

A COMMON STORY

She sang alto. They sat in front of the bass section. He admired her the very first time he laid eyes on her. One evening as everyone was leaving rehearsal, he walked up beside her and asked, "Would you like to have a cup of coffee sometime?" Smiling, she answered, "I'd like that." "How about Thursday after classes at the diner?" "I'll be there." She had such a sweetly sincere smile. On Thursday afternoon they did have a cup of coffee together. They talked. They told each other their lives' stories. There wasn't really all that much to tell. They were young after all. They had both grown up in Cincinnati. Both were from the east side. Both were

middle class. They had remarkably similar backgrounds.

That first simple cup of coffee turned into a lunch date at Frisch's. She got the filet of sole sandwich. His mom always got that. In some ways, she was a lot like his mom. He felt comfortable around her. There was none of that insincere coyness he disliked in some other girls he had dated. He never caught her manipulating his emotions. She was always straightforward and down to earth. He liked her.

"Let's have dinner. Somewhere nice. Maybe the Maisonette." "That's pretty expensive." "You're worth it." "All right, if you're sure you want to spend that much." That evening, he was worried if he had enough money with him. The waiter

asked if they wanted a cocktail. She got a Whiskey Sour and he had a Manhattan. It went right to his head or maybe he was just edgy being together with her in such a fancy adult place. Whatever the cause, he felt giddy. She was so beautiful. Oh, not in a movie star way. No, not flashy at all. She had that cozy wholesome look of a perfect life's companion, the ideal mate. He liked her personality too. Yes, he thought, she just might be the one for me. When the waiter took their orders, he smiled hearing her ask for the schnitzel a la Holstein. That was his favorite there too. Except of course, when he ordered it, he added "Without the anchovies, please." "Oh," she quickly chimed in, "I'd like mine without the anchovies too, please." They both laughed. "Can't stand 'em," she said with a smile. He liked the way she cut her meat, holding the fork in

her left hand and cutting with the knife in her right. She then lifted the fork to her mouth with it still in her left hand. She was so classy. Like him, she left the very last end piece of each of the asparagus spears on her plate. Then, she was so delicate eating her French pastry while he shoveled down that messy but delicious puddle of strawberries Romanoff. They both took their coffee with cream only. When they got in his car to leave, she turned and kissed him. “Thank you, that was so good,” she said. They drove up to Ault Park rather than going straight to her place. He parked on the part of the drive that passed the front of the cascade. They necked for quite some time. He *knew* she was the one.

After thinking about it a couple of weeks, he decided he would ask her to

marry him. It was a big decision. He worried whether she would agree. Would he get a decent job? Could they afford to live well? What would they do if she got pregnant before they could afford a nice big house and all that? He talked it over with his dad. Dad liked her and told him to ask her and not to wait any longer. Mom agreed.

It was a Sunday after church. He had not heard a single thing that had been said the entire morning. He had never felt so nervous in his life. They went to Lenhart's over by UC. She seemed to sense he was on edge. She wondered why. He talked her into trying the lieber knodel suppe. But, then he didn't even look to see her reaction to the taste. He stared at the dumpling in the middle of his own bowl. "Meg," he began. "Oh, God,"

she exclaimed. He looked at her suddenly. Was something wrong, he wondered helplessly. They stared into each others' eyes. Finally, he recovered his nerve. Looking directly into her eyes, he asked, "Meg, will you marry me?" "Yes," she said without hesitation — beaming — "yes, I will." He felt a rush of relief, and sheer happiness, and heart pounding fear, and thrilling joy, and well — a thousand emotions all at once. Old Mr. Lenhart knew something big had just happened and he was grinning broadly. "She said 'Yes.'" With his warm aristocratic smile Mr. Lenhart said, "Congratulations to both of you." He hardly tasted the rest of that meal even though it was all his favorites: backhendl mit spätzle und rote kraut and Haselnuss torte for dessert. He didn't even notice her sauerbraten or even her Dobos torte.

