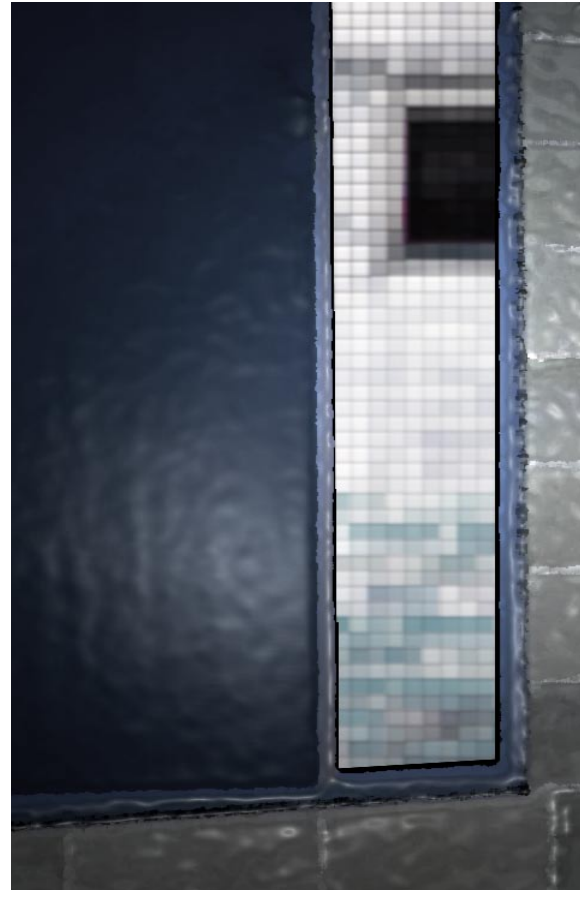


Envious Years



G.P. Keith



NUGGETS
northwindpress.ca



NUGGETS
northwindpress.ca



Dear John:

I begin this letter with great difficulty – even now I can feel the painful emotions welling up, and tears, I am sure, will follow. This must be my last letter to you, my dear, for I have, it seems, run out of time. It is not reason or logic that say this, for they have been rendered meaningless by the final crushing blow I received tonight. No, this only feels to be my last chance to write you, and feeling is all I have left now. My head aches when I try to think. I almost want to laugh and cry at the same time – to start and never stop. But I will write this letter instead.

In a way it is absurd for me to write this letter at all, for it will remain unread, along with all my other letters to you, tied together in a bundle and wrapped in the old t-shirt you gave me, hidden at the back of my closet. Why am I writing, then? Good question. I suppose it's because I feel closest to you when I am writing you. You have been slipping away from me these past months, and now, tonight I have suffered the last terrible shock. I need to feel close to you one last time. To reach out, to say something that will – I don't know – last. Forgive me, my dear, things have been so difficult, so damned difficult. Still, I feel silly writing this, and that, perhaps, is the worst thing of all: silliness as a condemnation of my love for you. Enough! I will not think! I will feel. What else do I have? After this letter, so the feeling informs me – and I know, somehow, this to be true – it will be impossible to write you again; the final tenuous thread will at last be broken. I have only the duration of this letter – and so I will make it a long letter.

But what to write? I have decided to simply put down everything that's happened to me, to set it down in order once and for all – my history as it were – to get things straight so that, if madness actually ever takes me (and I feel it hovering not too far away even as I write this, John), then I will be able to take up this letter and re-read it, and perhaps recapture something of the truth.

So, having said that, I suppose in a way one might say that this letter is for me alone.

And that thought – that statement, that indictment – has just sent slicing pains through my gut, and I feel the renewed pressure of tears well-

ing up behind my eyes. *Alone!* What a terrible word! Yet I do feel very alone now, John, horribly alone – more alone than I could have imagined possible, back when we were together. It is like the winds of the universe are blowing through my life, chilling not just my present and any possible future, but my past as well. But I will not think of that. It just makes my head ache, anyway, so I will not let my feeble attempts at logic destroy what I know to be true.

Truth, I think, must sometime lie beyond logic. It must, John, for I know that I loved and that you loved. We were together for nine blissful years – Mark and John – a happy, loving couple. Nine years! How long and yet how short that interval sounds! But it was *so*, John! Over and over I keep telling myself this, and I vow will never stop so long as that voice of doubt exists. It was true, John! We – *were!* Let the universe blow on that, if it will! He knew that, when he wrote those words: “It shall not touch, with breath of bale...” And how haunting those words are to me now!

Only let me say this one last time, for you, for me, for the world and the mad universe that has treated us so: I love you, John. No one ever loved another human being more. I love you – I loved you and I still love you, in spite of everything, in spite of all the insanity; and I miss you terribly; the pain of it is a physical wound from which feeling tells me I will never completely recover. You alone could always comfort me – with your touch, your voice, your mere presence. And there's that word again: alone!

