

Reunion in Berkeley

by Clay Rooks

The shadow of the house fell over me. I hesitated on the walk. The house was up on a slight rise, three steps above the level of the street and back a ways. It was a two-story wood frame house divided into four apartments, with double sets of windows. Its broad peak stood against the pale Pacific sky, blocking the sun. This is where she lived now. Before this moment, I had only come here in my imagination. It was not what I expected. The shade trees, shrubs, and flowers were well cared for and the house had been painted not that long ago.

I double-checked the address on the slip of paper in my hand. This was the right place. I felt a twinge of shame that in my vanity I had thought I'd find a squalid, run-down apartment house in a seedy, forgotten ghetto, like we'd lived in that summer.

On the flight west I had convinced myself that I wouldn't come here. But on the ride into Berkeley, I knew suddenly that I had to see her again. So many of my memories of Berkeley were memories of her: things we'd done, places we'd gone. In my mind, they were inseparable. That summer had seemed endless. Then it was suddenly over. And I think we'd been in love, at least at first. I didn't trust my memory for all that had happened, but I remembered how we'd ended.

My eyes locked on the house silhouetted against the bright afternoon sky.

Earlier, when I'd been away from the seminary conference room for break, Karl Christenson had found me out on the lawn.

As we stood in the afternoon sun, he'd asked, "Have you decided? Are you going to see Suzette?"

I had shaded my eyes and looked up toward the Berkeley hills. "I guess I should."

"You have enough time before dark," he said.

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Karl didn't know why I needed to see her. And he'd been polite enough not to ask. He did remember her, he'd said, and he'd seen her by chance about a month ago. We'd both had girls that summer after graduation. But then we'd both gone home; Karl to Minnesota, me to Iowa State for graduate school.

"You sound unsure, Jack," Karl said.

"A visit may not be a good idea."

He nodded. "Let's walk together."

After college, and that summer, Karl had become a high school teacher. Ten years later he had come here to pursue a second career, or in his case, a calling. Now he was a seminary student.

I had not so much changed careers as I had accepted another one, unexpectedly, because the need was there and so was I. I had come to Berkeley only for a series of conferences at the seminary, until I learned that Suzette still lived here.

As Karl and I walked by People's Park, the autumn sun was slanting toward the bay. We turned up Telegraph Avenue and headed for the Berkeley campus. We strolled together quietly at a fairly leisurely pace. The avenue was narrow and the sidewalks were busy with people coming and going, and milling about in front of shops and on the street corners. Most were college students, but some appeared to be hold-overs from the old days, people who still wore faded blue jeans, work shirts, rolled bandanna headbands, and long hair, some with beards or moustaches.

"It all seems vaguely familiar," I said to Karl, "yet it's different."

"Different? How?"

"It's not the same. It doesn't feel...tense. No intensity."

It was odd after all these years to return to Berkeley and be with my old college friend...but without our long hair and wire-rim glasses now...and no longer so young.

We stopped at a red light and waited. Looking around, I was surprised to see there were still streethawkers, their stands set up on the sidewalks at curbside. Near us, one displayed handmade jewelry crafted from copper, silver, polished stones, and quartz crystals. The next one showed leather goods, mostly belts, hand-tooled with large buckles, and shoulder bags with fringe and colored beads. Another hawked artwork, stark pen and ink drawings, and artistic photographs; many were black and white studies of fruits and vegetables. These had not changed. I was glad they hadn't.

I looked around at the shops.

"Karl, over there, that pizza place, wasn't that that headshop, the Electric Mind?"

He smiled and shook his head. It suddenly seemed an odd thing to say to a man who was soon to be a pastor.

The light was slow so I decided to go over to look at the stand with the pictures. Some were pretty good. I remembered how Suzette loved art and exhibits and museums. We went on several "art adventures" that summer. Most showings were free, and we had fun. She preferred modern art, the kind that treated ordinary objects with different perspectives, new visions. Picasso and Dali were the only two that I could bring to memory that I knew she admired, though she had spoken of dozens back then.

The artist saw I was standing at his display and he moved a step closer. I was comparing the drawings with the photographs. I liked the pen and ink better. His prices were low, but not inexpensive.

"See something you like?" he asked.

I took my time. "Yeah, I like a couple of these." I indicated a few small studies.

He looked where I pointed. "Give you any one you want for..." He paused, then named a price slightly less than what his list said.

"I don't know," I said.

