

Dave Margoshes

Night is Coming

I never really forgot her, not through war, two marriages, kids, even grandchildren—a whole life—but when I got to be 72 she came flying back into my mind like a boulder in one of those disaster movies, smashing away everything in front of it.

I was watching CBS Sunday Morning, which we get here on cable from Detroit, and Charles Kuralt ended the show with a quote: “I must hurry, for the night is coming.” He said who it was from, some poet, I think—Robert Frost, maybe?—but I was so stunned by the line everything else just faded. I must hurry, for the night is coming. That was me in a nutshell—72, divorced from one wife and separated from the other, in relatively good health but two heart attacks under the bridge already and the third one likely to be the back-breaker, as we kids in Milwaukee used to say, two or three centuries ago or whenever it was I was growing up. I had been putting old age out of my mind—the only time I thought of myself as a “senior” (ugh) was when I was queued up at the movies with a one dollar bill in my mitt and feeling smug as hell—and suddenly here it was, coming crashing down on me through the voicebox of the TV, just like those old Victrola ads had prophesied: my master’s voice, breaking the goddamn news.

And with it, with that bombshell, had come the memory of Ardis, fresh as a daisy, if you’ll forgive an old man an occasional lapse into dog-eared writing. I’ve been making my living at it long enough to qualify.

I guess I should fess up that it wasn’t really that simple. I’ve been working on my autobiography—oh, it’s really more about the oddball characters I’ve known over the years, from ex-cons to astronauts, than about myself—and that week I’d been making notes on the Iowa days. On an index card, I had typed this line: “Also, I have had numerous love affairs, after being engaged to a Catholic girl (Irish) when I was 21.

We broke it off 51 years ago, but the flame was still there.” I was running my tongue along the rim of my almost empty coffee cup, my eyes half closed, and trying to remember exactly what she’d looked like when Kuralt’s line came tumbling at me. “The night is coming,” I said aloud, and, suddenly, there she was in my mind, clear as an oncoming freight train at a level crossing, every detail sharp and fresh, just like a newly printed photograph. It was uncanny.

What happened next was like one of those cheery little items you find in the People section of your newspaper, and also a little like a mystery, a form of story I’ve been reading all my life and writing off and on for the last 20 years. I cranked out a letter to the Cedar Rapids Gazette editor, asking “Where is Ardis O’Keefe?” Considering over 50 years had gone by, it’s surprising how many responses I got, and not just from Cedar Rapids. The clipping of my letter was sent on to friends and relatives in Illinois, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, some of whom were nice enough to write, all with basically the same information. She’d married a silversmith named Harris, they’d had some kids and she’d moved to Terra Haute to live with his parents during the war, which he infantreed his way through, in Africa and Italy, much like me, though I don’t recollect ever meeting anyone named Harris over there. After the war, he got a job in an umbrella factory in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, rising to some kind of front office job before his retirement. Then they moved to Florida, right around the same time I was hauling my ass up this way, though none of my correspondents were sure where, or what had happened since.

That was a piece of cake for me, though. I found the umbrella factory, through long distance information (simple, isn’t it?) and a pleasant woman in the personnel department there gave me the city where the pension cheques were sent, though she wouldn’t go so far as to hand me the actual address on a silver platter. Confidential. Company policy. Yak yak. That’s okay. I was just glad the company hadn’t folded or moved to Taiwan. How many Harrises can there be in Coral Gables? A lot, in fact. Too many to contact them all, from this distance. But a brief letter to the directors of the town’s three old age centres, inquiring about an Ardis O’Keefe Harris, about 70, from Cedar Rapids via Terra Haute and Lancaster hit paydirt quick enough, and there was a letter from her, real as life in my hands, written in a graceful leftward slanting hand like they don’t teach in school anymore, on fine blue paper in a greyish ink: a widow of eight years now, 69 years old, only 105 pounds, and, yes, of course, she remembered me, she said—“how could I forget, the things you used to

say to me, Andy, the promises you used to make?" Kind lady, with a nice touch. But if I could pin the language to the mat from time to time, why couldn't she?

If I'm anything, it's blunt, so I write her this letter.

"Ardis, dear,

"We made a stupid mistake back then. I've always regretted it, but it's taken me 50 years to realize just how stupid it was. That doesn't mean we shouldn't do something about it, to correct it. I'm no prize. I'm 72 years old and have some of the 'older man's' characteristics. I'm forgetful sometimes and occasionally cranky. But my health is still good, my mind still sharp, I have my hair, though it's thin and sort of frizzy, and most of my teeth. I've taken care of myself. I've been married twice, lived all over hell and gone, been in a war, raised a family, had a career. I guess I'm what they call experienced. And I still love you. I always have. If you'll have me, we could be married, and start redoing the 50 years. We don't have that long, I know, and you can never do something now exactly the way it should have been done, might have been done, then. But we can get started."

