

SAN FELIPE

“Toby? Toby.”

Oh, boy. Toby, in an instant, recognized the voice, the voice, the calling voice, the noise.

I suppose you want to know who, who called out to Toby, that night in his store.

He couldn't hide from her, he knew this. Besides, he thought, he hadn't done anything wrong. There was no reason for him to hide. But that churning in his stomach revealed something different. It was just that he'd been so, so, very busy.

It had always been his nature to be busy, especially when he tried to avoid something or someone. This time, Clementina. Mentina. Tina. Ina. In a moment. Yes, busy. So, so, very busy. As

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a boy in high school, he maintained an early morning paper route, drilled after school with the ROTC, and worked evenings for an advertising company doing paste-ups. Only at the darkest hours of the night did he begin to immerse himself in homework.

Now in his late sixties, he is lucky if he can stay asleep for more than three or four hours a night. I suppose, you assume, that, now, he should be able to rest, having accomplished so much in his life. Well, did he? I don't know. I suppose, you assume, as well, that I should make something up to tell you, for the sake of the story, of course. Well, I could. But I won't, now. But, yes, I will tell you this. He finds himself aimlessly roaming the rooms of the small apartment, picking up this, touching that, attempting to find something, anything really, to amuse himself if only for a brief moment, for enough brief moments until morning when his current wife can make him breakfast. Not having much concentration, unlike his younger, much younger days, for reading or even for television, he ultimately, succumbing to boredom, sits with the cat, The Cat.

Let me also tell you this now. The baby strapped onto Clementina's back grew heavier and heavier as Toby made her wait on the other side of the multicolored, beaded curtains. The baby, their baby, despite their divorce, will in the end, in time, realize that the break-up was inevitable. He, only one at the time, bore sole witness to all the accusations, the denials, the tears, the name callings, the compromises, the frustrations, the promises, and the lies, to each other, and to themselves, at their planned, subsequent meetings at each other's doorways to pick up Henry for his stay with the supervising parent.

“Oh. I didn’t hear you,” Toby lied coming from the stock area into the five-and-dime, carrying boxes, breathing hard, pretending to be oh so, so very busy. Toby stocked mostly items that other shops didn’t, at that time, at the start of the hippie era—mostly peace pins made of wood, mood rings, and of course, bright florescent flower stickers. Some more useful, tasteful than others, some just outrightly on the fringe. This fringe merchandise made his store very popular with the younger crowd. He, himself, although thirty-eight at the time, appeared to be part of the “in” set. It seemed that, although the hippies’ motto was “Don’t trust anyone over thirty,” it didn’t apply to Toby. To them, Toby, the wild cat, hair long, in ethnic black pride clothing alternating with days in large flower patterned tunics, only gave them hope for those soon rounding the corner themselves of thirty.

It was really a quaint shop, so I have heard (or was I told?), situated on the side of a triangular block away from the busy Santa Monica Boulevard, right before it shoots through Beverly Hills and Wilshire Boulevard. The building is still there. I don’t know what it houses now. As I drive by on Santa Monica, I crook my neck, thinking I can see it from the car going thirty or forty, okay, maybe fifty. But I really can’t, thus I have never really seen the store front. But perhaps I should. But maybe I did once in a black and white photograph that Clementina had. But I am not sure. I may have made up this memory in my mind. It very well may have been a shop I would have frequented, then or maybe even now, if it was still open. It was open only for a few years back then in the sixties. Henry was about seven when Toby finally had to close its doors, under the pressure of creditors. I wonder if expatrons remember it at all, if they think fondly of its odor, the coffee, if they remember Toby.

“Toby, we have to talk.” Clementina insisted. Toby’s stomach immediately tied itself up into knots, like the time the principle of the high school summoned him during homeroom with a note delivered by one of those teacher’s pets, who you know as well as I, get away with murder. The note said: “Please see me after school, Mr. DiCola.”, signed Mr. Ripee. He tried hard not to show any weakness as he read the note silently among his friends. I tell you, he probably made up something to tell them, attempting to give off airs of grandeur. Or I could tell you that he might have told them simply that the principle wanted to see him for a misconduct, perhaps, after all, there was some respect to be had for not being a pansie of the school bureaucrats. Or I could tell you nothing. Nonetheless, he waited, sweated for five periods until the last bell of the day rang when he approached and knocked on the frosted glass pane of the door.

