

Two Away

Scott Peterson

Jim Tallent possessed the eye of a sculptor and the heart of a lecher. After running through all the artist's models from greater Boston who would sleep with him, he and his wife, Terry, became the leaders of a reverse migration that brought the six of us old friends back to Webster City, our small hometown in central Maine. Terry wanted to stay home with their two young children, so Jim got himself one of those franchises advertised on late night TV and took to servicing home appliances. When our air-conditioner broke down, my wife called him instead of the repairman recommended by her mother. At supper that night, the AC crapped out again just as Linda was telling me how Jim worked for almost two hours, but only billed us for one. With a slight hesitation that seemed magnified over the phone, Terry told me Jim would get back to us once he finished two other jobs. Around midnight, his knock woke me up. How I ever fell asleep in that heat, I don't know. Glancing at the TV, I saw a large woman and a little man selling their dignity for 15 seconds of fame. I shut it off before everyone started stripping.

"I would have been here sooner," Jim said, "but somebody's old lady got her tit caught in a wringer."

His grin was crooked and I thought I smelled bourbon on his breath, but I was never one to ask for details. As he passed me the cord of his droplight, I heard the sounds of a baseball game coming from his van. The Red Sox had already lost to the Yankees a few hours earlier, so I knew it wasn't a local broadcast.

"Is that a game you taped?" I asked.

"It's a bit of modern magic!" Jim said as he removed the plastic cover of the AC unit. "I use a wireless modem to dial up one of those sites that lets you listen to radio stations from all over."

When Jim's German shepherd, Faustus, came out of the van and sat next to me, I was almost taken back to the summer nights of my childhood. Of course, I never had a dog and wasn't friends with Jim until high school. That's when he started dating Terry Lerner—only to start running around on her about a week later. He was the shortstop for the baseball team and she was one of the star pitchers on the softball team, along with my wife Linda and Jennifer Littlefield. Jennie married Phil Garner about the same time we all got married. Less than a year after we moved back—it was about two months before that first heat wave and just one week before her fortieth birthday—Jennie was killed when she rolled her SUV on a relatively good road—by Maine standards.

"How's Phil doing?" I asked.

"Knocking the softball around seems to help his grieving process," Jim said. "We're keeping right field warm for you, Bob."

"Maybe I'll be settled enough to play next year," I said. I was the new human resources coordinator at WebQuest, a local computer firm.

Jim smiled. "It's only a matter of time before you're going to join us."

"I wouldn't have my head in the game now. Next year it'll be win-win."

"The deal can't always be win-win, you know. Take baseball. Either the hitter makes an out or gets on base at the expense of the pitcher."

Faustus flinched as I grabbed a handful of his hair. It was just too damn hot to rehash the glory days of the 1980 state softball championship all over again.

"Terry and Linda and Jennie knew they had to get three outs every inning whether they threw three pitches or thirty. They knew about pain—that semi-sweet ache which reminds us we're alive. And they knew we have to make sacrifices to get what we want."

"That's right," I added, "they were all good bunters."

Jim just looked at me as he mopped his brow. Then he snapped off his droplight. "That should do it."

"Thanks," I said. "Are you going to have a party for Terry's fortieth?"

He shook his head slowly, as if to say, "No woman—not even Terry—wants to celebrate her fortieth birthday."

The house felt cooler immediately, so I closed the windows and made my way upstairs. Cindy and Bobby Jr. were still sprawled on their backs with their arms 90 degrees from their sides. Linda was sleeping in a ball with her arms wrapped tightly across her chest as if she were freezing to death.

Three days later, Terry Tallent suffered a massive brain hemorrhage and fell into a coma. When Linda and I went to see Terry at Central Maine Medical, we found Jim and Phil there. Terry seemed so small and frail propped up in her bed that I didn't recognize her at first. It wasn't long before the other three started talking about softball. Maybe they were trying to revive Terry, or maybe they didn't have anything else to say to each other.

"We lost in the '78 tournament after Jennie blew out her hamstring," Phil started.

"And then we lost the championship game in '79 when I broke my shin," Linda continued, causing me to wince as I conjured up the photo I caught of her hitting the fateful foul ball.

"And then we won it all in '80," Jim said. "I still think Bob's photo of Terry pitching the final strike is one of his best."

That photo always reminded Linda of how Terry had to come in with two away in the bottom of the ninth and the bases loaded to preserve the win. She quickly changed the subject, "Remember how the six of us and three people with a pulse won all those coed tournaments in college?"

