

A 60'S VIGNETTE

By Rex Maurice Oppenheimer

Although their desire often meshed, it also collided, as did their egos, thoughts, and points of view. Sometimes it got rough. She once pulled a knife, and he had taken a shot at her. He said he missed on purpose. She told the police, when they came, that the gun had accidentally fired.

She had never imagined herself living this way, drunk more than half the day, lost in a forest of thoughts and a graveyard of dreams, leafing through old astrology tomes, and telling anyone who would listen that she was a seer. No one really cared now, much less believed any of it.

Back in the 60s it was different. She had gone to Mexico around 1967, first in Ajijic, where she rented a small house built around a little courtyard with a beautiful mango tree. She'd had a following back then. Flocks of hippies, that had heard of her back in California, or somewhere along the trail, would come by to have their charts read or for meditation and yoga classes. They would bring her gifts of embroidered shawls, wine and marijuana. Krishnamurti had even visited her once when he'd come to Mexico. When word got out about that, her followers increased and her one book was published. It had become something of a best seller. She believed in the stars back then. The future held promise.

She was older than most of her flock. They were young travelers looking for more. He had been one of them, sort of. He was handsome, had long hair and dressed in that flowing peasant style favored by creative souls at that time. He was a poet, liked to get high and talk about a reality that transcended the material world. A place of simple understanding we all could feel, and yet, seemed separate from. He spoke of joining hands and completing the lonely circle of all our souls. She was in her late 30s, he in his mid 20s, but when he had accepted her invitation to come over for tea and to read her some of his poetry, his sexual attraction to her was overwhelming.

There were a few coy moments. He sat some distance from her on the couch, as he pulled poems from his shoulder bag. Then he looked at her and started to recite, as though he was making it up on the spot:

If a man stands
At his window
Looking at the street below
Watching people passing by
How much about them
Can he know
He can study how they're dressed
Observe the lines they carry
In their face
He can form a simple opinion
About their status or
Their race,
But if he'd leave his window
And look into that mirror
Above his bathroom sink
He could close his eyes
And realize
So much more
About how
Those people think
He'd know that sometimes they're lonely
Sometimes they're without

Any love
Sometimes they're walking down the street
And sometimes
They're watching him
From a widow above
And now I'm sitting here
In front of you
Without a window or a mirror
As a guide
And yet I know
From what's not said
We share that private part
Of our mind
That's what singing is
All about
Or painting and poetry
To let our hearts
Conquer doubt
And our feelings
Hear and see

For a moment she didn't say anything, feeling herself moving closer to him on the couch. Then she got up, excited and very animated. She offered to do his chart. She was honestly impressed with his work. She told him he was going to be a big star, and his words would be recited and sung around the world. She sat back down, still closer to him, took a breath, and held his gaze in her Elizabeth Taylor eyes. He took her in his arms and kissed her. Her mouth, her neck, the tops of her tanned breasts bubbling above the low neckline of her cotton blouse. She responded passionately. But when he started to slip the blouse off her shoulders she drew back and stood up. You're leaving soon, she said. Heading back to Santa Barbara and your life there. As much as I want to be with you, I'm just not into that kind of short-term fling anymore.

He did everything he could to try to change her mind. He invoked the spirit of freedom she espoused, that the world was changing and free-thinking people like them were no longer bound by conventions that only served some ridiculous societal measure of morality. That their paths had crossed in the here and now and to deny the pleasure that they could give each other was very possibly a missed chance at a glimpse of something more. She understood, but she was also adamant that as much as she wanted to give in to her physical desire there was a different path she had to take. It wasn't society, or convention, or morality, it was a spiritual discipline.

After another cup of tea, he got up and left. The thought of abandoning his journey home had seemed real for a moment. The apartment in Santa Barbara was in his roommate's name, and he'd been staying there for free anyway. He had thought that maybe he could go back later to get his old Datsun and drive it back down to Mexico.

But he'd come to Mexico on a mission. His father, who was paying for the trip, had been deported for smuggling contraband, and had asked him to come down to retrieve some valued items from a secret apartment he had had in Guadalajara. An apartment unknown to his father's wife. His father's wife was her friend and neighbor, and it was she who had introduced them. He got in his rented Volkswagen and drove back to the Phoenix Hotel, then a rather luxurious establishment, in downtown Guadalajara. He'd bought a red tasseled purse, which he thought looked like something JanisJoplin would wear, as a present for Vivian, with whom he'd been having an intense if superficial romance back in Santa Barbara. She sang rock & roll and loved Janis.

That night he had a rather lavish Mexican dinner at the hotel, and while enjoying a cigar and brandy, the waiter had come over and told him that the two ladies seated over there, he said, turning his head toward two well dressed, elderly women, their faces sparking almost as bright as their diamonds, would like to pay for his dinner and wondered if he would please join them for a drink. He loved when life became a story, smiled and said that he'd be delighted.

As he sat down at their table they told him that they had been watching and were enthralled by how much he was enjoying himself, savoring his cigar and brandy. They said it reminded them of their father. They came from Texas, where their father had left them a ranching and oil business worth millions. So there he sat his mind briefly ping-ponging from the woman he just left behind to memories of Vivian naked with him in the shower and then focusing on the incongruity and yet total understandability of him seated here with these two lovely old ladies, with their well-cut dresses, diamonds and pearls. He listened to stories of Texas ranch life while he sipped his cognac and lit a fresh cigar.

The duality between the hippie he was, and the aristocrat he could be, might be jarring to others, but not to him. He loved sitting there with those heiresses enjoying fine brandy and a good cigar. Yet he loved being loaded and naked on the nude beach, writing poetry and envisioning a world free of society's constraints. For him those constraints weren't just moral judgements, they were also the naturally imposed realities of having to earn a living. Something that had eluded him, since just going to work wasn't an option he could abide. It tainted the image he had of himself, of who he really felt himself to be and yet something he didn't know how to be. The best he could do is what he'd been doing, charming his way through a life of illusions.

She was sad he'd left, and yet, not too much. She had meant what she said when she told him she wasn't interested in a brief affair. She had a life here in Mexico that meant a lot to her. The stars, her visions, the metaphysical world that people came and hoped she could guide them into, all gave her a sense of identity, which was more precious than anything else.

When she answered a knock on her door five years later and saw him standing there, she didn't know what to think. When he told her that the only reason that he had come back was just to be with her, she couldn't think. But her heart began to glow. Of course, she had thought about him many times. There had been moments of regret, but they didn't last long. She told herself things were as they should be. And he wasn't the only man that had wanted her. Still, she was now alone. Yes, by choice, but only because the men she had known hadn't made life better.

He hadn't become the star she had predicted that distant afternoon. He said he hadn't had the breaks, the luck. But that was okay. Things were as they were supposed to be. That was why he was there.

That was another five years ago. She turned at the sound of the door opening. It was just him, holding a stack of warm tortillas wrapped in paper. The rich corn smell drifting into the room. He set the package down on the worn wooden table and headed for the open bottle of wine on the counter beside her. Filling a large water glass full of the red, he sat down and lit a Delicado cigarette as he began to roll a joint. Licking the paper and turning it in his hands, his gaze became unfocused as thoughts and years projected in a fuzzy vision like a diaphanous hologram hovering over the old table. But it was a silent movie. Reasons, regrets even rationalizations couldn't be heard. He smiled and lit the marijuana cigarette. Every day was a day. He woke, moved through space and watched. She kept predicting the future and talking about the past. Why not? Wrong or right, it passed the time, and there were many moments where they laughed together, still, after all that hadn't happened.