

Village Voices

In Our Own Words

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MIGHT HAVE BEEN

by Howard Arons

Warren and Rita met for the first time at a mixer for the new freshman class. Warren was serious and rather shy, but he had a mischievous wit. Rita was also serious and quiet, but her quick laugh made Warren smile. Conversation began to flow, awkwardly at first, then naturally. They were surprised by how little they had in common. Warren was a dorm student from Dallas, Rita was a Houston student living at home. Warren already thought like an engineer, Rita was concentrating on Spanish literature and culture. Rita was a devout Catholic, Warren was effectively unchurched. After the mixer had ended, differences aside, Warren continued to think about Rita and her infectious laugh.

Warren had found a secluded spot in the library where he could study in the evening, away from the noisy distraction of the dorm. Before the first week of class was over, he was surprised when he found Rita there. His carefully planned

—and, yes, rehearsed—casual, witty greeting dissolved into “Hi, Rita.” Her quick smile said, “I’m glad to see you.” They studied in comfortable silence until they heard the familiar announcement, “The library will close in ten minutes.”

“Was it raining when you came in?” asked Rita. “I’ve still got to walk home.” Feeling like a fool, Warren said at once, “It’s OK. Let me walk with you.” Rita’s reply thrilled him. “I’d welcome the company, but it’s a good twenty minute walk.” As they walked through the evening gloom, they talked in murmurs, and at some point their hands came together. Warren suddenly became aware of the perfume of cape jasmine and honeysuckle in the humid, still air. That sweet fragrance would always remind him of Rita.

“This is me, next house on the left,” said Rita, dropping his hand. “Thanks for walking me home, Warren. I’m sorry you have to walk back alone.” She searched in her little purse for her keys and, without another word, headed up the walk-

way toward her door. Her house was dark except for a porch light, which turned off as soon as Rita went inside. Warren stood mute, not understanding what had just happened.

The next evening they met again in the library. Rita greeted him warmly and gave his hand a little squeeze. Yesterday's sudden snub faded. Warren was elated. His high spirits did his talking, and he asked Rita out for Saturday night. She replied, "Oh Warren, I'd love to, but I've got other plans." He answered immediately, "What about some evening next week?" The answer was even shorter, "No, I'm sorry." Warren was confused and sick at heart. When he and Rita were together on campus, she acted as if she were his girlfriend, yet she would not date him. Nevertheless, some mysterious agency was already at work, binding them together for a lifetime.

During the next four years, Warren and Rita became very close friends, sharing the elation of each achievement and the unhappiness of each disappointment. Their undergraduate years ended at the commencement ceremony in 1956. Warren, with proud parents following, spied Rita in the happy chaos after the formal program. She ran to him, hugged him tightly, and gave him a long and tearful kiss. Only later did he realize that there had been no parents or relatives with her. She had been alone.

After graduation, Warren had chosen to pursue some advanced work in graduate school, and Rita had been awarded a fellowship for study in Spain. Determined to remain close, they overcame their physical separation by using the tools of the times. They exchanged letters, with their thoughts and feelings condensed into ink on paper. The letters eventually gave way to emails. They shared their lives—careers, marriages, births, and troublesome children. Warren was married and had a career as a chemical engineer; Rita and her husband lived in Mexico, where she was a mother as well as a successful freelance editor and translator. They each thought it very important that their spouses always knew what a close connection they had.

In 1976, twenty years after graduation, Warren and Rita agreed to meet in Chicago. He was based there, and she was attending an editors convention at the downtown Hilton. They recognized one another at once in the hotel's crowded bar, and an unsatisfactory handshake became a lingering and close embrace. They grabbed one of the few empty tables and began to talk as if twenty years had not passed. They were dawdling over a second drink, and their conversation had become punctuated with moments of silent thought. Suddenly Warren had to speak. "Rita, that first year at college I had a terrible crush on you. I was sure that you were my first and only love. When you wouldn't go

out with me I didn't know what to do." Rita replied softly, "I couldn't. Not with you, not with anyone. My mother had become a serious alcoholic, and my father had walked. I never knew what I'd find when I got home. I think I started falling in love with you on day one; you were my hero, my only link to normal life."

They sat with eyes filled, holding hands. They each thought of Rita's room upstairs, and they knew what would happen if they spoke of it. Warren finally broke the spell. "Well, I guess we'd better call it a night." Rita gently touched his face, stood, and said, "This has been a wonderful evening. Neither of us will ever forget it."

That was their last meeting.

