession, it and we still not ready to concede. Then I noticed the nearby Nantucket Theater, closed for the entire summer. I may not know about ferry schedules, but theaters I know – front to back, inside and out, lights on or off.

So, I took Miss Mustang’s hand and walked us ‘round back to the alley, found an unlocked gate, and entered the side yard of the theater. So far so good. Now, despite the darkness, I could just make out the fire escape stairs to the balcony. Climbing up, I found the balcony door locked, naturally. Then I spied a cornice running along the side wall, just below the second floor windows. I inched carefully along the ledge – movie style – to the nearest window, tried it, and found it *unlocked!* Brilliant! I quietly lifted the window, climbed inside, and felt, in the dark, a matching ledge just below. I inched carefully back along the wall to the balcony rail, climbed over, and walked triumphantly over to the door, opening it to a shivering Miss Mustang, my nicotine-scented partner-in-crime. I assume we were “breaking and entering.” But to me it was “lifting” a window and entering a door, without “breaking” anything. So, technically, I guess we were trespassing. (And I always did consider consequences for such adventures.) But for now, it was – *Voilà!* – shelter! And much, much more.

We didn’t dare try the lights, so we really couldn’t see anything. We had to move and explore mostly by touch. Slowly it began to feel more recognizable. I knew theater layouts, but my accomplice didn’t, so she kept grabbing my shirttail.

Soon I discovered stairs to the backstage, and we carefully felt our way along. There we found a dressing room with a toilet and running water. Now we had it made. And then . . . we made an even more fortunate, and much more “spectacular” discovery – something I’d never seen in my entire life. Lying on the stage, from side to side, from front to back, was the theater’s entire costume inventory – just lying there – spread out! There must have been decades’ worth on the floor: hundreds of costumes piled one atop another, deeply layered, covered in thin plastic. We felt and realized all this entirely in the dark. Try to imagine.

Now, finally, we found our resting place – an enormous ocean deep with costumes. And, as we finally gloriously lay down, sinking deep into the wondrous effect, I could imagine all the doublets and gowns, capes and petticoats, and trousers, vests, and overcoats. To me, it was better and more satisfying, and more magically soothing, than even the deep bedding of Ralph Lauren-comfort back at Mummie’s in Chatham. Somehow all this seemed the perfect metaphor and magic ending to our misadventure. I think we might even have held hands as we lay back, staring up into the darkness; and I guess smiling, the both of us. I might have even given her a brotherly goodnight kiss. In our relieved happiness, it seemed appropriate. It was all very innocent, and yes, I did not take advantage. I’m sure this disappoints some listeners. But it takes a lot more than libido to overcome the utter exhaustion we felt. Mustang’s mom – if you’re reading this story – no worries.

4.

We woke to the early morning sunrays streaming through the balcony windows and dusty interior, revealing the spectacle surrounding us. The full effect of the polyethylene-covered expanse now glittered and sparkled in the sun’s effect. And our near-disastrous evening had transformed itself into something magical, even themed: a reckless guy and a misfit girl, wandering homeless, marooned in the cold darkness, caught up in adventure, crises, discovery, with more than a little theatricality, all rescued by the unimaginable.

We had both slept deeply, intact, fully clothed, surprisingly warm, and totally innocent. Affected as if from some magic drug. In reality, it was called “exhaustion.” Miss Mustang-Marlboro was even too tired to light up, to calm her nerves, or anything else that could have set fire to our dreamscape. If she had, Yale President Brewster, a Nantucket summer resident, would certainly have ended my Drama School career then and there!

Rising, we each took a polite turn in the off-stage bathroom. Then, without saying too much – which was our way – we stepped carefully over and through the ocean of costumes, slid ourselves down onto the aisle, climbed up to the balcony, went out the side door, and finally down the stairs for our exit – stage left, I believe. In a way, it was the perfect ending to such implausibility – and a memorable and symbolic treasure to savor the entire summer, and for many years to come.

Nantucket had ended quietly, happily, and sweetly with breakfast buns, coffee, and two cigarettes, one each, enjoyed on the early morning, near-empty return ferry to the mainland. No sell-out problems this time.

We two, cycled back from Hyannis up to Chatham and “home,” to report a pleasant overnight “Reunion” with my “Very Good Friend” – and, hopefully, no uncomfortable questions from Mom. Soon mother, daughter, and I all parted pleasantly, a bonding of some kind, I think, having occurred between wayward daughter and me. A bonding with Mother I doubt. Standing in her kitchen those final moments, I felt Mom could see right through me. I don’t know if the air was thicker with a mother’s silent intuition, or a daughter’s unspoken denial. Or did Miss Mustang-Marlboro-Gypsy Girl always get her way?

Maybe. But this time – she didn’t get me.

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