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A MATTER OF TIME

(Memoir)

Marvin Sosna

She had aged since I had last seen her which surprised me because I had thought that somewhere along the line, the process—the shrinkage of flesh, loss of tissue, the tremors, vacant stare and tilt of the head in an absent direction—that all of that came to a place and stopped, as if to wait for death. It had been two years and she was now ninety-one and it had not stopped, the slow disappearance of the person fading, as it were, before one's very eyes, becoming more of a blur than a human figure, receding from view even as one watched.

That earlier time, two years before, the initial shock of it was difficult to disguise. I felt my eyes widen as I entered the room where she had formerly presided at her salons, my vision involuntarily surprised at the level of her appearance, the obvious physical weakness of her, and I glanced away and then recovered quickly, putting my hand up in an exaggerated gesture to shield my eyes.

I carried it off as a joke. “You’re so radiant, darling,” I exhaled. “Forgive me, I can’t stand to look at you, the brilliance hurts my eyes so.”

Cheap, obvious flattery, the kind of thing we had established in discourse over the years. In other times she would have shot back with an even more outrageous hyperbole. That time, she gave me only a tremulous smile.

I had been five years away, and the ravages of Parkinson’s Disease had robbed her, leaving only splotches of speech, her voice unable to enunciate at anywhere near the racing pace the thoughts that poured through her mind left unfeebled, sharp enough to recognize one of the ironies—a classic one, indeed—of her situation, that the disease was eponymous. She was Sherry Parkinson, and while it was not for her that the disabling,

degenerative process she was undergoing had been named, she said she felt honored that, when she was diagnosed with it after so robust a life, it turned out to be “her” disease. Any other would have been inappropriate, she said, even unworthy of its victim.

Sherry had been, at one time, a screenwriter, a wit, a political activist (liberal), a hostess to authors and composers and musicians of some substance, and a champion poker player. On occasion, she could talk backwards, that is, “backwards” would be pronounced “sdrawkcab.” She had two husbands. She divorced the first because he was an unapologetic drunk and later married a man who literally worshipped her as well as the son and daughter who came with her until her husband died, leaving her to mourn alone the daughter, who died of adult diabetes, and to spoil and indulge the son who married a very rich, very stingy woman with whom he had a child who drowned in a swimming pool, sending the son into alcohol and his wife into drugs. Sherry’s second marriage produced a son who had three children by three different mates—well, it gets complicated, she confessed.

Her talent was language and her gift was timing. She could turn a phrase on its head and spike an opponent at his most vulnerable moment, earning her a fearsome reputation well-deserved, her moods changing on some word or even a gesture, flying from cooing delight to blazing anger, worst of all a cold bitterness that froze the room and the people in it and their conversation until, as unexpectedly as it had arrived, it vanished in a radiant smile that denied all that had gone before. Still we came for the evenings and the weekends at Sherry’s, we ate her array of canapés and cold cuts and drank her excellent bar stock in the surround of original minds and artful intellects and therapy-released emotions that left one short of breath and slightly dazzled at what had been said and heard.

Over the years, Sherry’s writing, once professional, had long since become filing cabinet fillers, as current fashion and commercial taste became crude and wit was replaced by laugh tracks. But she kept at it, writing screenplays and sending them to her onetime agent, to former friends who had achieved and fallen from prominence in the business, all of whom encouraged her, after a suitable time delay that would indicate they had considered the work, even read it, and said they had mentioned it to So-and-So at Such-and-Such, who would be looking at it. She believed it, clinging as to a life preserver, a rope, a chain to a time now gone except in present memory, the aura of it becoming brighter as the years added on with file drawers of manuscripts mounting like pages of a calendar to remind one of time passing. The words spilled out of her mind onto the paper, repeating plots that had not sold, unconsciously excerpting dialogue from past works, all of them ending in the same twist that eventually became apparent at the start, once the reader had read the fifth version and knew what to expect in the sixth.

Aging had not been defined for her, living as she did in that environment of the brief years of her professional life and looking, thinking, acting as if she were in a period of pause. No then-and-now; just now, as if it had never stopped.

Then, after five years away, I came to visit, as longtime friends do when they are unsure of each other's condition, reading between the lines of holiday greetings and seeing there specters and goblins created by neglected personal contact, fearful of what might have happened while sure that if it had, information would have followed with action taken. I wasn't sure what I wanted to find, that nothing had changed, that she had found a way to ignore the time and the disease or to reinvent them as she did so much else.