Warren and Rita maintained their close friendship for another forty-six years. During those years, career stories became retirement stories, birth notices became notices of spouses' deaths, and, in 2020, the dreaded word *metastases* appeared in Rita's emails. From then on, their communications took on an elegiac tone. Her symptoms were very mild, and she continued to live in Mexico and occupy herself as a freelance editor. In early 2022, Warren received an email in Spanish from Rita's eldest daughter in Mexico. Translated, it said, "My mother, Rita, asked me to send you this note before she died on January 8. She want-

ed you to know that she loved you very much."

After he had read Rita's last message, he found himself staring sightlessly through his window, remembering every detail of their last meeting forty-six years before.

SAIL, BABY, SAIL

by Peggy Pollock

*Sail, baby, sail, out across the sea, only don't
forget to sail back again to me.
Baby's ship's the silver moon, sailing in the
sky.
Baby dreams a lovely dream, while the stars
go by.
Sail, baby, sail, out across the sea, only don't
forget to sail back again to me.*

Long ago, my mother sang this lullaby to me before I had words to tell her how much I wanted—no, *needed*—to hear it. She must have known, so often did she hold and rock me against her cashmere sweaters as she sang, my heart pounding from my latest night terror. "Your little heart is going pitter-pat, pitter-pat," I hear her, in memory, croon. Enveloped in softness and *Arpège*, I am safe.

After she died, I would give so much away, but not the cashmere sweaters. It's chilly on the balcony today, and I am wearing her nicest black one. I can smell

her perfume. She switched from *Arpège* to *Chanel* and again to *Charlie* by the time I was in high school. When she volunteered in the Upper School library reshelving books, I could smell her *Charlie* among the stacks. I knew, without seeing her, that she was there.

When I take a bath, I think of her. Of those evenings when she would escape from her five unruly children after a long day, dishes done, the twins tucked in: she would be soaking in the bathroom with the hexagonal brown and yellow tiles, her cathedral. I would sit alongside her on the edge of the pale yellow tub as, dipping her washcloth into the steamy suds and laying it across her chest, she'd sigh with pleasure. We would talk peacefully into the evening, like a quiet prayer.

At Mom's funeral, my daughter said, "She left the world tucked in with the pillowcases ironed just so." When I do my laundry, I think of my mother, smell her in the detergent. So many times, in our family of seven she made our beds, smoothing out the sheets with a *slap, slap, slap*, fluffing up the pillows with a *punch, punch, punch*. Folding perfect hospital corners on all four sides, pulling up those "George Washington's Choice" white bedspreads with the fringe on the bottom just so. I still make my bed exactly as she did. She would be pleased. When I was five, I tried to emulate her hospital corners. She pushed my small fingers out of the way. "Never mind, I'll

do it myself," she said. My eyes welled up as I watched her yank the sheets tight. A tear escaped. I brushed it away.

Later, when I was older, she said, "I hated that you would never cry during spankings." *Slap, slap, slap. Punch, punch, punch.*

Really?

My husband asked me when I was much, much older and he knew he was dying, "Why is it that I've never seen you cry?"

Now I cry.

MY FIRST LOVE

by Gaby Kopelman

Now that the trouble in Ecuador is much in the news, and the name Lasso sometimes often comes up, I'm reminded of my first love.

It started with my father's various efforts to get his family out of Germany, away from Hitler's clutches. America, of course, was our first choice, but while waiting for those visas to come through, there were other possibilities to explore.

Sometime in the mid Thirties, my father made the acquaintance of Señor de Las-

so, then Ecuador's envoy to Germany, and as a result, my intrepid Dad embarked on a trip to Ecuador to get acquainted with this exotic land. However, fortunately for whatever reasons, we did not emigrate to Ecuador, but stayed on in Berlin until 1939 when our American visas came through.

In the meantime though, I was maturing, and when the two De Lasso sons, on an international tour, came to Berlin and stayed with us for a couple of days, I was already seven or eight years old—time to fall in love! Which I promptly did.

I developed an enormous crush on the younger boy, who must have been a late teenager at the time, a handsome boy with a shock of straight black hair. I must have spent hours watching him as he sat at our dining table after the midday meal, bent over his books, and probably doing his best to ignore me. But I didn't care—a once-in-a-while smile or a cookie that I'd share with him, was enough to make me happy for the rest of the day.

Compared to my later loves, that first love of mine was singularly undemanding, but in its modest way, unforgettable!

SEPTET ON WAKING

by Deidre Crumbley

Narrowly written
On empty sheets of snowfall,
Winter signs her name.

Twilight offers gifts
Of pebbles casting shadows
Into tomorrow.

Muted by the sound
Of midnight rolling over,
Day breaks silently.

Little sleep last night:
At least its hours were free
Of loud shouts and screams.