I would have ended it there, for the dramatic effect, but I'm a talkative old soul once I get started, even on paper, so I rambled on. Told her a little about my life, and about the book I'm working on. Told her how she was sort of vaguely in my mind that morning when I heard Charles Kuralt, quoted her the line, told her a little about how I'd gone about finding her. I wanted her to feel the sort of person I am. I sent her a photo, the best of the recent ones, me with my son Jack taken when he and his family were up this way on a holiday two years ago, and we all went fishing at the Uplands Reservoir, me with my scruffy fishing vest on and a battered hat that I've worn fishing for 30 years, filled with flies and hooks and weights, holding up a trout that weighed a good five pounds, if I remember right, and grinning like hell into the camera. The world had seemed pretty good that day, and I looked like a pretty good old boy, like a nice man at peace with the world. I wanted Ardis to see the sort of person I am, too.

I signed the letter "with love, Andy," and put more stamps on the envelope than necessary.

I mentioned I was writing a book, an autobiography. Why not?

William Saroyan, who's one of my favorite novelists, wrote his autobiography and called it *Here Comes, There Goes You Know Who*. I'm going to call mine *Who? Me?*

I've always had a knack for meeting interesting people, and getting on with them. I cut Monty's hair in Africa, and Patton's in Sicily, and I think I could honestly call them both friends. But there's been dozens more, hundreds. And I've always had a natural gift for gab, as the Irish say, a born story-teller, that's me. When I was a barber back in Cedar Rapids and Sioux City (where I went after Ardis and I had our falling out), I used to keep my customers' ears from drooping into my way by spinning one yarn after another, most of them more or less true. I've never been big on imagination, and fiction's just a classy way of lying, as Hemingway once told me, but detail is what makes my stories worth hearing. Nothing gets past me. People would say, "Andy, you're a born story-teller. Why don't you write a book?" And I'd chuckle and say, "Who? Me?" That's where the idea for the title comes from.

I spent the craziest war anyone could imagine. I started as a barber, in a headquarters company, and wound up in public affairs, although I never stopped cutting the top brass's hair. I didn't get beyond private first class, but I did an officer's work in public affairs, writing pieces for Stars and Stripes, press releases and even a couple of speeches for George Patton, although no one was supposed to know about that. A tank commander I got chummy with, a major named Arthur Cudrup but called Lucky, was the son of a publisher of the *Arizona American*, a newspaper published in Yuma, and that led to my first full-time writing job. I'd already been doing some, selling the occasional piece to the *Cedar Rapids Gazette* and the *Sioux City Press* and even once or twice to the *Des Moines Register*, mostly profiles of people I came across I figured other folks would be interested in, or outdoor stories, hunting and fishing always having been my first real true love.

In Yuma, I did all sorts of things: a lot of outdoors stuff, some sports, obituaries (a form I came to respect), and even social notes, weddings, things like that. I wrote a column for 13 years, even after I'd left the paper, "Andy's Way," that some people down there still remember, I'm told. I never did do much in the way of real reporting, though. I'd fall asleep at school board meetings, and I'd always want to say my piece at the city council. Once, on my way to a press conference at the chamber of commerce, I saw a broken window, stuck my head in and found a dead body. I had my camera with me, as always, and got a dandy picture of a little kitty cat leaving bloody pawprints on a

newspaper lying next to the body, but my city editor gave me hell for missing the press conference. The picture won a state prize, but the city editor never let me forget how unreliable I was. I wasn't cut out for just taking notes and being invisible.

I wound up as director of public relations for the Arizona Highways Department, a job I kept for 10 years, until I had a flareup with my boss, a terrible little husk of a fart who was the deputy director, what the kids these days would call a wimp. It didn't make no nevermind to me. I'd been selling stories to papers and magazines all through that period, and doing my column for some of it, and I'd even done a couple of books, outdoor adventure things for the teen-age market. Scott Meredith, the agent who got Norman Mailer a couple million bucks for a book a while back, handled them for me, though he didn't do as well by me. There wasn't a lot of money in it, but it was satisfying writing, knowing that kids were going to enjoy it, maybe get some inspiration.

In 1960, I moved to Montana to be a PR man with the fish and game commission, but I kept on doing my magazine writing. I was already a regular in *Outdoor Life* and *Fish and Stream* and *Boys Life*. Now I was doing things for *Ellery Queen Magazine* and *True Detectives*—one kind was fiction and the other fact, but the difference between the two has always eluded me. They're both stories, and that's what I'm good at. The telling is pretty much the same. I even wrote pieces for some church magazines, during the religion phase of my life, and I got lucky once and sold something to *Readers Digest*, one of those "most memorable character" things. I never had much use for the *Digest*, but that was my most memorable paycheck, I'll say that.