The room, the worn burgundy velvet couch buttressed with oriental tapestry cushions, the low tables scarred with the marks of long-dead cigarette burns and wet-bottomed cocktail glasses, the late-day sunlight coming through the west-facing windows cloaked in the shadows of huge trees that cast their patterns across the wood floor, all of it was as it had been. Perhaps things reach a time-worn point after which they stay immutable.

Humans are more fragile, I saw, shocked at Sherry's condition, the destruction of it all the more noticeable by the unchanging room around her, and after a weekend with it and with her, I grew accustomed to it as she had, both of us unwillingly trapped by it and knowing no protest would have effect, the medications doing what they did to calm the tremors while they caused her eyes to unfocus and seemed to affect her hearing as well. Conversation, the once-splendid wardrobe in which she carried herself, was left in tatters, and as I left after the visit then, we both acknowledged wordlessly the damage in her life. Not with pity; no, not for or by Sherry. More anger and rebellion, more hatred and loathing of the disease, of the condition, of the adult diapers, the useless hand clenched against her chest with its white knuckles testifying to the muscle tension within, of the rasp in her voice that had formerly delivered its smoky elegance on cue, of what had been handed to her for how many more years who would know?

Into her eighties as she was then, she had successfully suggested she was twenty years less and even her older son declined to do the math that, had her suggestion be true, made him the product of a pregnancy at age nine. Besides, challenging her would invite a fusillade in response, much of it as deadly as bullets and none of it establishing the facts, so what was the use?

Indeed, only now, two years later still, in this return visit and in this nursing home setting, did the truth of age emerge. It came officially, on her admission documents, and it was a revelation, yes, and a testament of sorts to the quality of deception. She did that, as she did so much for so much of her life, well.

She was living in the state capital of Nevada (pronounced by natives as "Nevaaada,"

and if you call it “Nevahhhda” they curl their lip at you), a state that is fair to being the ugliest in the Union. It is gray desert, marked on the south by the freak towers of Las Vegas, and on the north by the scummy pimp, Reno, and between those two pustules lie any number of smaller nondescriptions, among them the state capital, Carson City, itself a model of the barrenness of the state, the downtown a cluster of low-enterprise gambling casinos and various state offices that are marked on the south by Kmart and on the north by Wal-Mart. Carson City is a shithole. The only redeeming grace consists of a range of round mountains that in winter carry a light dusting of snow; in summer, I’m sure, they are as ugly as the rest of it. The faces of the people are, like the place they live, ugly and barren. Not a smile crosses the checkout stand, not a greeting returned. These are not the picturesquely taciturn New Englander, nor the brazenly brusque New Yorker, nor the spacey Californian; these are vacant faces turned inward on vacant lives.

She had moved there from California because the poker was more available and she could earn money playing it, living in a condo with state-provided help which she needed for everything except poker. “I can do more damage with one hand than you can with two, plus your feet,” she challenged players who looked doubtful as she rolled up to the table in her wheelchair propelled by her partially workable arm. They looked at her as a little old lady, treated her gently, humored her apparent indecisiveness, and even felt charitable toward her as she raked in her winnings. Insiders knew enough to steer clear; the wayward tourists who fell into a game with her emerged poorer and doubtful now about their earlier doubts.

Poker had been her friend but it undid her. As she was entering her favorite poker palace a mis-step landed her on the pavement. At the emergency room it was found that she had broken a bone in the wrist of her “good” arm, the one she could use at all despite the flutters that caused it to wave like a limp flag when she extended it for use. She had been transferred to a convalescent facility, there to remain until she could use one hand to any extent, unable to leave until it healed, at her age an unpredictable time. She had sent word to her friends and former associates, inviting them to visit. And then to me, a message that said no one had come yet.

I arrived at night after a late flight to Reno-Tahoe International Airport, which serves the state capital but appropriately is named for two more magnetic destinations. The drive through the first winter snow showers led to the care center: surgically clean, wide halls, large rooms, two beds in each. The dominant color scheme, peach which neither interests nor offends. Wheels everywhere, on chairs, walking appliances, carts, desks, consoles, beds, as if nothing is permanent and everything is too heavy to lift though much of it isn’t. Sherry Parkinson in bed, eyes closed with the bed night light shadowing her face. As if by instinct, her eyes opened as I arrived at her bedside, she focusing and re-focusing

until she caught my face in her mind, then her lips forming a small, thin smile.