I have no complaints.
The first sound beyond your breath
Was that of our wren.

Hormones now dwindling,
He sighs a weak whistling song
Into Wednesday's dawn.

Let me leave this bed
To write another version
Of last night's dream!



DOING BUSINESS IN THE USSR AND RUSSIA

by Norval Reece

People of conscience all over the world are greatly distressed by what is going on in Russia these days—and its invasion of Ukraine. It has caused me to relive my own experience in 1988-92 as the majority owner with the City Council of St. Petersburg of a cable TV business.

My first trip to the USSR was as an “American-European” (no Americans allowed) member of a Swiss group of young people for a six-week seminar/workcamp in 1962. I returned in 1969 for ten days as a Board member of the American Friends Service Committee negotiating cultural exchange agreements between teachers in the USSR and the USA.

It never occurred to me that I would return as a businessman. Yet, I did.

In 1988, I negotiated a joint trade agreement to bring cable TV—with no censorship—to communist Poland. The Russians knew the details since the agreement had to be approved in Moscow. One of my partners soon got a call from St. Petersburg, and after extensive negotiations, we owned 70% and the St. Petersburg City Council owned 30% of a similar joint venture for cable TV. As Chairman of the Board with 70% voting interest, I had total control over the

channels we carried and content of programs, again with a written guarantee of no government censorship.

Our joint venture progressed very well until the USSR collapsed in 1991. What had been predictable, now became chaotic as old institutions were being abolished for new ones and state-owned businesses were being privatized by former communists turned oligarchs. And the country was in transition from an embattled President Gorbachev to alcoholic President Yeltsin and his KGB Prime Minister, Putin.

But there was also excitement about the possibilities of a post-communist, democratic Russia. I was one of two foreigners invited to speak at the first Russian Independent Journalists’ Convention in Veliky Novgorod in 1992. The mood was highly optimistic. Attendees were convinced a new day was dawning for democracy and freedom for the press, and I stayed up all night reviewing plans with individual Russians for new media ventures. One attendee was the founder of Echo of Moscow which became the largest independent radio network in Russia with 7 million listeners.

But the dreams of democracy and freedom of the press were fragile at best. This soon became apparent to me in St. Petersburg where information was becoming more difficult to get and questions about regulatory control were

going unanswered. Our Board meetings continued with City Council members participating until the lead councilman missed a meeting for the first time. When I asked about him, our cable manager leaned over and whispered, “Norval, I will tell you later.”

Afterward, as we walked outside in the streets (to avoid “bugs”), our manager said, “The City Council member won’t be coming any more. He feared for his life and is now in your country.”

I won’t go into further detail here but refer you instead to Bill Browder’s spell-binding autobiography, *Red Notice*, which chronicles his experiences—and narrow escape—as a hedge fund manager living in Russia during this period. My experiences were similar.

I soon pulled out of Russia. I loved the market and liked and trusted the Russians with whom I was working. But when it came to the government, everything had become a dark, murky fog of unanswered questions.

Now, tragically, some of those questions have been answered.

Thousands of journalists have been arrested and Echo of Moscow has been shut down by Putin’s government, apparently for discussing Russian casualties on the air and using the word *war*. A few

days later, one of its veteran reporters, Valery Nechay, said this in *The New Statesman*, March 22, 2022:

Echo’s existence was beneficial, not only for the regime but also for the people and Russian civil society. It grew with the radio station and the journalists who came and went. It sowed the seeds of liberty and ideas of humanity into listeners’ minds. There is at least a chance they will grow, if not today, then tomorrow.

There are still some people in Russia who sowed those seeds of liberty and humanity. And there is still some hope that the promise of our joint cable TV venture in St. Petersburg in 1988, Echo of Moscow, and other forms of free speech and independent news media may return to the Russia we hoped for and planned for at the Russian Independent Journalists’ Convention in Veliky Novgorod in 1992.

Those days were full of promise, not fear.

THE STORY OF THREE JAPANESE DOLLS

by Leah Rutter Zenker

I loaned some treasures for the display in Passmore Lounge Gallery, September-October 2023.

My mother, Dorothy, told her parents and her eight adult siblings that she would be bringing back a souvenir from Okinawa, Japan, where her husband was stationed.

On the military troop ship she took to meet him, she was extremely sick which made it difficult for her to supervise us four children ranging in age from three to ten years.

When we arrived in Okinawa, my father greeted us and gave us welcome gifts. Since my mother always had a doll collection, he gave her a large Japanese baby doll dressed in colorful silk dress and bonnet. My sister and I received a medium-size Japanese doll.