Looking back on it all, he remembered how exciting their romance had been. Too, he had clear memories of all the good things to eat they had enjoyed together. It was all so perfect. Maybe it had been too perfect.

Years passed quickly — as they do somehow. When they had reached their mid-forties, their children were in high school, the routine of their lives had become a little stale: a little overly predictable: frankly a little boring. She was a good mother. But, she had developed interests of her own. She had grown away from him somehow. They no longer agreed on things quite as readily as they had when they were newlyweds. One evening, while they were both sitting in the living room reading, he glanced

over at her. She seemed distant. She looked tired. He wondered — seriously wondered — if maybe — well just possibly — if it had been a mistake to rush into marriage the way it now seemed he had. They almost never took walks together the way they had when they were young. If they did walk, they never held hands anymore. Love making was perfunctory. The passion was gone. It all was just mechanical. He felt stuck, even trapped, in his tedious life and in his marriage. That Janey at the office was so cute and she always laughed so spontaneously when he made little jokes. Meg never laughed like that anymore.

After the holidays, one day when snow was predicted for the next morning, he stayed at the office later than he usually did. He called home. “Meg, I believe I’m

going to stay downtown tonight.” Lengthy conversations; tears — and from both of them, not just her; a few serious arguments. Everything moved along at a pace all its own.

One evening in the summer, he called. “I got the proposed settlement from your lawyer.” She was silent. After a lengthy pause, he said, “It’s not fair and you know it isn’t — but I’m tired of all the bickering. I’ll sign the damned thing. We could meet at that dump in the Plaza tomorrow and I’ll give it to you over lunch.” After another long pause, he added a little angrily, “Dutch.”

Sometimes love can be like that. Born in thrills, slowly decaying, and ending in frustration and anger, a marriage can be such a disappointment. His parents had

experienced married life of that kind too. Ah, but his grandparent though, they had stayed together until death had separated them. And, up to the end, they seemed at least to feel some kind of magic, some kind of genuine caring. What had been their secret?

When his parents had married, the stock market crash had just occurred a couple of months earlier. Their married life began with the onset of the Great Depression. By then, his grandparents there in town had been married nearly thirty years and his grandparents in Alabama had been together even longer.

He realized that both of his grandfathers had been happy men with invariably cheerful outlooks. Samuel, his grandfather down South, had been born

just a few years after the end of the War Between The States. The South was desperately poor and he brought very little to his marriage other than his cheerful disposition. He loved to give low budget parties. Sammy's fried peach pies were known far and wide. His northern grandfather could do anything. He became a professional baseball player when he was very young. His major league debut had been with the Brooklyn team well before they were known as the Dodgers. After a year, he came back to Ohio and was on contract with the Reds. They dropped his contract and he decided to open a sporting goods store down at the Court Street Market. For several years he made the uniforms for the Reds until the Depression took away his business. If you walked anywhere downtown with him, at least one person

on every block would greet him. He was fun to be with.

In stark contrast, both of his grandmothers were taciturn and either grumpy or depressed most of the time. When they were widowed, their unpleasant dispositions grew worse and that was what he remembered about them. Maybe it was those happy husbands who had made their marriages work so well. Maybe it was Dad's fault and his own that theirs had not been so successful.

He did not see much of his Southern grandparents. It was the Northern ones he remembered better. They had a rough time during the Depression. Through it all though, they stayed close to each other. Grandpa was so colorful but grandma's

depression worsened when Grandpa lost his business downtown. In those days, people did not take pills for every little problem. Her doctor had prescribed long walks to distract her and she walked miles sometimes. Their marriage outlasted it all. Then, one Saturday morning, grandpa said he was thirsty and got up to go to the kitchen for a glass of water. Grandma heard a glass break and grandpa groan loudly. She rushed into the kitchen and found him on the floor. He was gone.