And anyway (I will be defiant here, John, for I am not dead) I don't accept that this letter is for me alone. I am writing it for you too, my dear. If not for now – for how could that be? – then for some time years from now. But I will not think even of that. Enough! This letter is for you, John, from me – my last gift to you, my dear.

So. In this letter – I say it again – I will put simply the facts, the terrible facts, as I remember them. All those other letters that I have written, they have my feelings, my pain and my rage, my pleading and my despair. And those are for you too, John. I wrote them in an attempt to feel like I was with you again, an attempt to elicit, I guess, some sort of comforting response, even when I knew you were not there to comfort me. Now I will simply tell the story of what happened, of how things came to an end (not why it happened – for as to that, I still have no idea, and my head starts to hurt when I try to think it through), and what has happened to me since.



I will begin with that afternoon, the afternoon I came home from work to find you lying on the couch, nearly unconscious from drink. I remember the smell of alcohol hitting me as I walked through the door. I remember, too, my gut tightening. Drink always meant you were going through a difficult time. I was used to those (when you were, for all your evident suffering, never angry or cruel with me, only more loveable in your vulnerability, and giving me the gift of letting me take care of you). I think the smell hit me so hard that afternoon because during the months previous I had been worrying about “us” – trying to fight off an increasing sense of dread, a feeling that you were slipping away from me in some inexplicable fashion.

How many little indicators had tormented me! Little things that all combined to form the one big thing that I could not ignore – my intuition, my feeling of dread. Your bouts of acute drunkenness became more frequent, but between them, even worse, it seemed that *you* were changing – and that was what really frightened me.

It’s odd, I suppose, that I’d never experienced a break-up before. How many times had friends told me they envied me finding true love while I was still a university student! I remember some even repeating the old saw that a person wasn’t fully an adult until he had had his heart broken at least once. I’d always thought those people were just bitter. I’m not so sure now, John. My heart has been broken and I have picked up the pieces the best I can, but I don’t feel very adult. Just less happy, and aware, perhaps, of the pain that feels like it will never go away entirely. Maybe that’s what they meant. Maybe being an adult is about realizing that life is never safe, never without suffering. You knew that, John. I remember the pain that I’d always been able to see in your face and hear in your voice even in the happiest moments. That always frightened me a little, I think, even when it made me love you all the more. Yet, whenever I’d sought to discover what it was, you never told me. You only reassured me, telling me that it had nothing to do with me, that what you felt for me was true and unbreakable. I remember how that had made me feel shut out, for I wanted you to explain, to share everything. I thought that maybe I could help. But you were always close-lipped about so much. Maybe my wanting to believe that love could have no secrets was a symptom of my not being fully an adult. And I remember what you said: Most things one has to find out by experiencing them.

But was I a child, John, all those years you and I spent together? That

would be an unpleasant thought. I don’t really think I was. I remember feeling the love and gentle gratitude in your eyes, during your bad times when you’d taken strength from me (and how wonderful that had made me feel – that I had something to give someone as wise and wonderful as you) – I can’t imagine that that is the sort of relationship one has with a child.

Strange! One thing that has been especially painful these last months, John: the realization that I can’t picture your face anymore. I guess it’s because I’ve done so much drinking in the months since it all ended; my memory isn’t as clear as it used to be. This is a hard loss to bear. I sometimes wish I had a photo of you that I could take out and look at. But you didn’t like photographs. Let the moment pass, you used to say. There will be other moments, and you will remember what is important. And then you’d add: It is the striving to hold on that hurts.

Maybe, John, but losing still hurts. Now I only have my impressions of you. But perhaps you were right, perhaps they are more important than images: your kindness, your love, the way you made me feel loved. But I do wish I had a photo of you as well, even if I do feel a bit ashamed admitting this. Listening to you sometimes was like listening to an oracle, a profoundly wise man, whose depth and wisdom and goodness one can feel, but whose words are difficult to comprehend. I must still be learning, John, for I still want more than the little I do have left from our years together.

But now I’m getting away from the purpose of this letter again – it’s very hard not to, John, for almost I feel as though I am touching you again, and that pulls at my emotions, my yearning – and produces pain. But I must push that distraction aside and finish this – for the imperative of my limited time left hovers over me.

Where was I? Oh, yes. I’d never experienced a break-up before.