Eight months later, after Christmas, she delivered a baby boy at the Kadena Air Force Base in Okinawa; her surprise souvenir! A tinier doll was given to us at the birth of this youngest brother, Douglas.

I now have all three dolls in my collection and a great story to go with them.



CHRISTMAS COOKIES

by Kathy Hoff

My mother made Christmas cookies—brown-rim wafers and Spritz with a cookie press: green Christmas trees with

sprinkles as ornaments, green wreaths, white swirls with cinnamon-dot centers, even camels with cinnamon-dot eyes. When we were little, my brother, Ricky, and I would leave a plate with a few of her cookies and a small glass of milk with notes by the fireplace as a snack and thank you for Santa on his long journey around the world. Those cookies seemed a necessary part of Christmas along with our tree and stockings and packages.

I make Christmas cookies—still, even though the making is a drag, too much work—because I feel that my kids and grandkids count on them as part of their Christmas. Even though I am well aware that both my sons and my daughter-in-law are trying to lose weight, which is a good thing, given middle-age spread, I can't bring myself to forgo making cookies again this year.



Traditionally, I make five kinds: Grandpa Taylor's peanut butter cookies with red and green sprinkles, chocolate chip cookies, orange sugar cookies, chocolate nuggets, and brownies (the only package mix in the lot, personalized with multi-

colored sprinkles). I used to make seven each year, but I've dropped the Spritz out of frustration with my malfunctioning cookie press and the nuisance of food-coloring batches of batter to produce wreaths in homage to my mother. Alas, Spritz were my older son's favorites, so I suffer qualms of conscience over the lapse, but not enough to make me relent. The other lapse from more energetic days is an annual experimental new cookie. The experimental variety was easy to let go. After all, only one—the orange sugar cookie—ever made it onto the permanent list. Some, like a sprawling, brittle, sticky, snowflake-shaped creation from a church cookbook with batter that ran off the edges of cookie sheets and burned on the oven bottom, were downright disasters. So I'm down to the five, none of them fancy looking, like the elegant productions some Pennswood residents and staff donate to the annual Cookie Swap, but each variety tasty and reliable.

When I lived in Ewing and Trenton, I used to give red paper plates of cookies to my neighbors, but my Pennswood friends and neighbors tend to calorie-counting, diabetic carb anxiety, or other cookie-resistant issues, so though I plan to make orange sugar cookies for the Cookie Swap and to give a plate of assorted cookies to regular dining friends, I'm going to have to cut back production in future.

The cookie business for family has become complicated in recent years by The Cookie Plate. Whereas family as well as neighbors used to get disposable red paper plates under the cookies, now my kids and grandkids assembled Christmas Day in Philadelphia expect The Plate, a large (13") glass plate purchased at a Christmas mart for \$5, which holds even more cookies. My daughter-in-law tells me that, weight-loss efforts notwithstanding, even this large plate gets emptied Christmas Day. It comes back to me promptly for storage until the next Christmas.



Why do we do these things to ourselves? Preserve burdensome, even unhealthy traditions like my family's Christmas cookies. We do it from love—to memorialize those like Grandpa Taylor and my mother who are gone now but who made our own lives richer with their holiday efforts and to please those still with us, binding them to us through our

own efforts. Mostly we do it to stop time, to preserve through ritual the fantasy that there will always be Christmas with the taste of Grandpa's peanut butter cookies and the crunch of chocolate nuggets.



HAPPY HOLIDAYS

However and whatever you are celebrating at year's end, your *Village Voices* Editors wish you good cheer—and lots of cookies. We do not publish an issue in December, so you'll next see *Village Voices* in January.

Editor Glenna Follmer is retiring after this issue. We'll look forward to publishing her prose or poetry in the future, and we'll miss her like crazy. She was really good at espying those errant commas and spotting spelling gone awry. Thanks, Glenna!

Thank you, too, Contributors. You have no idea how excited we Editors are to receive your submissions. Potential Contributors, perhaps you'll see a Writer's Prompt in a December Bulletin that will induce you to put pen to paper (or the electronic age equivalent).

Readers, you're our reason for being. We love getting your feedback and appreciate the time you spend perusing our publication.

Surely, it's not too early to say, *Happy New Year!*

The Editors

Publication of
**Pennswood Village
Residents Association**

Founder and Editor Emerita:

Paulina Brownie Wilker

Editor: Anne Baber

Assistant Editors:

Howard Arons, Henry Baird,
Glenna Follmer, and Kathy Hoff

Typist: Sara Pollock

Distribution:

Lisa Williams, Nina Moyer

Layout: Henry Baird

Contributors:

All Pennswood Residents

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HB@HenryBaird.com
or place typed hard copy
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