How had they done it? What made both couples help each other through all the miserable difficulties they had endured? Why were his parents unable to do that? They had stayed together “for the sake of the children” but their lives together were largely unhappy. Several times they had separated only to

reconcile on the most practical and unemotional terms imaginable. When dementia overcame his dad, Mom would just go play bridge with her women friends and leave him alone for most of the day. One day, when she got home, she called out for him and got no response. She found him in his bathroom on the floor in a pool of blood, He had slit his wrists. Yes, they had stayed together until death parted them. Still things had not ended the way they are supposed to. Why?

Now, he was alone. The kids still called and visited sometimes. That cute young Janey at the office got married and quit. Life lost its luster.

What about those love lives of people on the television? Not the ones of artificial fictional characters. No, what

about the couples who had gone to work together in show business? Those who had survived vaudeville certainly had known hardships together. Was that their secret? Was struggle — struggle in the same boat — what made a marriage endure?

His mind wandered and he remembered an old couple who had been his grandparents best friends, Clara and Eddie Blume. Now they had a happy marriage. Why? They never had children. They lived comfortably but frugally. Eddie used to read the stock report on the radio and he drove some big old car that he absolutely loved and held onto forever. Was it a Buick or maybe it was a Hudson. He could not recall. When he was about twelve or thirteen, he had visited over there one day with his

mom. He recalled sitting in that really big kitchen of their old house. Clara and Eddy had a parrot whose perch was in that kitchen over near a window that faced the driveway. When Eddie drove up, the parrot began bobbing its head up and down, “Eddie’s home; crow; Eddie’s home” the parrot called. He remembered how all of them had laughed. Clara said the bird always did that when Eddie got home. They had all then gone into the small, dark sitting room with the old fashioned but still beautiful art nouveau furniture. He remembered every detail so clearly. Clara gave him a little glass of wine. She said it was sauternes. He had never tasted wine before. It was sweet. Delicious. That glass she served it in too — what a glass! He had learned later from his mom that Clara’s wine glasses were from Bohemia — wherever that was

— someplace in central Europe. He could still remember that little glass. It was cut crystal — so finely cut in fact that it felt like velvet in his fingers. Just being a guest of Clara and Eddie felt so special. The two of them, Clara — and Eddie too — were tiny frail little people. Clara did not cook well and they ate sparingly. In fact, Clara seemed to survive on almost nothing but candy. They smiled a lot and told little stories together, one finishing a phrase the other had begun. Their whole lives seemed to be one long party. What a positive outlook on life they always had. Maybe that was their secret.

Bored sitting alone in his living room, he switched on a re-run of an old Burns and Allen show. The plot was nonsense, naturally. Still some of the gags made him chuckle. Every now and then

something in the show reminded him of a long gone incident that had occurred in his marriage with Meg. He smiled. Well it was not all hell, was it? She *had* been a good cook. Nobody made fried chicken like Meg. With her mashed potatoes and good sweet corn on the cob, God, what a meal she could fix. Her pineapple upside-down cake too. How long had it been since he had tasted that? He thought about calling her. Was it all too late?

He had been ignoring the television, but just then he noticed that the show was nearly over. It was the part where Gracie and George would re-enact one of their little vaudeville bits out in front of a curtain. George walked out from behind the curtain at stage center. Gracie was at far stage right under the proscenium. She was holding a gigantic armload of fresh

flowers. George approached her. She smiled sweetly at him. ‘Gracie, what beautiful flowers.’ ‘They’re Mrs. Wilson’s.’ ‘I bet she’ll love those.’ ‘Oh, she did already.’ ‘What do you mean, Gracie?’ ‘Well you said if I went to visit her in the hospital I should take her flowers. So, when she wasn’t lookin’ I ...’ ‘You *took* her flowers ! Hhmmm, say goodnight, Gracie.’ ‘Goodnight.’

Well, in memory of all of them, his parents, both sets of his grandparents, Clara and Eddie, George and Gracie, Hell even Meg, I’ll join in to wish you all goodnight.