Along the way, I interviewed astronauts and mass killers, nuclear physicists and trophy hunters, biologists busting their ass to save the kind of bird most people never even heard of and mercenaries from Africa. Congressmen, cowboys, inventors, the last man to be executed in the state of Montana before the supreme court said no way, a little man who'd killed his wife but donated his eyes to one of those banks. I taught English and writing in penitentiaries because it seemed like a worthwhile thing to do and preached sermons in Protestant churches during my religion period, which came about the time my first marriage was breaking up.

I never graduated from any school at all, except barber college, and I never got a diploma from them because the shipment was lost in the mail, but I've interviewed college presidents, including Ike, when he was head man at Columbia. I've never been arrested, but I spent a lot

of time behind bars. I'm afraid of heights and get dizzy on a kitchen ladder but Gus Grissom is a friend of mine. I heard Patton call Montgomery a son of a bitch with my own ears, and I heard Monty say worse about Patton. The day John Kennedy was killed, I was in the governor's office in Butte, Montana, and I saw him cry. Why the hell shouldn't I write a book?

Ardis writes me this letter, arriving about two weeks after I mailed mine to her.

"Dear Andrew,

"Your letter, which arrived a few days ago, has set off a torrent of memories for me, some pleasant, some not so. Truthfully, it's made me giddy. I feel like a schoolgirl, and I'm not at all sure I can trust my emotions.

"I've tried to write this letter several times, and I've written it in my head dozens of times. I think I can make sense of it now.

"I think you're right when you say we made a mistake in 1933. I was in love with you, just in case you had or have any doubts, but I hated you after that argument, for weeks. But you moved away, the hate diminished, finally went away entirely. After that, I didn't feel anything about you, if you can believe that, and, after I married Mr. Harris, I don't think I thought about you at all, except briefly, in passing, for over 45 years. You said in your letter you don't even remember what that argument was about. How like a man! I remember, and I remember every hateful word you said that day. But I said hateful things, too, and I remember them, too.

"I'm not sure, though, that the mistake was as stupid as you think. I can't speak for you, of course, but I've had a good life. Mr. Harris was as good a husband as a woman could want, a good provider, a good friend, a thoughtful, generous man. He died eight years ago, as I mentioned in my previous letter, and I still miss him. We had three wonderful children. One of them, our darling son James, died of polio. The other two are well, married to wonderful people, and have given me four (so far) grandchildren that are the pride and delight of my life, as is ordained. My daughter Linda and her family live in Los Angeles, and we visit, back and forth, once a year. But my son Robert and his darling wife Jan and their two children live right here in Coral Gables, not far from my house. I still live in the house Mr. Harris and I bought

when we moved here, after his retirement. He, poor man, only got to enjoy it for three years before he got sick.

“What I’m saying, Andy, is that I’ve had a life. I didn’t get to be the queen of England or a movie star, but I had a life. It was mine, and still is. I’ve had plenty of misery, when Mr. Harris was wounded in the war and lost one leg, when our darling son died and other times, but I’ve been happy, too, as happy as I think any one woman is entitled to be.

“You’ve had a life, too. You’ve had two marriages, three fine sons, several careers. You seem to imply, in your letter, that you’ve had nothing but regrets because you and I had our falling out, but I don’t believe that. Life doesn’t work that way, dear Andrew. I’m sure you’ve had regrets. All people do. But I’m sure you had happiness. You’d be cheating yourself if you tried to say you hadn’t.

“So we’ve both had lives. We can’t just erase that, pretend they didn’t happen. You can’t turn back the hands of time, dear Andrew, as I know you know. You can’t relive life, and you shouldn’t want to. That’s a defiance of God, and it makes your own life cheap. I don’t think either of us want that.

“I’m an old woman. I’m 69 years old. My health isn’t all that good. I haven’t been with a man since Mr. Harris died. I don’t want to talk about marriage, don’t even want to think about it. Buy you’re right when you say there is something between us, there’s still something between us. If you’d like to come down for a visit, there’s plenty of room in the house. Don’t, though, come with expectations that may not be possible to meet. We can see what happens.”

The word love wasn’t mentioned anywhere, and she signed “Affectionately yours, Ardis,” a phrase that makes me frown. Affection isn’t what I want. I have to smile at her use of that other hoary old saw, “can’t turn back the hands of time,” though. What a pair of word-manglers we’d make.