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We played nonchalant and haggled the price for a while. In the end I bought a nice drawing of chunky apples and bananas with dark eggplants and onions. Karl had been watching without saying anything.

"Interesting choice," he said as we walked back to the corner. "Your taste has changed."

"It's not for me," I said.

The signal turned green and we crossed the intersection. On the other side, a young man and a young woman were handing out leaflets. As we passed, the young man thrust one into my hand.

"Here, brother, join the true revolution. Know His love. He forgives all."

I showed the tract to Karl. He nodded and smiled, and we went on.

"You know the last time I walked through that intersection I was offered acid, grass, and speed," I said.

"'The times they are a-changin,' friend."

I slipped the leaflet into my pocket as we walked past the streethawkers and a musician playing a violin.

"It always used to be guitar players," I said, pitching a few quarters into the musician's violin case on the sidewalk.

I remembered strolling here on moist summer nights with Suzette. She liked to walk hand-in-hand, and she loved music. We would go at dark and slowly make our way up Telegraph, cross the campus, and go dancing and drinking at the Calico Cat. Then, at closing, we'd return to the apartment house through the deserted streets and go to bed.

Karl and I crossed the Berkeley campus, climbed the steep hill to the north gate, went down Euclid, turned left on Ridge, and stopped at the GTU library.

"I want to show you something," Karl said. He led me around to the west side of the library. "Look."

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In the distance across San Francisco Bay, I could nearly make out the Golden Gate Bridge in the hazy sunlight.

"At night," Karl said, "the bridge lights are on and from here you can see this faint string of lights in the pitch black, like stars, linking two dark points of land."

When we went back around to the street I told Karl that I was going to see Suzette. He nodded and smiled. "I know. I knew you would."

"You know there's a child, don't you?" I said.

"I suspected it."

"When we left after that summer...she was pregnant. But I didn't know it. It was over a year before I heard from her. She wrote that she'd had a baby boy."

"Your son?"

I hesitated. "Yes. Mine and Suzette's." It was strange to hear it, strange to say it.

"I understand, Jack. You didn't know."

We stood awhile in silence as the sun sank toward the bay.

"You know until now I've never even come to see them, Karl. I know I should have, but...what could I have done? I had just married Kate."

Karl put his hand on my shoulder. "I'm not sure what to say, Jack. Ultimately, it's between you and her and God. But you should go talk to her. Tell her...."

"Right."

"I'll be here a while, then I've got to go back."

"Okay. Thanks, Karl."

He patted me on the back. "I'll see you later."

I started off alone, walking slowly.

"Does she know you're coming?" he called after me.

"No," I said, and kept going.

Standing before the house, a voice inside me said to turn and walk away; it's too late. But I went up the steps quickly to the front door and went in.

I knocked at the apartment door and waited. No one came. I was about to leave when I thought I heard a sound inside the apartment. I knocked again, louder. I heard movement, then the door opened just a crack.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"To see you," I said, trying to see through the crack.

"Go away. I don't know you." She began to close the door.

"Suzette, it's me...Jack. Jack Stevens."

The door opened again. "Jack?"

"That's right. Jack."

She opened the door wide. "Jack?"

I nodded and smiled. I knew right away it was her: the voice, the face. She had jet black shiny hair that fell straight down her back. She was Eurasian. Her mother had been Chinese-American; her father a tall European or Scandinavian, I couldn't recall which. He'd been a professor somewhere. I'd never met them. But I remembered the last time I'd seen her. She had been wearing faded blue jeans and a worn workshirt with a rose embroidered on the breast pocket. We'd been saying goodbye.

Today she wore a Chinese-print blouse and tailored slacks. She stood in the doorway looking me over, her beautiful dark eyes studying me, to make sure, questioning.

"What are you doing here?" she asked. She spoke plainly, masking whatever she was feeling.

"I came to see you, Suzette."

"Why?"

"To visit. It's been a long time since...since we've seen each other."

"I don't want to see you, Jack."

"Please, Suzette. I need to talk to you."

Her eyes searched into mine. I didn't know what she was looking for, but I hoped she would see it.

I tried again. "Please."

She paused, then stepped aside and motioned for me to come in. The room was softly lit by sunlight through sheer curtains. It was decorated with many fine prints and pictures, and it was almost painfully neat and clean. I followed her through to the table nook beside the kitchen. Washed vegetables and a cutting board were at one end of the table. Next to the cutting board were an open bottle of wine, a glass, and a sharp knife. A radio in a back room was playing hits from the 'sixties and 'seventies.