I’d always imagined that the other person would get cold and distant. But you, John – you became more loving than ever – incredible, I suppose, since you had always been the most loving person I had ever known. And now I am laughing through the tears that are running down my face, for I am remembering the time we first met – if only dimly – you seemed almost frightened of me. That strangeness I felt in you – what was it? Fear? Anyway, it was part of what made me love you right at the start. But, in spite of your initial display of reticence and taciturn tendencies, you’ve always been the strongest, most sensitive, kindly, wise and generous man I’ve ever known. (I know that am repeating myself now, but I think it is



something worthy of repeating.) But that remembering is too close right now, and my head is starting to ache, so I will move on.

During those months, when I imagined you drifting away from me, you became so gentle, so kind, so tender that it almost undid me. It was so strange! I felt cherished even in my fear and my pain. Dante could not have cherished Beatrice more than you did me during that time. It was bliss built upon the glowing happiness of all our years together; and yet, somehow, I felt in my heart that it boded ill – and that led to the periodic panic attacks which I had to endure in isolation, hiding them, ashamed and frightened, from you.

Whenever I asked you: Is there anything wrong? – you, your eyes sometimes floating with unshed tears, would just smile and shake your head. I even pestered our doctor into breaking his oath of privacy to tell me whether anything was wrong with your health, even got him, when he elliptically implied that there was not, to have you come in for a complete physical anyway. The results, which you casually showed me (the doctor must have given me away), were that you were in excellent health – slightly surprising considering the amount you were drinking! And I do remember what you said to me then – the only answer you ever gave me: I love you more than you will ever know. And when, after you had said that, I demanded yet again, somewhat hysterically: “Well what is wrong then?” you just shook your head and came and gently enfolded me in your arms.

So, anyway, that afternoon.

I came home late, with the sun just above the horizon. The curtains of our living-room were drawn and you were lying in the shadows. I remember that when I saw you I felt a further tightening of the noose I imagined closing round us. You were lying, completely motionless, your face pressed against the back of the couch, arms around a pillow that was wet with your tears.

I walked towards you, feeling dread creeping along my skin.

“What’s wrong?” I yelled, shaking you.

“I’m sorry,” you said in a slurred, drunken voice, looking up at me so painfully and pathetically that I shook you and almost screamed: “Sorry for what?”

But you only repeated those words: “I’m sorry.” You must have repeated them a dozen times while I shook and finally slapped you in my terror and my desperation.

You weren’t angry that I’d hit you, just very sad and very pathetic – so that I

felt ashamed, and sat down, beginning to cry myself, cradling you in my arms.

And then, after several minutes of this: “I want you to know,” you said, your voice cracking, “that I will always love you.” I remember how you clumsily grabbed at my shirt as you said this, how you overbalanced and fell off the couch. “I just want you to know that,” you muttered from the floor, and then began to sob again while I stood over you.

“What?” I yelled. My throat felt constricted. “What? What is it?”

And then those final words: “It’s over, Mark. It’s over. I’m sorry. I’m so very sorry.” You said the words quietly, your gravelly voice sounding utterly defeated and grey like ashes.

And that was all I ever got out of you.

I panicked, feeling suffocated by the nightmarish situation. Grabbing my coat and running for the door, I ran down all twelve flights of stairs and out through the emergency exit onto the sidewalk. Then I ran to the intersection and across, not bothering to wait for the light, and finally through the entrance to the park and along the winding path.

I first came to myself again about ten minutes later. I was walking along the path that we had strolled together so many times in happier days, leading up to the hilltop with the bench on it overlooking the small lake that lies at the bottom of the dell just beyond. That bench was one of our favourite spots, and I collapsed onto it, seeking, I suppose, some kind of solace. What I felt, however, was only numbness. The sun had set by now, and the sky was dark blue, fading to black. I could see the lights of the city beginning to shine out from the buildings all around the park, and the glow of the lamps lining the paths that wound beneath the trees in the park.

I can’t recall what my thoughts were. I’m not sure I had any. What I do remember is watching the fog roll slowly in from the lake, filling the copse of trees that stood at the foot of the hill in a ghostlike manner. I remember momentarily wishing you were there to see it: for it was the kind of thing that you liked – beauty and mystery. But the thought of you brought back the scene in the apartment, and I recoiled from that, focusing instead out of myself, at the deepening darkness, at the fog and the lights.

It was some minutes later, and the night had come on entirely by then, that I noticed something else. There was a blue glow in the fog-filled copse of trees below me now. I remember having that realization quite clearly, because it was



the first pain-free thought I'd had that evening – a single thought filled only with startled, innocent curiosity. I think the relief I felt as a consequence was the reason I continued to focus on that light for the next few minutes. I began to wonder what the source of it might be, but could think of no answer. I knew there were no lamps inside that particular group of trees. You and I had walked through it on our way around the lake many times during the daytime. And there was moreover an eerie quality about the light that was unlike anything I had ever seen before.