“M-m-m-m,” she murmured as if tasting the sound. And then slowly, each word forming a sentence of its own: “I knew you would come.”

At the first two words, I knelt closer. Her voice, coached by a new generation of Parkinson’s disease therapists, had turned deeper, coarser, trained for volume to get as much sound out as possible, but it was still barely more than a whisper, requiring the listener to be within inches. I told her there was nowhere else for me in the world but here. By the time I had finished the sentence her eyes were closed and she was asleep.

The next day, I saw what time aided by disease had done. She was sitting in a wheelchair. Her hair was cut in what might be called a regulation style, short for easy maintenance, the flattering bangs that had graced her forehead gone along with the side curls that I now realized had been artificially induced rather than her own, and the color once admittedly-artificial auburn turned to something between earth and ashes. She was wearing a man’s short sleeve blue and green plaid cotton shirt that could slip over the soft cast on her lower arm, the top two buttons open through which I could see her chest now wan to the point of wispieness. The skin on her fleshless arms that had lost their bodyfat was a translucent pearl-white, her hands similarly thin and the knuckles magnified by the absence of surrounding tissue, as were her cheekbones and forehead and nose, all appearing thrust forward, distorted, resembling a close-up photograph taken with a wide angle lens.

I had brought a bottle of expensive gin, symbolic, really, a reminder of the parties at her home when the argument over the perfect martini was limited to the kind of gin (anything as vulgar as vodka never entering the discussion) rather than proportions in which all agreed with Sherry’s declaration that a wave of vermouth was all a gin delicate enough to be worthwhile could tolerate.

“They’re back in style, darling,” I said as I placed the bottle on her lap and leaned over to kiss her forehead.

“They never left,” she whispered in that slow hollow voice.

“Neither did you,” I said, leading into the usual hospital inquiries about the food and cheer-up chatter about the room and how well she was looking, how soon she would likely be out to inflict pain on her poker pals and pausing occasionally for a response while knowing that to produce one would be a major effort on her part, so then carrying on as if she had in fact answered, all the time searching her face while her eyes stared out at something or nothing over my shoulder.

At last I fell silent.

“Get out of here,” she said, still looking beyond me.

I had turned my ear close to her mouth to catch the sounds, but I wasn’t sure I had

heard her correctly. I turned my face to hers, my puzzled look betraying my confusion.

“Get out,” she repeated, her eyes looking directly into mine. The words deliberate, slow, a pause between each as her mouth enunciated them transmitted from her brain along the damaged links of the network of her nerves. Then, again each word a statement: “You’re no use to me.”

“What is it, Sherry?” I asked. “What? What do you want?”

Silence. Her mouth a thin line fallen behind the now-protruding chin, her eyes closed tight, a frown turned to a scowl on the prominent forehead.

“Sherry, I came because...”

A sharp exhale then, her head quivering, then a deep breath in: “You lie to me,” she said. “Like they all do,” the words like punches to the stomach, the head, I felt her pummeling my body with them, *bam! bam!*, my ribs aching at the impact as they slammed against my consciousness. “You might as well go.”

She had closed her eyes to concentrate on what she was saying, to focus all her energy on the message and getting it out of her disease-weakened body, then she opened them to look directly at me.

“Sherry, darling, please,” I began, but she had shut her eyes.

I stayed, unable to move from my bent-over position, our faces so close I could feel her soft breath on my lips, relishing the intimacy despite the physical discomfort. It must have been part of an hour, who knows in a place where there are no clocks on the walls to remind people how slowly the day passes when it is unchallenged by duty. She knew I was there, waiting.

At last her eyes opened, as they had last night, one quick blink, then questioning what they were seeing until identity set in.

“Tell me,” she said, an order, a command more than a request.

“What? What, Sherry, darling,” knowing what she would ask, trying to avoid the question, if possible, at least to postpone it, unable to do either.

“When,” she said, again the command. Then, less sure, more uncertain: “How long?”

Her eyes were over my shoulder again looking at the peach-colored wallpaper or perhaps at something not there. I searched her face, that once-piquant, coquettish, intelligence-exuding visage, imagined my eyes piercing her skull into her brain seeing the dead cells that had once produced words people had paid to read and repartee only the privileged could listen to.

She turned her eyes back to mine, the question repeated in them, silently. My hand went to hers that was fluttering like a bird in a nest.

“Soon,” I told her, her eyes never leaving mine. “Oh, soon, Sherry darling. Soon, I hope.” 