She went behind the table, sat down, and began chopping vegetables. I hesitated, then sat down across from her.

"Making stir-fry?" I said.

She kept cutting. "You can't stay," she said.

"I won't...not long." I smiled, to reassure her. Then I remembered the picture I'd bought. I slipped it out and placed it on the table where she could see it. She glanced up at it, but kept cutting. "I thought you might like it," I said.

Her knife moved quickly along a stalk of celery. "No thank you," she said.

I knew now that it was going to be worse than I expected. I resisted an urge to stand and leave. My memory was beginning to clear and I remembered how temperamental and fractious she had been. Hadn't that been one of the reasons I had gone home to graduate school after that summer? When she was happy there had been no one who was more fun to be with. But when she wasn't...

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"You look different," she said. She had stopped to clear the cutting board and she was looking me over again.

"Well, I shaved my beard and got a haircut...about eight years ago."

"I wasn't sure it was you. What are you doing in Berkeley after all these years? I know it's not just to see me."

She put some vegetables in the kitchen and returned, but remained standing.

I considered saying that I had come just to see her, but I said, "I came for a series of conferences on helping the homeless."

"Really?" She poured a drink from the bottle. She held up a glass, offering.

I shook my head.

She was silent then. Alternately, she drank, eyed me intently, then looked away, then looked back. I let her scrutinize me, and I waited. She was leaning against the kitchen counter. For a little while she seemed to drift away, a distant look in her eyes, then she came back.

"So where do you live now?" she asked.

"You know, Suz. Illinois."

"You still married?"

"Yes," I said, but I didn't like this questioning. "Are you?"

She didn't answer at first. Then she said, "I was for a while." She poured a little more wine and sat down again. "What do you do in Illinois?"

"I work at a university."

"You teach?"

"No. I'm an information specialist. I write and edit publications."

"What does that have to do with the homeless?"

"Nothing. It's...it's hard to explain."

She sat, waiting.

Rooks

I took a breath. "Our church has an outreach program for refugees and the homeless. I'm the coordinator."

She laughed harshly. "You? The wine must be going to my head. Who are you really?"

I looked at her, directly. "It's really me."

"Oh? Well what happened to you? What happened to the angry, cynical revolutionary who was going to change the world or burn it down?"

I winced, then said, "I changed. I found another way."

"Not the Jack I knew."

"That was another life, Suzette. I had a lot of hate and bitterness then."

"So what happened to you?"

I shrugged. "I'm not that angry anymore."

She looked surprised. "Why not? It's the same world, isn't it?"

"Not to me."

"What's different?" She scowled. "Why have you changed?"

I paused, considering what to say. "I couldn't stay like I was. The anger inside got worse...it was like poison."

"So what do you have now?"

"Now? Faith. I have faith."

She hesitated. "Faith?"

"Yes. I made peace, Suzette. With myself...with God...with life. I accepted faith. I had to. Do you understand?"

She looked stricken, incredulous. "No," she said. "No. I don't know you." She drank the wine from her glass. "I want you to go."

"I will. But I have something to say to you first."

"What?" A suspicious tone came up in her voice.

Rooks

"I want to apologize. I'm sorry that I left you pregnant that summer. And I'm sorry I couldn't come back."

"You mean you wouldn't come back."

"You know why I couldn't come. I wrote. I told you why."

She folded her arms across her chest. "You could have brought your bride with you."

"Don't try to pull her into this, Suzette. She had nothing to do with it."

"You married her!"

Her dark eyes were hard and glistening.

"Look, Suzette, you don't have to forgive me if you don't want to, but I would like to know why you never told me you were pregnant. I never heard anything until the baby was born. And then not for some months. If you wanted me to come back, why didn't you tell me?"

She glared at me, not speaking, then she stepped into the kitchen to the sink and turned on the water and filled her glass.

"I am his father, aren't I?"

She spun around. "Oh that's just like a man, Jack. How can you ask that?"

"All right," I said, "I'm sorry I asked. But how am I supposed to know? I've never even seen a picture of him or anything else for that matter. You've kept me in the dark."

She didn't say anything.

Then suddenly I realized something that I'd never connected before. The boy really was mine. But she had waited until after he was born to tell me so she could see him. To see if he looked like me.

"Do you know that you've never told me his name?" I said. "What did you name our son?"

Her expression softened. "My son's name is John," she said.