Any other time I might have hesitated. But I found that I had gotten up and was already walking down the grassy slope towards the trees even before I was aware of having made a decision to do so. As I approached the trees, the fog-dispersed blue glow grew even more diffused. I finally descended into the fog, coming amongst the first of the trees. When at last I came to a stop and turned around, I saw that the light was all around me now. There was no apparent source at all.

I remember the first tingle of fear then. My thoughts suddenly turned to you – to our apartment, and to the desire to get the hell out of there and back to safety. I turned back the way I'd come, but in that same instant the light went out and the ground shifted under my feet. I fell and lay there, winded, in complete darkness. And as I lay there, I had the oddest impression that I could hear something like an echo of your voice, calling my name. After that, only silence.

I have played that moment over and over in my head, and I am certain that I neither hit my head nor lost consciousness. I am not dreaming, I am not mad, I am not dead. That is the opinion I have continued to hold, through everything that followed.

Lying there, a new feeling came to me – the palpable sensation of terror. I got up and began to run blindly through the blackness. Almost immediately I ran into one of the trees. Staggering back and cursing, I resumed my flight, hands held out before me to avoid running into more trees. I was running now in the direction that I imagined as being, not back towards the hill-top, but straight towards our apartment building beyond the park's edge, towards home.

After several minutes of this difficult progress, I stumbled out into the open. Still possessed by the inexplicable terror, I ran across the grass to where bushes began on the long slope leading up to the park's boundary. I entered the thick brush and again the going was difficult but, driven as I was by panic, I continued doggedly on until at last I fell through the hedge that lines the perimeter of the park and onto the narrow greensward that stretches between the park proper

and the sidewalk adjacent to the busy street.

Breathing heavily but feeling a great sense of relief, I got shakily to my feet and walked over to the sidewalk and along this towards the intersection. When I got to the intersection, I remember standing there, my chest still heaving, one hand resting on the pole of the traffic light. While I was waiting for the light to turn, my gaze traveled across the street. There, instead of our elegant, white high-rise, stood an ugly four-floor walk-up apartment building built of dark brick.

I remember the stunned feeling that hit me then. I looked quickly up at the street sign above me. Apparently I was at the right corner. The light turned green but still I did not cross. I remained rooted to the spot, staring in horror at the squat building that should not have been there. When the light turned red again, I turned and stumbled back a little ways along the sidewalk, looking at the buildings that lined the opposite side of the street. Some were as they should have been, but some were not. A powerful throbbing ache began in my head then. Had I injured myself?

Finally I came to a halt, noticing that I was leaning against a newspaper box. So, for no real reason that I knew, I lowered my head and looked at the front page of the newspaper that was visible behind the plastic shield of the box.

It struck me that the headline seemed wrong somehow. In my stunned state I couldn't at first figure out what this might be. Bending lower, I read the words of the actual text of the article that began below the title. This too seemed strange. Then I scanned the entire page, and finally noticed the date printed below the paper's masthead was wrong. There appeared to be a typo in the year – so that it was ten years out of date. I looked at the headline again, and vaguely remembered something like the event it described – but it had occurred years ago.

An icy sense of dread began to flow through my body then. I moved over to the next box, that of a rival paper. The date was the same and the headline was a variation of the first paper's.

I started to feel giddy. I began staggering slowly along the sidewalk. Periodically I looked at the buildings that lined the opposite side of the street. Again and again, I noticed that some were as they should be, but some were not. Then I began to notice a pattern. It was the more recent buildings that were missing, these being replaced by older structures.

When at last I came to the corner where the park ended, I saw that here were more newspaper stands here. I walked over to look at them. As I checked



each one, the feeling of horror nestling inside me grew with each date that I read. They all agreed. That was when I first put my dread thought into words: everything seems to suggest that today is exactly ten years ago.

When the lights turned green, I crossed and continued to make my way down the street. Several blocks further along I noticed a bar, and decided that I needed a drink. I went inside and took a seat at the bar. It was early and therefore not very busy. There was a guy sitting two stools away from me. After I had been served and swallowed half my drink in a single gulp, I turned to him.

“Excuse me,” I said. “I’ve forgotten what day it is today. Do you know the date?”

The man turned and regarded me for a few seconds. Then he gave me the day and month.

I nodded my thanks. “And the year?” I asked. “Could you tell me what year this is?”

But now the guy just stared at me. Then he laughed and shook his head. Finally he turned away and ignored me. When the bartender came by a bit later with my refill I asked him the same question. He looked at me strangely. Maybe he thought I was a mental case. I shrugged and smiled sheepishly.

“I know it’s a silly question,” I said. “Still, if you don’t mind.”

