

Chapter 16. The Big Date

The date was October 3, 1980. I was in the throes of divorce. I had gone for lunch to *Sammy's*, the small cafeteria in the Rice University Student Center. Stepping with my tray from the cashier, I could not help but notice a young woman sitting alone at a table nearby. Her head was shaved bald, and it glistened in the light of the ceiling fixtures. She was smartly and imaginatively dressed. At first glance, her confident appearance did not suggest either tragedy or accident, which intrigued me. Why then the shaved head? I paused uncertainly, as my mind raced. Should I speak to her? After Annette's explosive termination of our marriage, I certainly wanted nothing more to do with women; and yet I did too. Looking for a place to sit, I carried my tray to her table and asked,

"Do you mind if I join you?"

"Please do," she replied.

"I just had to ask what caused you to have a shaven head," I said while noticing a beautiful, deer-like face, having large dark eyes.

"My boyfriend dumped me," she said bluntly, "and by the time my hair has grown back I hope to be over him."

Her determination to bounce back appealed in my own situation. I had seated myself half prepared to empathize even with a health tragedy, but instead I found fresh determination embodied in that old Broadway hit song "I'm gonna wash that man right out of my hair". I was not actually looking for a girlfriend. And I needed a kooky one like I needed a hole in my head. But I was in pain, and I was discouraged, and I found emotional kinship with this stranger. My immediate thought was that her boyfriend had made a poor decision. As time came to return to work I realized that I had to suggest something or we would not meet again. So I invited her to attend a play with me at a Houston theater. She accepted! That gave me a lift. When I arrived to pick her up at her apartment, she emerged dressed in a beaded-satin 1950's party gown. She flaunted not only her heartbreak, but also nostalgia for times past. I viewed her with some combination of humor and amazement. She had become quite memorable already.

This first date initiated a fast evolution into what would be the seminal friendship of my life. We had significant things in common. I learned that Nancy McBride had been born in Pennsylvania and high-schooled in London, England. Before returning to the US to enroll in college, she had lived and worked in the small village of Tongue on the north coast of Sutherland, Scotland

"I have been to that village", I exclaimed.

"I worked tables in the Tongue Hotel", she clarified.

She had returned to the United States to study art and architecture and had recently returned from an architecture internship in New York City to achieve her Bachelor of Architecture degree (a second, professional degree in architecture). I shared with her that I had lived in Cambridge, England during the very years of her London experience. In the same space of time we had hiked on some of the same, remote Scottish mountains. The similarities of emotions and experiences with England were uncanny. Today I am unnerved to look back and realize that the course of our subsequent 27 years was made possible by one fleeting chance encounter.

Our coincidental histories in Scotland made a special bond between us. We spent frequent, friendly time together. Our passions for England and Scotland made us feel that

we shared a longer, richer history. After a few months those feelings inspired an adventurous plan that made sense only to our increasingly romantic friendship. While contemplating whether to participate in another NATO Workshop being held at the *Institute of Astronomy* in Cambridge, the idea arose to go together to the north of Scotland to rent some simple cottage for a long holiday following that Cambridge Workshop (on Supernovae). While in tongue Nancy had lived in a very simple cottage and loved it. My schedule allowed exactly a month during summer 1981 between Cambridge and *The Meteoritical Society* meeting in Bern. Captivated by our idea, we located a house near the tiny village of Achiltibuie on the northwest coast. It was offered for summer periods by its owner, a Mr. MacLennan. We sent money to reserve it from July 15 to August 15. Making that booking reignited the special emotions we shared. I had, by the way, arranged in the divorce for Alia and Annette to continue living in our house on Bartlett Street. Somewhat comforted by that arrangement, I found it to be a time to bury my daily worries about them.

I left Houston for the Cambridge meeting on June 26, where for two weeks I had a room in historic Clare College. I would deliver my talk “Supernovae and the Origin of the Solar system”, rekindling at once my fire for the isotopic puzzles within the early solar system. Nancy flew into London on July 11 and took the train to Cambridge. From there we drove a rental car to Tongue, where Nancy had worked as a waitress in the Tongue Hotel. She had sought out that experience in preference to a forced return to the USA with her family, to their consternation, at the end of her father’s London stint for Gulf Oil. She had been quite determined, unwilling to simply pack up and return to Houston. During our revisit to Tongue, a postage stamp of a village, Nancy relished staying in the Tongue Hotel and being on the other side of the service. Next day we walked up the hill to the simple stone cottage about one mile from the hotel in which Nancy had lived during that time. For quite a pause we savored beautiful desolate views of the stony hills and of the azure *Kyle of Tongue* penetrating inward from Tongue Bay in the north, past Tongue itself for three miles, until it narrowed to the Kinloch River that drains into it. I watched Nancy in silence as she recaptured her feelings as she silently looked about. *Ben Loyal* loomed visibly several miles further to the south. I had hiked to its summit with Hoyle and Fowler and radio astronomer John Bolton in 1968 during my second trip to the Highlands. An uncanny bond between Nancy and me grew stronger.

On Saturday July 18 we arrived at Mr. MacLennan’s cottage, *Blairbuie House*. Its name sounds grander than the house actually was. But it was perfect, a light yellow stuccoed two-story house standing alone in a hillside of sheep. We enjoyed four weeks there, in isolation from the world. I wrote on my novel based on the solar-neutrino puzzle, and Nancy edited and criticized the writing with an unerring literary eye. And on alternate days, if the weather was fine, we drove to the base of one of the many nearby mountains and hiked to its top, packing our lunch. We first climbed gentle *Cul Beag*, and cooked a leg of lamb afterwards to celebrate Nancy’s maiden climb in these western highlands. One by one, day by day, we hiked lovely mountains-- *Canisp*, *Cul Mor*, where in the fog we encountered botanists searching for rare plants, up magnificent *An Teallach* on the day of Prince Charles’s wedding to Dianna, which we picked up on the car radio after descending, over the highly eroded baroque looking pinnacles of *Stac Pollaidh*, up long *Beinn Dearg* where five deer majestically leaped a stone wall in front of us, fogged in on *Beinn Allegin* amid the geologic wonders of Torridon’s pre-Cambrian quartzite, and

trekking up massive *Conival*. We were irrepressible, reaching the optimism of each pinnacle. It was four weeks of sheer poetry. It was four weeks of talking through our disappointments in life. In this special time, our friendship turned to love.