There’s a photo, too. A small, fragile looking woman, with papery skin, bluish white hair that looks to be long, wrapped up in a bun like schoolmarms used to wear. I like that. Too many women cut their hair short and bob it when they get old. The color of the photo is a little too muddy to tell what color her eyes are, and that’s something I have no recollection of, but they seem to be bright. She’s wearing a sundress, with bare, freckled shoulders, and she obviously hasn’t let herself go to pot. She’s not fat nor unhealthily thin. There’s some juice left in her, that’s obvious. She’s smiling, a wide open, toothy smile that means her son must have taken this shot, or someone she loves. The photo seems to be a companion to the one I sent her, or an answer. She looks good,

looks like the kind of person anyone with their senses about them would like to know. But she's right. She's an old woman. And she doesn't look anything like the young woman who's been clear and sharp and dominating my memory these past few weeks. Not a thing.

Coral Gables. On the map, it looks like it's just an extension of Miami, but I'm told it's really more like a small town, with a personality of its own. I've been to Florida, of course, several times, but never to Miami, so I've never gotten down that way.

I've been taking count, and this'll be my 17th move, the 17th place I've lived since I left my father's house in Milwaukee, almost 60 years ago. He was a drunk, my old man, and there wasn't much love lost between us. When my mother died, I knew it wouldn't be long before I'd be going, because there wasn't anything to keep me. When the old man remarried, I was out the door. I didn't see him again, and I was in Sioux City when he died. I was notified in plenty of time, but I didn't go to the funeral.

"Nothin' good'll come of ya, Andy," he yelled at me when I left. I just gritted my teeth and didn't say anything back, although I could have. His prediction wasn't so hot, because, while I guess I haven't amounted to a hell of a lot, I've done okay. I'm not rich and famous, but I've always made a good living, lived the way I wanted to, made a lot of friends and no enemies I can think of, had a lot of fun and didn't hurt anybody anymore than absolutely necessary. Even in the war, I never killed anybody, although there were a few times when I fired my weapon in anger.

And I sure as hell turned out to be a better father than my old man, though my eldest son, Muggs, sided with his mother and has been cool to me ever since I left. Jack and I've always gotten along real well, especially since all the help I gave him while he was on the bottle.

I moved to Canada in 1969, the year after my youngest son, Peter, came up here to dodge the draft. When kids were first starting to do that, that and burn their draft cards, I thought it was a bunch of damn foolishness. Like any old vet, I guess, I thought a man should be proud to serve, and should go when he's called, no matter what. But by the time Peter got his notice, I'd been thinking a lot about the war and I'd turned my views around quite a bit. There was a photo in *Life* of an old woman and a baby on fire with napalm, that really turned me around. Peter was living with his mother in Phoenix and I was in Denver,

where I'd gone to work for Ducks Unlimited, and he called me to ask my advice. He was only 19 and he'd taken the divorce hardest, I think, because he was always my boy. I told him to follow his conscience, that that was the most important thing for a man to do, to do what he felt was right, not what other people said was right.

"That's what takes the real guts," I said.

"I don't know if I have 'em, Pop," Peter said, "but I want to be a man."

I followed him, partly to show him my support and partly because I'd always wanted to live up in this part of the world, ever since a fishing trip to the Kenora lakes at the height of the Depression, when even barber shops were closing down, things were so bad. We roomed together for a while in Toronto, then had places of our own, not too far away, when I went to Winnipeg to work for Ducks Unlimited again and he tagged along. But the funny thing was, when Carter came in and pushed his amnesty through, Peter went home to Phoenix and married a girl he'd been writing to. I just stayed put.

I was always comfortable in Canada, even became a citizen a few years ago, on my 67th birthday, which might make settling in Florida a bit of a problem. But I hear Florida is full of retired Canadians, so why should it matter? The social security people in Washington might smile a little, that's all.

I don't have a job to quit, but I've given my landlady notice. I told Jack about it when he called the other night and he thinks I'm crazy, of course. Maybe I am, but not doing anything would be even crazier, and I've never been one for halfway measures, god knows. Going down there like a tourist or a visitor would only be awkward, make us both feel nervous. And the expense of the extra flights back here, then down there again is more than my budget can stand. Since I've been working on the book, my freelancing has gone to seed, and I have to admit I miss the extra bucks it used to bring in, even though I'd slowed down a bit since I turned 70 and I had two artificial knees put in.

So I'm all packed and ready to go. It's no big deal, really. I've always been a rolling stone. And when you're my age, and live alone, you don't have much accumulation, you're always ready to pick up and go, usually to the old age home or the hospital or the boneyard, so I'm getting off scot-free, you might say.

It's important, I think, to show her my commitment, that I really mean it. "We can see what happens," she said. Okay by me. But only a fool leaves everything to chance. A fool or a younger man. Ardis is right, we've both had lives. I've had a damn good one, and I never

meant to say I didn't, not for a minute. But I'd be a fool, wouldn't you say, if I let the end of it spin out without shoehorning her back in somehow. I loved Gladys and Carol, and they were fine women. But they're in the past now, and I'm here now, today, looking out for tomorrow. Night is coming, and I gotta get a move on or I'll be left in the dark.