“Okay,” he said slowly. And he told me the full date, including the year. The year was ten years wrong – ten years in the past, and the sickening sense of dread inside me tightened. For several minutes strange thoughts about a conspiracy set to drive me mad passed through my head. To rid myself of this, I quickly finished my second drink and ordered another.

When I awoke the next morning my head was pounding. I saw that I was lying on the grassy sward of the park, just under the hedge. I sat up woozily and looked around. I was perhaps a dozen yards from the intersection where our apartment was – or had been – for when I looked up, I saw once again only the brick low-rise.

A feeling of utter defeat came over me, and I lay back on the grass and stared up at the blue sky, watching the clouds drift slowly past. It was a beautiful day, I remember – or should have been. The horror I now felt was accompanied by a physical nausea and an unpleasant mental confusion. But, as bad as these physical distresses were, the periodic thoughts that passed through my head were more

unpleasant still. The thing I kept returning to was the desire to get back to you. If I could only find you, I believed that, somehow, everything would be alright again.

I vomited once or twice before getting to my feet. The first thing I did after that was cross the street at the lights and actually go up and touch the low-rise building.

It was real enough.

After that I began to walk aimlessly again, along the streets of the city. When I came to a phone booth, I phoned our number. A stranger answered, and when I asked for you, I was told that no one by that name lived there. Not wishing to press the point, I hung up and resumed my hopeless journey.

It must have been close on noon when my hunger pushed me into entering a greasy-spoon establishment. It was only after finishing my meal that I realized that I had no money. Evidently I had drunk the contents of my wallet and now had only the spare change in my pockets. I explained this to the waitress, apologized, and offered to wash dishes.

It turned out they needed a dishwasher, so I got the job.

For the first week I slept in the park. After that I rented a shabby, furnished room in a run-down rooming house near the restaurant. Every evening I would go to the park and sit on that bench, hoping to see that blue light again.

I never did.

After the first few days, when something of the initial shock wore off, then I really began to suffer. The months that followed passed in a drunken haze. I consumed the cheapest kind of alcohol and spent my nights tossing and turning on the horrible bed in my room or sitting on the park bench. I wrote letters to you. I almost mailed the first one, but didn’t. All of my investigations only confirmed the idea that I was – somehow – ten years back in the past. So I just bundled the letters up and hid them at the back of my closet.

I had fits of despairing rage, too. I almost got thrown out for breaking the mirror in my room by throwing a shoe at it.

After a while, however, I slowly began to reclaim something of my sanity. What helped me in this was asking myself what you would have done in this situation. The answer came very clearly: figure things out and think it through.

Okay, John, I remember thinking at some point. I will.

I started going to the library and reading up on the nature of time. Not easy



stuff to read. I learned something about Einstein and the concept of space-time. But I have no math, so it was all just beyond me. The little I understood offered me nothing, indeed suggested that time travel was, by definition, impossible.

Once I even requested and was granted an interview with a professor at the university, an expert in the field of space and time. He was actually quite polite to me. In retrospect I think he must have decided that I was some kind of a nut, and that maybe he was humouring me out of a concern for his own safety. When I asked about time rifts, even going so far as to speculate that they might occur in the presence of blue light, he merely shook his head and said that what I was talking about was sheer fantasy – science fiction. I didn't say anything else. I just apologized and thanked him for his time. He showed me to the door a little stiffly. When I was outside the closed door once more the thought came to me that this ending to the interview was at least better than being taken away by the police – or to the nuthouse.

From time to time I found myself thinking of my parents. I even toyed with the idea of going to see them. I knew where they lived in the city at this time, but finally decided against it. They would just freak, I knew, and it would be painful for me. Then I thought about my younger self, who would be a business major at the university. It amused me, to think about spying on myself. But for whatever reason, I never did. I realized at some point that what I wanted – all I wanted, all I ever wanted – was you. Everything else, I felt, could go to hell.

But I had no idea where you lived. I looked your name up in the telephone directory, but couldn't find it. Had you come from out of town before we met? I couldn't remember, and I began to curse all those months of drinking that had so clouded my memory. Anyway, when I thought of you I pictured you ten years away in the future, drunk on the floor of our apartment, wondering, perhaps, where I had disappeared to.

I was washing up the lunch dishes at the restaurant one afternoon when the idea suddenly hit me – a new idea, a new possibility. I sat down during my coffee break to think the idea through. Hardly daring to hope, I began to think about when it was I had first met you. When had it been, exactly? I thought and thought, wracking my brains while I resumed my dishwashing. Using the calendar that hung by the phone, I narrowed the possibilities down to a period of just over a month, and circled the possible dates. It had been a Saturday night, I knew. And the first of these possibilities was less than a month away.

The thought of meeting you, of being with you again – that gave me new life. I started taking care of myself, and I stopped drinking so much. I bought new clothes and began to haunt the bar in the village where I knew we had – or would – meet.