"We always bragged you up," Jim said, "and you girls never failed to impress."

They went on rehashing our pre-family years in Boston, sounding like classmates at a reunion instead of the hospital room of someone fighting for her life. I went over to the bed and put my hand over Terry's fingers, which were extended as if she'd just delivered a pitch. They were clammy and unresponsive when I squeezed her curved pointer finger in a vain attempt to bring it back in line with the other three. I couldn't help smiling as I remembered taping her wrist before every game and listening to the story of how she broke the finger while playing ice hockey on the river with her older brothers.

I earned some pretty vicious nicknames as the trainer for the softball team in high school, but I also became friends with Terry, Linda, and Jennie. When we four went out together, they took turns dancing with me at socials and sitting next to me at movies. Once, just once, Terry and I kissed in the front seat of her car after we'd dropped off Linda and Jennie. Her dark eyes took on a strange new intensity in the greenish glow of the dash lights. She had a round face and a page boy hair cut in those days. We sat in my driveway and talked about nothing in particular until we found the breathless courage to lean forward and press our lips together. "There," she said as she put her hand on my thigh. "Was that so bad?" It wasn't, of course, but just a week later, I was dancing nose-to-nose with Jennie during "My Best Friend's Girl" when the four of us went to see *The Cars* in concert. Then Jim and Phil arrived on the scene to ask Terry and Jennie to the prom. This set the stage for Linda and me to connect while watching *Salem's Lot* on cable in her basement, although neither of us was that fond of vampire movies.

Back in the present, Linda cleared her throat, prompting me to drop Terry's hand. "I don't suppose you've been able to do any sculpting, Jim," she asked. Her voice was calm, but she looked as drawn as Terry in her hospital bed.

Jim glanced at Phil. "I was going pretty good on that project Jennie helped me with back in April."

This came as a bit of a surprise because I thought Jennie had been too sensible to get mixed up with Jim.

"Will you have a show in Boston—if you finish it?" Linda asked.

Jim nodded. "It will be a pain in the ass to get it there, but no one around here would be able to appreciate it anyway—present company excepted," he added, looking directly at me.

Despite "working" with artist's models of all shapes and sizes over the years, Jim's nude female figures were consistently athletic and short, with over-developed left arms. The subjects had a classical or literary premise: "Dido throwing herself onto the pyre" or "Anna Karenina throwing herself under the train," but I could always spot Terry as the model for the piece. The reviewers of Jim's last Boston show had given him hesitant, uneasy praise, as if they, too, had recognized how the retrospective collection chronicled the ebb and flow of Terry's figure. "Mary Kelly throwing herself into the arms of Jack the Ripper," which was finished just before we all left Boston, was particularly disturbing to Linda, who dragged me out of the gallery as soon it was unveiled, as if she didn't want to be reminded how she was also fuller in the hip and deeper in the bosom.

Terry lingered for a month and then I came downstairs at three a.m. one July morning to find Linda staring at a bowl of cold cereal. Every light on the first floor was on and there was a brand new lighter and an unopened pack of cigarettes on the kitchen table. When she looked up at me, her face was washed out and colorless. Without preamble, she said, "That's two away."

"In the bottom of the ninth," I rejoined to complete the familiar phrase. Linda shot me a look as if she thought I was making a reference to her failure to get the final out in the championship game.

"It's just not fair." Linda spoke slowly, with a long pause between each word.

I couldn't help agreeing with her as I closed my eyes and tried to call up the photo I took of Terry, Linda, and Jennie for the yearbook. They were standing shoulder-to-shoulder with their hair flipped up like Farrah Fawcett. The "Wildcats" logo stitched across the front of their uniforms was more of a warning than anything else. The caption, written by Phil, said they scrapped like the Three Musketeers and pitched like the Three Graces. I knew all those details by heart, but their faces were blurry, as if they'd been burned out in the darkroom.

At Terry's funeral, Jim was calm and composed. In fact, neither Phil, nor Linda showed much emotion. When the three of them fell to talking about—what else?—softball, I said my good-byes to Terry. Her haircut and the shape of her face weren't much different from that in the front seat of her car all those years ago. Without caring whether Linda was looking or not, I bent over and kissed her again. "There," I said under my breath, "that wasn't so bad after all." As we left, Linda and Phil and Jim slowly raised their hands and gave each other the "peace" sign.

Two weeks later, Linda found a lump in her breast. After four biopsies, one of her doctors wanted to do another biopsy and the other one was calling for a mastectomy. As we discussed her situation at the kitchen table in the middle of another sleepless night, I thought she was just one biopsy away from the second option anyway.

