

BRUCE PRATT

Baby Pictures

ALEX KNOWS ROB AND Dottie Weatherly better than I do. She met them when they moved here six years ago from Philadelphia and their dog, Molly, a deaf, sixteen-year-old Border Collie, wandered into our yard. Alex discovered a Pennsylvania phone number on the nametag attached to the dog's collar and the answering machine at the other end directed her to the Weatherly's new number. Fifteen minutes later the three of them were having coffee on our screened porch.

At the time, I was on one of three, two-week tours of one-nighters I do each year. At fifty-nine, I'm too old to stay on the road for long stretches, so I head out first in mid-April, hit the festival circuit in early summer, and make a final foray through New England and New York in October. Those forty or so dates a year—about all my dying fan base can support—and Alex's work as a visiting nurse pays the bills and allows us to visit both of our far-flung daughters each year.

The rest of the time, as Alex says, I putter, tinkering with our mid-nineteenth-century saltwater farm. Twenty-six years ago, with the advance and royalties from my first album, the only one I ever made any real money on, we scraped together the down payment on it though the place was barely habitable. We cobbled it into a home in furious bursts, camping here for the summer, then draining the pipes and buttoning the place tight before moving back to our New York apartment for the school year. During the disco scourge we considered selling out, but with Alex working overtime when I was home, and me playing every gig I could unearth, we hung onto it, and when both girls left for college we settled here permanently.

Rob and Dottie, both retired from some financial gig, are great about inviting Alex over to their place for dinner when I'm away, and the three of them have become fast friends. When I'm home, the last thing I want to do is go out. I dread parties, as there exists a presumption among most people that musicians live to jam with hackers. I'd be fully retired if I'd banked a

sawbuck every time someone said to me, “We’re having a party. Bring your guitar.” I’ve never heard anyone say to a plumber, “Come over for beers, and bring your tools.”

Alex, blessed with unbridled energy, is ready to bolt out the door before she hangs up the phone whenever someone calls with an invitation, and though she makes a point of offering to make my excuses, I owe her for all the years she tended to the kids while I was playing a hundred and fifty dates a year. Besides, she spends most of her days with shut-ins and invalids, and getting out and laughing with healthy, vibrant people restores her spirits.

Last Friday, Alex phoned just after I’d hung up from an argument with my agent, Mel, who’s been pestering me to book some low-guarantee shows, “designed to maximize my exposure.” I’d answered by repeating what Utah Phillips says: “Men die from exposure.” I was still fuming when Alex called and said, “We’re invited to the Weatherlys’ at six to see pictures of their first grandchild, Dianna, the one who lives in Seattle.”

Distracted, I said, “Sure.”

“Dottie asked us to bring dessert and wine,” Alex said. “I’ll stop at Frank’s Bakery if you’ll pick up a few bottles of red. I’ll meet you there.”

I assumed we’d scroll through pictures on their screened porch while we ate, but Dottie had arranged tray tables in front of the TV in the den and laid out a buffet in the kitchen. When we’d filled our plates and settled in, Rob popped in a DVD and dimmed the lights.

Half the time I try to send an email, I mess it up, so I was more than impressed by the video’s opening collage created from clips of Rob and Dottie’s old home movies. “Our daughter, Merrilee, did all the graphics on her iMac,” Rob said. “Sent this to me over the net and I burned this disc. Chose the music, too.”

“We took our old 8-mm with us to Seattle,” Dottie said, “and Merrilee had them converted to DVD.”

When a new face appeared on the screen, Alex would ask who it was and Dottie would give us the long explanation, though most of the footage featured Merrilee and her husband mugging for the lens, and appeared to be shot from a camera mounted on a tripod. I wearied of seeing Merrilee raising her maternity top so her husband could rub her belly, and of the close-ups of her navel interspersed with pulsing sonogram images, but I did enjoy the scenes of the two of them decorating the nursery, as they reminded me of Alex and me painting our old apartment in the village.

At last Merrilee squashed her body into the passenger seat as her husband plunked her suitcase into the trunk, started the car, and backed out of the driveway.

Rob paused the machine. “More wine?” he said. “The birth is next.”