The first time I entered that bar I felt quite strange – the place had sort of an eerie feeling. Would I see you there that night? It was a Wednesday, so I didn't expect you, but it was a possibility. Strange to say, the few people about, far from being interesting or attractive, I dismissed as mere distractions. I knew what I wanted now. Curiously, my indifference got me some unwanted attention. Each time I went back to the bar I had to endure chat from one or more interested individuals. I even got bought drinks. But when they finally figured out that I was distracted and not at all interested, they moved away, usually making some sort of rude parting comment.

The challenge was to meet you before you met my younger self. That realization made me panicky, and by the time the first possible Saturday rolled around, my heart was pounding and my stomach tight with knots. I began to fear that you might not be interested in me, the older me. I fought this down, reminding myself of your love and devotion through all the years of our relationship, and of the depth of our connection. Such a peripheral thing as age would not change that. It would work. I only had to get to you first. I remember that night the bar was dim and crowded, so that I cursed the crowd in my heart, forcing myself to remain calm, so that I would at least present an attractive picture.

You didn't show.

The second Saturday passed with the same disappointment. By the third Saturday I was getting really frightened, so I ordered two doubles on entering the place just to calm myself. I had arrived early, and so watched the people trickle in. Gradually the place heated up. It got crowded and I began to fear that I might miss you in the crush. I decided to make regular trips around the place. Looking inquiringly into all those faces was not exactly the most pleasant thing to do. I even began to get some sneering looks after I had made several circuits. Not that that mattered; these people simply did not count.

But then I made an unpleasant discovery that gave me quite a shock. I saw my younger self.

At first I wasn't sure if it was really me. I peered at him from all angles, and gradually decided that it must be. My heart really starting to pound then: the



game was on. This was probably the night, my one chance.

Feeling grim, I went to the bar and ordered two more doubles so that I wouldn't have to get a refill and interrupt my vigil later on. Adrenaline was keeping my mind relatively sharp, but it seemed only a very short time later that I'd finished both drinks. Cursing myself, I bought two more and took up a post where I could keep my younger self in view. I alternated keeping track of him and scanning the faces of the crowd that slowly pushed past for you.

Although I took only tiny sips of my drinks, at some point I saw that I had finished one of them. I poured half of the second into the empty glass, spilling some in the process. It hit me then that I must be pretty snackered, and this realization gave fresh energy to my panic.

Time passed, and I continued to monitor my younger self. He was standing alone, against the wall opposite, his face just visible through the crowd. I think the drink must have made me a bit stupid, for I started to find the situation amusing. I looked at him. He was so young! Not bad looking either. I almost laughed aloud when this thought passed through my head. What is this? I wondered. Some form of auto-eroticism?

Even though from then on I didn't do more than take mock sips, the fog brought on by the booze already in my system continued to increase. I found myself slipping into a curiously numbed state, a state of just sort of "being," not really looking at anyone or thinking anything.

At last I was brought back to myself by the sound of a voice in my ear. I turned my head, and there, standing right next to me, his face open and smiling, was my younger self.

I just gaped at him. He seemed to find this amusing. "You're having quite a party," he said.

I stared. "What?" I said at last.

He indicated the two glasses I was holding, one of which was empty. There were also several empty glasses on the chest-high ledge that lined the wall behind me. Evidently the busboys were slacking off tonight.

"Holding it for a friend," I heard myself mutter.

"He disappeared?"

Those innocent questioning words unexpectedly made my throat close and tears well up in my eyes. I wanted to scream, to cry out: Yes, yes! He's gone, I've lost him!

For a second the mad thought came to me that here was someone who would understand – myself, after all – someone with whom I could commiserate. I wanted to tell him everything, to solicit his help. But even in my largely stupefied state, I realized after a few moments that that this was not possible.

So I swallowed hard and just nodded, looking into those youthful, innocent, and concerned eyes. Part of me wanted him to go away. I remembered thinking that I needed to be alone, for some reason. It took me several seconds to recall why I needed to be alone. And then a sudden recollection of both my mental state and my desperate situation filled me with a renewed terror. I must find you! I began to look around again, through the crowd.

My companion watched my behaviour without comment. But he also showed no signs of leaving. Actually, he was showing signs of – I could not avoid the realization – interest. He began to make casual conversation, eying me periodically and then looking away. That made me want to laugh and scream at the same time. But I just kept everything in and let him lead the conversation. He told me his name was Mark. No surprise there, I commented sardonically to myself, almost sniggering. Then I realized that he was looking at me expectantly, waiting for me to give my own name.

It came to me that if I were to give the same name in reply, this would create complications – and I was in no state to handle any sort of complication. So I gave him the first name that came to mind – the only name in the whole wide world that meant anything to me right then.