"We should go back to Boston." I said.

"Medicine is more art than science," Linda said quietly. "And in this case the doctors are just monkeys with car keys."

"They've got the best radiologists in the world there," I said. "I bet we wouldn't see anything on your mammograms after just a few treatments."

"It is what it is, Bob," Linda said. "No amount of darkroom magic is going to change it this time."

I laid my hand on top of hers. "I will always love you no matter what happens."

She stared straight into my eyes until they started to water. "I wish I could be sure of that." I tried to interject something here, but she squeezed my fingers and cut me off. "If I die, I want you to promise me you'll keep our children away from Jim Tallent's sculptures—especially that hideous Jack the Ripper thing and any new ones he does."

I got up and tried to hug my wife of almost 15 years, but she wrapped her arms around her chest, forcing me to settle for a weak squeeze of her shoulder.

"You're going to beat this," I said. "We've still got one out left."

She gave me a smile filled with terrible resignation. "All right, I'll talk to a radiologist, but you also have to stop using baseball metaphors."

I said, "Done," and we shared a mirthless laugh.

Central Maine had another heat wave in the middle of September and the air conditioner conked out again. When Jim finally arrived, he was listening to the end of a game being played on the West Coast.

"I would have been here sooner, but we went into extra innings. Phil says I still have the soft hands," Jim said as he held them in the glow of the droplight.

I saw only the strong, sensitive fingers of a sculptor and wondered if he was still working after losing his model, just as some novelists stop writing after losing their ideal reader.

"Remember that play we read by the guy who was married to Marilyn Monroe?" Jim asked as he removed the cover of the air-conditioner.

I was listening to see if Barry Bonds would homer again, but I knew what he was talking about. "The guy would be Arthur Miller and the play would be *The Crucible*."

"Yeah, that's it. Remember how the people just dropped dead or got sick and died?" Jim's eyebrows were raised as he waited for my reply.

"As far as I know," I said, "no one has linked Miller's plays with anything life-threatening."

Jim held his drop light under his face so that his features were jumbled by the shadows. "What about the witches?"

"What witches?" I asked. "It was just a bunch of girls playing in the forest, just like the Reds in Hollywood were just rich Americans playing at being Communists."

Jim did a drum roll on the A/C unit. "Well, she's purring like a kitten now. I'd love to stay and chat, but I've got another call waiting up for me on the other side of town."

"Back in the saddle again, huh?" I asked. "Or were you ever out of it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Everyone knows you banged all those models," I said, "just like everybody knows you made it with half of the art department in college."

"Most of the time." Jim said as he loaded his tools in the van, "95 percent of what everybody knows is bullshit."

"I don't know why Terry put up with you."

"There's a lot you don't know."

I wanted to punch him in the mouth. "You didn't deserve her."

Jim closed the sliding door without showing the slightest trace of anger. "Can't argue with you there. But then, do any of us really deserve the love we're given?"

I tried for an hour to fall asleep and then I went down to the junk room in the basement to see if I could find a copy of Miller's play. Three American Lit anthologies contained *Death of a Salesman*, *A Memory of Two Mondays*, and *After the Fall*. On the off-chance one of us had boosted a copy of our senior lit book, I broke into the faded liquor boxes that held our high school mementos. The only books in there, of course, were our yearbooks, but I wasn't in the mood for musing over inscriptions or portraits. Picking up the yearbook supplement Phil and I put together to memorialize the softball team's state championship run, I opened it right to my favorite photo. As Terry delivers the final pitch of the tournament, the soft, graceful shadows on her face, torso, and shin hide the explosive wheeling of her arms and the driving thrust of her legs.

Linda's low, insistent voice broke my reverie. "What on earth are you doing down here at this time of the night?"

"Looking for a copy of *The Crucible*," I said when my heart stopped trying to squeeze itself out of my chest. "Jim thinks the play had something to do with Jennie's and Terry's deaths."

"That's just plain crazy," Linda said with a long pause between each word. "Jennie never was a very good driver and Terry had a family history of comas."

As far as I knew, Jennie's only car accident happened while she was still in high school, and Terry's favorite aunt had gone into a coma after major surgery when a blood clot lodged in her brain, but I wasn't in the mood to argue fine points with my wife.

"There's just no reason," Linda went on after a moment of silence, "to link our championship with that play."

"He didn't say anything about the championship," I said.