Before I could answer he’d filled my glass, and when he poured another measure for Alex, she squeezed my thigh. As Rob refilled Dottie’s glass, Alex crinkled her nose, a silent sign she gives me whenever she wants to express gratitude for something I’ve done, or for some inconvenience I’m enduring with good cheer. “I’m sure this is almost over,” she whispered.

Rob clicked the remote.

I’d gone to Lamaze classes and been with Alex at both of our girls’ births so I knew the drill, but Dottie insisted on gabbling out detailed commentary while Alex inserted her nurse’s knowledge into the mix. We saw Merrilee, freshly changed into what Dottie called her “birth ensemble,” heft herself onto the bed where her husband rubbed her back and fed her sips of spring water. “The hospital was fabulous,” Dottie said. “They let Merrilee shave herself before she came in. And the staff was just great.”

Nurses grinned for the camera, which I realized was being run by Rob, as Dottie, half in the bed, made Dizzy Gillespie cheeks and waved. A young couple swept into the room and exchanged hugs with Dottie. “Who are they?” I asked.

“Merrilee’s college roommate and her husband,” Dottie said. “They’re expecting too, so the girls decided to be with each other for their respective deliveries. Isn’t that great?”

I had no idea how to answer, but Alex said, “That’s sweet.”

A doctor breezed in, accepted a pair of gloves from one of the nurses, who squeezed lubricant onto the middle and index fingers of his left hand, and as he lifted up Merrilee’s gown and inserted them into her, Rob panned in close.

I winced.

“How many centimeters was she when she came in?” Alex asked.

“Two,” Dottie said. “But here she was six. See,” she added, “they’re hooking up the fetal monitor.”

The next ten minutes were frenetic close ups of machinery and interviews with the *guests*, as Dottie called them, who were each required by Rob to address the camera. Everyone cooperated, even the doctor, who didn’t look old enough to be delivering papers, let alone children. I hung in as best I could, but when the nurses hefted Merrilee’s legs into the stirrups and Rob closed in by shooting over the doctor’s shoulders, I said, “Gotta hit the head. Keep it running.”

“We’ll pause it,” Rob said, reaching for the remote. “We’ve seen this half a dozen times.”

“I’ll go now, too,” Alex said, following me out into the hall.

I opened the bathroom door and she trailed me in. “You first,” I said. “I don’t really have to go.” As Alex hoisted her skirt, I said, “This is too weird.”

“When did you get squeamish?” she said, lowering herself onto the seat.

“I’m not squeamish,” I said.

“You keep looking away,” she said.

“Only when Rob is zooming in for crotch shots of his daughter. I can’t imagine filming our girls like that.”

Alex flushed and stood up. As she snugged up her panties, I recalled Kelly, our oldest, beet-faced and wrinkled, crowned with flame red fuzz, burbling out from between Alex’s legs, and the vigour of Alex lathering her hands reminded me of the moment I first snuggled Victoria to my chest as she flailed her unfettered limbs against the warmed blanket.

“This is the trend, now,” Alex said. “Everyone’s invited. There’s a program on *The Discovery Channel* that shows a live birth in every episode.”

“But they’re strangers,” I said. “Would you want Rob to see Kelly or Vicky like that?”

“That would be up to them,” Alex said, as she dried her hands.

When the video resumed, the guests cheered as an ensemble, exhorting Merrilee to “Push, Push, Push,” and mimicking her breathing.

When the doctor urged her to bear down, Merrilee, half reared up in the bed, gulped a desperate breath and bellowed it out in a long shriek. I resolved to look away before the baby came out, but from the instant her ebony head crowned, through to the father snipping the umbilical cord, my eyes were copper-fastened on Rob’s camera work. I watched the nurses rub Dianna dry, weigh her, wrap her in a blanket and settle her on Merrilee’s chest, holding my gaze on the screen as Rob recorded the stitching of his daughter’s episiotomy, the announcement of Dianna’s APGAR number, and her nascent attempts to nurse.

The film ended with stills of Dianna sleeping in her bassinette as the music segued from *Daddy’s Little Girl* to *Ode To Joy*.

Alex and I helped clean up, and left a few minutes before nine.

As I followed Alex’s tail lights, I recalled a time, a year or so after she and I were married, when I opened a bill with my old friend and mentor Dave Van Ronk. When the owner of the joint, which Dave had christened an “upholstered sewer,” blustered into the dressing room to pay us, he said, “You’re invited to a party at my place. Lots of gash, you’ll have your pick.”