"John." Name of the Beloved. "I like John."

Suzette began clearing the rest of the chopped vegetables from the table. Then she put away the wine.

"I would like to see him," I said.

She paused. "You can't."

"Why not?"

"I don't want you to."

"Does he even know about me?"

"No."

"He should."

"No, Jack. And if you try to see him I'll...I'll tell your wife about us. About him."

"That won't work, Suzette. She already knows."

She stopped and turned toward me. "You told your wife?"

"Yes...years ago."

"I don't believe you."

"Here." I reached into my pocket and pulled out the tract, then wrote my telephone number on the back. I held it up to her. "Go ahead. Call her. Her name's Kate."

Suzette looked, but she wouldn't take it. "I don't care if you did tell her," she said. "He's my son and you can't see him."

I sat back. I laid the tract on the table. "Let me ask you something. I know there weren't many, but why did you always send my checks back?"

"We didn't need your money. I have a good job on campus."

"Wouldn't the money have made things a little easier?"

"No."

Shadows lay in the room now. Out the window I saw that twilight had come. I looked at my watch.

"Kind of late for a kid to be out, isn't it?" I said.

"He's at a friend's house nearby."

"I could wait..."

"No, you can't."

"You're not being fair about this, Suzette."

"Fair? What do you know about being fair? I've had him for eleven years. I raised him myself. Was that fair?"

"No, no it wasn't. I don't know what it was like for you all those years. I don't pretend to know. But I am his father and I'm only making a small request."

"No."

"I won't tell him who I am. Okay?"

She shook her head.

"Suzette. Five minutes. That's all."

She was silent, but adamant.

"All I'm asking is to see him for five minutes. Right here."

"You really bring me down, Jack. You know that? You come here all different and strange, telling me your good work and having faith and God and your wife and everything. And now you want my son, too. Well, you can't have him." She snatched up the tract, crumpled it, and threw it at me. It hit me in the chest and fell in my lap.

"I don't want to take him, Suzette. I just want to meet him."

"If you don't leave now, I'm going to scream." I could see she meant it.

"You don't have to do that." I took the crumpled tract and stood up. "I'll go."

I took a long look at her. Again I tried to think of the right words to say, different words. But they didn't come.

"I'll be staying at the seminary dorm another day if you reconsider," I said.

Rooks

I decided to leave the picture for her. Maybe tomorrow or the next day she would see it and...

The front door flew open and a boy ran in out of breath. He had shiny jet black hair and dark eyes, but I knew he was my son...John. He was lanky and thin and hyper.

"Hey, Mom," he said, "I ran all the way, real fast. I was gettin' real hungry and it was gettin' dark. We were playin' this neat new video game Teddy's got and I got to the fifth level and all these creatures were tryin' to get me and I'd run out of..."

"John, John," his mother said. "Stop. Stop now. You can tell me later, okay?"

The boy quit, reluctantly. He looked from his mother to me and back again.

"Hello, John," I said quickly. "My name's Jack." I offered my hand.

He seemed shy about it, but he stepped forward and shook my hand, his eyes downcast.

"It's nice to meet you, John," I said. I could feel tension radiating from Suzette beside me. "I would like to hear about your video game."

The boy brightened. He smiled at me and began to say something, but his mother cut him off.

"Unfortunately, Jack can't stay," she said. "He has to be going."

The boy looked dejected. I wanted to reach out to him, put my arm around him, tell him who I was and how everything would be just fine and how I would make things right.

"Go on," his mother said to him. "Get washed up for dinner."

He didn't want to go, but he went with a quick, polite, "Goodbye."

"Goodbye, John," I said. "It...was nice to meet you."

Then he was gone down the hall.

Suzette was holding the door open for me to go. I walked over.

"Look, could you...?"

"No, Jack."

Rooks

I stepped past her and out the door. "He's a fine kid," I told her. "You've done well with him."

"He's my son."

I nodded and turned to go.

"Thanks for not telling him who you are," she said suddenly.

"Someday he'll want to know," I said. "He'll want to know who his father is."

"Maybe someday, but not today."

I went down the hall to the front door.

"Jack..."

I turned.

"...don't come back," she said.

I went out the door. Evening had come quickly. The streetlights were on, but the walks were empty. I paused to catch my breath. Above me the sky was surprisingly clear. I looked back. Then I walked off into the falling darkness toward the bay where in the distance there was a string of lights linking two dark points of land.