Linda crossed her arms over her chest. "All right, whatever you said. It's 3 a.m. and that medication makes it hard for me to think."

"Why won't you let me take you back to Boston?" I asked.

"Let's not act like we're desperate," Linda replied quietly. "We need to make this as easy on the kids as possible."

That was enough to make me snap. First, I threw the yearbook supplement down so hard the staples broke and the pages went flying. Then I started kicking the boxes. On the third kick, I hit my toe wrong and fell onto the floor.

"Why is everybody taking this so calmly?" I asked.

"It's about time you started asking some questions," Linda said as she left.

The page with my favorite picture of Terry came to rest on its side against one of the boxes. Maybe it was the quality of the light or the fact it was after three in the morning, but from where I was lying on the floor, the shapes and shadows of the bodies in the grandstand formed a face just above Terry's shoulders. The eyes were pointed and full of mirth, but the lips were thin and cruel. This face in the crowd emanated a greedy glee that made me sick to my stomach.

I reached over and grabbed the page, but when I had it in front of me, I couldn't see anything in the background. I turned the picture to reconstruct the angle, but the face had disappeared back into the crowd like one of those holographic 3-D laser images with all the colored dots.

Over the next several days, I dropped the names of cancer specialists in Boston, but Linda refused to consider any of these suggestions. Instead, she focused more and more of her attention on making lunches and picking out clothes for the kids, even though they'd handled those sorts of things by themselves for years.

"Linda, for God's sake," I started to say one evening when I came home late from work to find her writing in a thick spiral bound notebook.

"Leave God out of this," she said without looking up. "There's nothing He, you or anyone else can do."

"How do you know?"

She went on writing. "This is a letter for the kids. I want you to show it to them in five years."

She weighed almost nothing, so I was able to turn the chair and take her face in both of my hands. "Linda, honey. How can you say that?"

Tears streamed down her cheeks. "It was just for fun, we didn't mean anything by it. I don't think Jennie even knew what hit her. Terry might have had a suspicion, but she didn't have much time to think about it either. I suppose I'm being punished the most because it was my idea."

"What was your idea?" I asked. All of a sudden, I seemed to be asking a lot of questions.

When she grabbed my hands, her grip was hard enough to make me want to cry out. "Bob, you have to promise to keep our children away from Jim's studio."

"All right, I will," I said, "but you can't just give up. Let's plan something for your fortieth birthday."

"No."

"Why not?"

She stared back at me with a blank expression. "You just don't get it, do you?" She said this with such a calm, detached manner that I felt cold and sick and hollow. "It's almost as if I never knew you," I said.

Her face remained expressionless. "In some ways, you never did."

I fled the house at that moment, running from the shimmering glint in her eyes as much as from the words that fell from her lips.

Linda died in her sleep two weeks later. After the autopsy, the doctors were tight-lipped and vague about the actual cause of death. At the funeral, Phil handed me a softball uniform and Jim put a fitted maroon cap on my head. That weekend, I was camped in right field and batting last for Jim's team. After the game, a 25-5 drubbing at the hands of St. John's Apostles, Jim suggested we drink some beers at his studio. The kids were with my mother, so I drove over with him and Phil even though we could have walked. While Jim poured three frosty mugs from the pony keg in the mini-fridge, I admired the new pool table occupying the spot in the center of the studio where Jim would have kept a work-in-progress. As the three of us clinked glasses, I decided there was no new sculpture and that Linda had gotten herself all wrought up over nothing.

"It's kinda muggy in here," Phil said. "Let's go sit in the back yard."

The black flies were long gone, along with most of the mosquitoes, so it sounded like a good idea. As soon as we stepped outside, my gaze was drawn to the full moon looming over the softball diamond.

"How would you describe the color of that moon?" I asked.

"Burnt umber," offered Phil.

"No," Jim said as he flipped a switch next to the door, "it's burnished bronze."

I heard the whirr of an electric motor and then I caught sight of a glimmering movement in the center of the yard. At first, I thought it was a merry-go-

round, but as I moved closer, I saw it was a sculpture of three nude figures who were dancing with joined hands. Their steps were light and imbued with youthful energy, even though their bodies were clearly weighted with the gravity of middle age.

"I was there when the three of them danced naked around the pitcher's mound," Jim said as he flipped another switch, "and I heard them swear how they didn't care if they never reached 40 as long as they could win it all."

When the light came on in the center of the circle and I was confronted with the same cruel, greedy leer from the crowd in my photo, I knew—despite all my willful blindness—that he was right.