We began to chat. I was, I realized dimly, very drunk now. But, never having been very good at multi-tasking, and fascinated in a horrified sort of way at the experience of talking with someone who was essentially me, I found myself focusing more and more on the conversation at hand and thinking less and less about my actual reason for being there in the first place.

Well, somehow or other, I ended up going home with him.

I remember us arriving at my old university campus apartment. That was strange. Everything – every contour, every object – was limned with memories. There was a certain amount of giggling as we undressed in the bedroom because the degree of my inebriation made me clumsy. He helped me, though. And then ... Well, the sex itself was pleasant, but his touch was the thing that was important to me, a touch that was comforting and familiar. It did not feel wrong, touching



him in that way. It felt only infinitely reassuring. Afterwards he got up and got me something for the headache that I could feel coming on – the hangover that always comes when the alcohol starts to leave my system – and then we lay together in each other’s arms.

It struck me as strange, how peaceful I felt lying there with him. I felt safe for the first time since I’d lost you.

He fell asleep. I got up and went into the livingroom. I was starting to sober up and decided to take a shower. After this I took another headache pill from the medicine cabinet, and then went back into the livingroom. I sat down at my old desk. All those books ... God! I thought about how much I had hated studying! I went into the kitchen to get myself a glass of water, and then stood and in the entrance and surveyed the livingroom.

I began to think over my situation. At first I felt inclined to laugh. I wondered what name there might be for what I had just done in the bedroom. Not masturbation; not incest – something in between? Yet somehow it had worked. I knew exactly what he wanted, and the youthful passion he’d directed towards me had been both flattering and exciting.

Then I began to think about the failed meeting with you. That sobered me more. I wondered whether my intrusion had prevented the meeting between my younger self and you. I tried to work through what that could mean. Strange to say, I didn’t feel especially worried. Rather, there remained inside me that same quiet sort of peacefulness.

Then I noticed a book on the shelf over the desk, one I’ve always treasured: *Lewis Carroll’s Collected Works*. I went over and pulled it down, flipping through the pages. When I came to the fore-poem of *Through the Looking Glass*, some of the lines leapt out at me in a strange and powerful fashion:

*Though time be fleet, and I and thou
Are half a life asunder,
.....
Whose echoes live in memory yet,
Though envious years would say ‘forget.’*

Sudden sobs rose in my throat. I thought again of you and me, of our sepa-

ration in time – what was it that Tennessee Williams said? – that time was the greatest distance?

I thought of you, ten years away on our couch, telling me that it was over. I thought bitterly that I’d never even found out why you had said that.

It was then a curious mental sensation started to press inside my brain, like something struggling to make its way to the surface of my mind.

I put down the book and stood up, turning towards the bedroom door. My younger self was asleep in there, blissfully unaware of the misery that awaited him in his future, just over nine years from now. I experienced a sense of tender affection for that young man, for his innocence and his goodness. He is a lot like you, John –

And, with this thought, the pressure in my head increased. I recalled something that young man had said just now, as we were lying together. “That was incredible, the best sex I’ve ever had.” And then he had added in a laughing sort of way: “What are you doing for the rest of your life?”

I’d just laughed in response at the time. But now the words struck me, oddly. Why? I stood there, feeling my chest tightening, my scalp tingling. The pressure in my brain had increased to the point of actual pain. A memory, ancient and dim, came back to me – a memory of me saying exactly the same thing to you the night we had met – and the laugh it had garnered in response.

All the breath left my body and I sank down again into the chair. I held my aching head between my hands. Think! Think! I struck my skull with my knuckles. What does it all mean? I felt I almost had it.

For about a minute my brain still roiled in confusion. Then, like a bubble rising at last to the surface and bursting, the truth broke over me at last. It felt like a knife being driven into my chest. Tears began to flow down my cheeks as I lurched up from the desk, went over and threw myself down on the couch. I had to press my face into a pillow to stifle the sobs that were bursting from my throat.

Of course! The thought went through my head over and over. Of course, of course, of course! It all made sense at last – horrible and final sense. All the pieces fit. Several times I went over the sequence of events, working everything through, and yes, everything made sense now.

For about ten minutes I lay there, letting the sense of loss wash over me, letting it pour out in tears and sobs. Gradually, however, the passage of emotion



ended and I lay there in a kind of numbed state. The truth of the terrible impossibility of what I knew to be my reality held me fast like a pin holds a butterfly to a board.

For several more minutes I lay there. Then, suddenly, I became possessed of the terrible urge to write a letter to you. I had the conviction that I had only had a very little time to reach you – even if only in such an imperfect fashion.

