

DO YOU STILL WANT TO MARRY ME?

THE CALL – First Friday in December

I was holding my phone to call my tax guy, it rang in my hand.

Though I was startled, it connected and I said “Hello”.

“This is Lara.” She made no apologies for refusing to talk to me

for four years or any inquiry as to how I was. I could hear the wine in

her voice. She launched into a summary of her recent life. I was paralyzed by her voice alone. I loved her voice, its cadence, diction,

and verve. I would do anything to keep her talking, almost like police

with a kidnapper, not interrupting with factual questions, comments

nothing but Yes, Yes, Yes.

Breathless, Lara said, “I only have five clients. I’m starving to

death. Judge Kinnary gave me space near the courthouse , rent-free

for a year. I’ve staged several pro bono nursing home talks. I can’t

meet anyone new. Both my parents are in memory care. Do you still

want to marry me?”

Only one statement needed a reply, I thought, but I'll wait

to hear if she's serious or just drunk. Having not heard from Lara in

over four years forced me to wonder why she called me at five on a Friday. She might be terrified of facing another weekend alone with her problems and no money. I knew I couldn't argue or question her, she'd simply hang up. At her pause I asked if she had

seen any new movies lately, knowing she only watched the rom-com

DVDs piled up in her bedroom. “Only the hundreds on my bedroom

floor,” replied Lara, “You remember my bedroom, don't you, Tom.” “I

remember every moment I spent with you, Lara,” I said. “Every moment, really, Tom,” said Lara. “Except when I was talking,” I replied. “That was most of the time, wasn't it, Tom,” said Lara. “I don't remember most of your politics, history, or geography. All I remember are your eyes, your lips, your touch. Mellowed by wine while we had dessert after dessert, I was hypnotized by your voice.

I'm not afraid of your spell so long as I can't see you, something like

old Ulysses.”

“Lara, I promise not to speak, only listen, if you meet with me.

You seem very stressed. I’ll do anything to help you, to keep you safe and happy. Let’s get together this week, tonight. I’ll simply listen, you can stun me with your smile.”

“I don’t have anything nice to wear and I’ve gained some weight.”

“You couldn’t have possibly changed enough to dissuade me from wanting to see you, from wanting you,” I said, “Let’s meet tomorrow, please. Anytime, anywhere.”

“Yes, I’d like that,” said Lara. “Tomorrow AM? “Early brunch at

Nudy’s? Yes, but be forewarned, if I haven’t had something to drink

you may find the Lara you hated, the Lara who sent you into exile. By

the by, why did you give me that painting of my cottage?”

“I know how much you love your cottage, I wanted you to have a

special memory of it if you move away,” I said. “I love it, I look at it

too much. I put it over the fireplace so I can sit on the couch, our couch, and remember how happy we were inside this cottage,” said

Lara, "Why did you deliver it on All Fools Day?" "I'll tell you when we

meet Lara," said Tom. "Oh, a cliffhanger. Bye for now," said Lara.

THE MEETING – Last Saturday in January

Five minutes into their breakfast, Lara said she had to leave to

go to work, to her job as a docent at Winterthur. She was out the door before I could think of anything to hold her. Later, I learned that

Winterthur was closed for January and February. After paying the bill, I drove the one block to Lara's cottage reaching it just as she was going in. I jumped out of my car, popped the trunk, and slid a box of gifts right into her doorway. Lara froze in place, surprised.

"I miss you so, so much, Lara," I said, "Please don't end us like

this." Lara leaned in close to me, hugged me, whispered in my ear,

"I'll always love you, Tom." In a heartbeat she was gone into the cottage with the door slammed between us. I jumped into my double-parked car to unblock the street, honking cars ignoring my plight. I was not defeated. I was ecstatic to have simply seen and

listened to Lara for a few moments. "This is progress," I thought. I'll

be very patient, I won't overwhelm her with demands for attention or suggestions to improve her life."

I never saw or spoke to Lara again. As time passed, I learned so much about Lara but never enough to allow me to understand or accept what happened.

Hours, then days, then weeks passed without any calls from or contact with Lara. She didn't return my calls or acknowledge my letters. Her message machine was full. I couldn't even voice any more pleas to her.

On Valentine's Day I delivered flowers to her cottage because I wanted her to be happy on that special day. There was no response from Lara. Someone removed the flowers after a day or so.

On Thursday, February 23rd, I absentmindedly googled Lara. When her obituary filled the screen, filled my world, I fell out of my chair. I laid on the floor crying bitterly for her, for what she was, what she had been, all her achievement and promise. Most specially, I cried for my own loss which I knew would be with me for

the rest of my life. After thirteen years, I can't think of Lara without

| boundless pain. The feeling of loss has never ended. It won't until I

follow her over.