Clementina’s ringed hand tapped the glass top of the display case. The ring, the diamond Toby purchased for her in San Felipe, pinged rhythmically, adding to the acid dripping, churning, burning inside Toby’s stomach.

“What’s up? Why are you here?” He played it off coolly. *Show no fear.* “Is something wrong with Henry?”

Once, Clementina and Toby rented a U-Haul, which opened up into a tent (do they still have those?), and they drove it onto the beaches of San Felipe, stopping only once or twice for pee breaks, finally camping along the waters of the eastern side of the baja peninsula. The night was warm. They slept practically naked under the clear sky, after they made love with the intention of conceiving Henry. Or was San Felipe just where Henry was conceived?

Henry and I have been to San Felipe several times, ourselves. Each time lulled back by the wondrous, ripply texture of the sand in the pools left behind by the receding waves,

quarter mile of them, of differing sizes and shapes, warmed by the searing sun and the 103 plus temperature. And for the shrimp tacos. Mmm. The first time we went, the exchange was a hundred thirty seven pesos for a dollar. "Cambio, Senior?" Just several years later, it was over five hundred pesos. Petunia's was the place to go for breakfast, and the rest of the day we survived on Pilar's shrimp tacos. Wait, were they fried in fat?

It is usually anti-climactic, the event, whatever event. planned, pinned with unsurmountable expectations, anticipations. They, Clementina and Toby, were successful in their sojourn. They made Henry. The anti-climax came when Henry was about a year old, strapped to his mother's back, confronting Toby, together.

Henry has developed over the years a relationship with both his parents, separately, as I have. When with one, the other does not, has not usually, asked questions of their former spouse. Clementina does not speak of Toby, yet when she does, her words are not bathed in bitterness. She has realized that he could not own up to the responsibility of being a family man, or a man responsive to a changing, growing woman in the age of liberation, despite his frequent talks of empowerment.

But when Clementina was pregnant, that hot, humid summer of '63, clothed in the only thing that fit, the polyester bathing suit, 'most twenty four hours a day, Toby had been a very generous father-to-be. He swooned over his ballooning wife. She felt loved. She felt beautiful. She loved her large breasts.

Breasts long since returned to their pre-pregnancy cup size, Clementina charged ahead with her much practiced mental

script, “I think we need to separate for a while. We haven’t talked much lately and when we have, that didn’t seem to change things much.”

Bull’s eye! Finally, Toby thought. He had waited, acting in ways that would push her to say these very much desired words. Or was he just being himself? Would you rather I tell you which? I will tell you this. Toby didn’t have the guts to say those words himself. He never did have much in the way of guts, then or now. I would venture to say that he is emotionally arrested when it comes to dealing with conflict. Here, look, he would rather shut down, ignore, deny, warp, and ultimately forget, hoping, testing to see if the others involved have forgotten along with him.

Toby worked eight to four in P.R. at Pratts, where he first met Clementina. Afterwards, he clocked in at the five-and-dime. He usually did not return home until the early morning, after patronizing the jazz clubs and coffee houses. He had kept up this schedule for some months now, partly, as I say, to avoid things that are hard for him to confront emotionally, and partly, as I have said, because he’d always been one to keep busy. So close, finally, to being released from this bond, Toby was impatient with Clementina’s need to talk it through.

“I, we, need more from you...You can’t seem to give of yourself...I don’t want a life of...I feel...when you...would you please...”

It wasn’t that Toby didn’t love them, Clementina and Henry, it was that marriage brought on responsibilities and expectations he was not prepared for, yet he thought that, at the time, he was. Or it might have been that he’d grown tired of being a husband, a father. Or he just didn’t like it much.

Although impatient to the point of fidgeting, Toby knew better than to cut Clementina off short. Her recent personal

growth fortified her in demanding the right to speak and the right to be heard. And over the years, Clementina continued to grow, more and more, even causing the FBI once to pay her a “visit” at Pratts. Nothing serious. She has a file, for sure.

“We don’t want to scare you, Ma’am.”— nonetheless, a not so subtle form of social control.

After she finished, Toby, depleted, had nothing to say but “Oh,oh, okay.” Clementina left him in the dark.