“Wives invited?” Dave said.

“Sure,” the guy said, eyes torched with coke, mouth slit by a smile.

“We’ll talk it over,” Dave said.

When the owner left, I said, “Our pick of clap or gonorrhea.”

“And, worse yet,” Dave said. “Whether we go or not, five years from now that asshole will swear we were there.”

I stopped behind Alex’s car in the driveway and left my lights on so she could see her way to the door. I remembered how the club owner, whose name I can never recall but whose face I cannot forget, said *gash*, ripping all the onomatopoeic snarl he could wring from it. I killed the engine and closed my eyes, but Dianna’s furry head, swathed in blood and mucous, crowning between Merrilee’s parted legs, flashed before me and I opened them to banish the vision.

While Alex changed for bed, I checked my messages, finding an entreaty from Mel suggesting we book a jag of dates with younger performers on my next tour, though it means splitting bills in joints where I’ve soloed for years. “Grady,” he said, “you need to connect with a younger demographic as a living person, not just as the guy on the cover of their parents’ old albums.” Mel lives for phrases like *younger demographics* and *market development*. Still, I’m grateful to him for the grand I clear most nights, the chance to peddle some product, and the luxury of sleeping in decent hotels.

Lately, Mel’s been badgering me to record an album of duets with budding songwriters who claim me as one of their influences. I don’t mind being an inspiration, but I won’t record with kids whose work I don’t respect. It’s pride, maybe, but not hubris. I never was, or ever will be, Woody or Ramblin’ Jack or Van Ronk, but I earned what respect I have by beating an honest path through the fray. From a money perspective, Mel’s right, but I can’t face it. I was one of his late-father’s first clients so Mel won’t drop me before I quit, and in many ways he’s a better agent than his old man was. At worst he’s a loyal pain in the ass trying to make a buck for his kids, too.

On the road, in my hotel room, when I am finally able to conjure sleep, I dream of making love to Alex. Younger, to summon peace to a mind rioting with the day’s dementia, I envisioned vivid and unrestrained trysts with fans and strangers, but the allure of those fantasies has eroded with age. Sometimes, in these dreams, Alex and I are twenty-five, living in the village, our third-floor bedroom window open to the sirens and steam of the night, other times we are as we are now and burrowed into our blankets and quilts, familiar and grateful.

When I slid into bed beside her, Alex drew her leg over me and soldered her lips to mine as my blood surged and rattled in my veins.

Alex lunged into sleep after making love, her breath night-rasped, rhythmic, her vertebrae spooned into my chest. She’d cracked the window

to the night, and the soft slosh of the bay on the boulder-bound shore of our inlet slipped into the room as an east breeze stirred the curtains. I thought about Kelly and her husband, Padraig, asleep in Ireland in the B&B they own on the cliffs in County Clare. They'd be rising soon, and I imagined that the same susurrus breeze cooling our bedroom had banished the Atlantic fog and opened their view of a sun-spackled Galway Bay, and wished it to rush across this continent and luff in her sister Victoria's raven tresses as she ambled home with her husband, Chris, from afternoon rounds in the hospital where they're interning in San Francisco.

I yielded to a dream.

In a recording studio, I blinked against the smudged gleam of my 1956 Martin D-18 lying beside a set of abandoned headphones outside an isolation booth, where a young blonde girl was layering harmonies on my song "The Riot in the West Wind," her voice breathy and empty. When her earnest face morphed into that of a pallid boy with a voice as cracked as a hoarse crow, I knew that I would never record the duet album Mel covets.

As John O' Dreams rowed me deeper into sleep, I saw my girls, two and four, sun-burnished, stomping naked through the inlet's mud at low tide, their tiny legs black to the knee and their stomachs rippled with belly-shaking laughter. They have each chosen husbands who cleave to them, who do not depart for months at a time, who will know their offspring in a way that I do not know mine. The girls will be fine parents, and perhaps, had I known them better, I would be able to record them becoming mothers, but as the vision of my tiny, pure, naked, flesh-of-my-flesh and bone-of-my-bone daughters pranced with delirium toward the edge of the tide, and the one who carried them in her womb burned against my chest, I knew that I would turn away.