So I got up, my knees shaking slightly, came back to this desk and searched for paper. Finding this, I seated myself and stared at the white page. And I thought I'd missed meeting you tonight, John! A final bitter sob escaped as I wrote the opening salutation.

Then, as suddenly as the urge had come to write, now the realization came to me that I had no idea what I would say to you. I sat for several minutes, staring at your name, unable to write anything else. What was there to write, anyway? The confusion and pain – even anger – in my head passed in rapid, cyclical progression. Finally I decided that it was important for some reason to simply write down everything that had happened to me since I had left you that afternoon in the apartment. There was nothing else to do.

So this is it, my dearest John. We are come to the end of things. After this I will never write you anymore. When I end this letter I will have accepted my fate

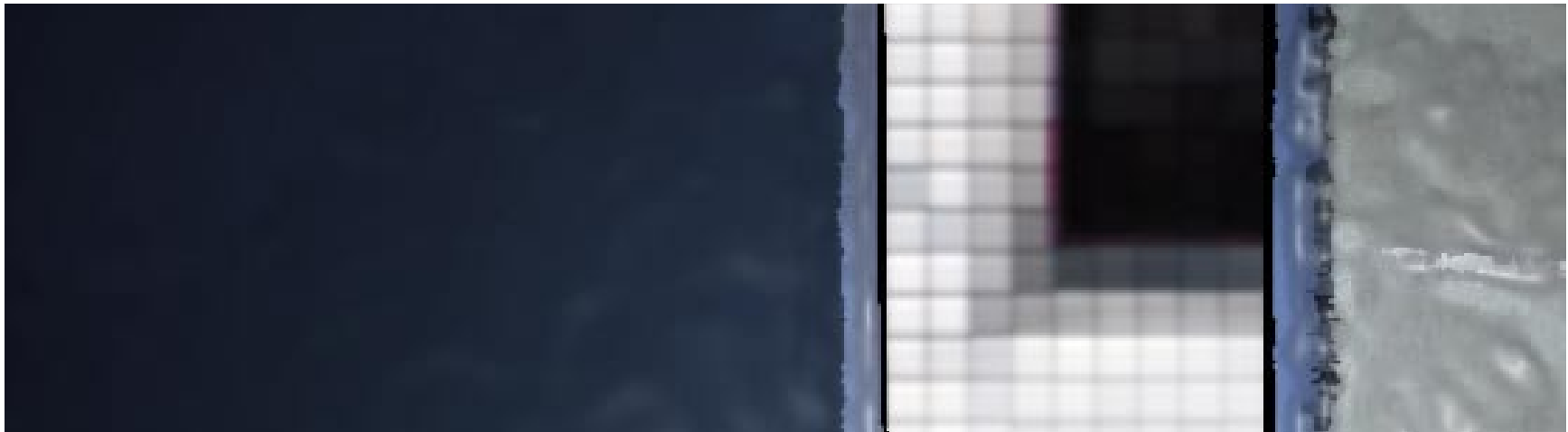
and must leave you there on the floor of the living room all those years away. I will keep this letter with the others. You must go on into the future, my dear, and I – I will live out our relationship once again, but from the other side this time.

Will I love that young man in there as you did, John? How could I not, when I remember how tenderly you loved me? Even now I feel the stirrings of feelings for him. I realize that he is not me, for I have changed. I now know why your tender, wise eyes always looked sad. You were missing your lover who had gone before you in time.

If it must be so, John, then let me accept that it be so with grace.

The logic that denies what I know in my heart to be true I reject utterly. My dear, I ask only that you wait for me. Nine years of love and sharing – that is not so terrible a thing, though the loss at the end will, I know, be hard. Then I will follow you. I ask only that you wait for me. I will join you and, once we are together again, we will move into the future and not be separate anymore. Wait for me, my dear. I say only good-bye for now, and send you all of my love. So be it. I accept this, my curious fate, and with the ending of this letter I lay down who I was and take up who I must, from now on, be. And so I sign myself – as I must from now on,

John



About North Wind Press

About North Wind Press

NUGGETs is an online publication of North Wind Press,
PO Box 652, Station P, Toronto, ON M5S 2Y4

Marion Wyse: Publisher and Editor
Michael Battenberg: Creative Director

Contact US

Editorial and submissions: submissions@northwindpress.ca
Support: webmaster@northwindpress.ca

Copyright

Writers and artists retain copyright over each work
produced in *NUGGETs*. For permission to quote or copy
please email *NUGGETs* and we will pass it on to the writer or
artist to contact you.

Visit NUGGETs online!

Did you enjoy this article?

Visit our NUGGETs online reading room and enjoy
informative, inspiring and engaging poetry, prose,
short stories and art.

<http://www.northwindpress.ca/nuggets>

